

Prerequisites for "Taking the Line"

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Going in the direction sent is an all-important skill for a retriever. On a simple marked retrieve, the dog does this on its own — because the dog knows exactly where it's going and there's nothing in the way of going straight to the fall.

But when the retrieve is more complicated — a memory bird, a blind retrieve, or a retrieve with hazards along the way that will make the dog want to deviate — then taking the line becomes important for a successful retrieve.

Taking the line from your side ("Initial Lining")

For a retriever trainer, teaching a dog the skill of lining can be divided into two projects:

1. Teaching "initial lining" (roughly defined as going straight for the first 20 yards), and
2. "Holding the line," which means that the dog stays on the line it initially committed to. We will start with the first step, of course, initial lining.

Canine structure dictates that the first few steps a dog takes when it launches for a retrieve will be in the direction that its body is aimed. So teaching a retriever to take an initial line really begins by teaching it "precise alignment at heel."

Precise alignment at heel

Precise alignment at heel is an important part of basic obedience for the field dog if you plan any sort of advanced work involving multiple marks or blind retrieves. When we perfect a dog's skill at sitting straight at heel, we use the following eight exercises, proceeding in the order listed:

1. Heeling in a straight line
2. Left and right square turns
3. Heeling backwards
4. The "pendulum"
5. A 90 degree and an 180 degree return to the heel position
6. A 360 degree pivot to the left (assuming the dog heels on the left)
7. The "Close" command - realigning the dog's shoulders to the right (again assuming the dog heels on the left)
8. One-step sit drill

Some of these maneuvers are self explanatory, and need no introduction. Let's take a look at the ones that need explaining.

Backwards heeling



When teaching the dog to heel backwards, keep a snug lead, and use a stick to tap on the dog's feet as you encourage it to move back.

No. 3, heeling backwards, is a crucial exercise. It teaches the dog to know where its butt is, and how to control the motion of its hindquarters — critical for achieving precise alignment at heel.

There are various methods to teach a dog to heel backwards. The one we prefer at the DOBBS Training Center initially uses a stick presented in front of the dog's front feet to encourage the dog to step backwards as the handler steps back with the dog.

You must "limit the dog's options" when teaching this maneuver by

1. Keeping the dog on a snug lead, and
2. Initially working against a fence so the dog cannot move sideways.

The "Pendulum"

No 4, the "pendulum," is an extension of heeling backwards. After the dog knows how to step back with you, you can require it to "follow your left leg" like a pendulum as you take one step forward, then one step backward.

The return to heel

No. 5 is returning to the heel position. In this exercise, the dog learns to automatically get into the heel position as it approaches you. (Memory birds are remembered better when a retriever goes straight to heel before it delivers, and looks out at the next bird.)

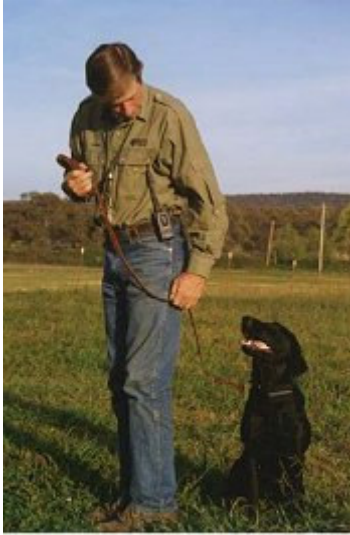
To teach the finish motion, heel the dog backwards on leash. While it's moving backwards with you, suddenly present the stick in front of the dog as you pivot to the left and say "Heel." When the dog swings its hindquarters behind your legs to move away from the stick, quickly remove the stick from the dog's picture, thus rewarding the dog for the finish motion.

"Close"

No 7, "Close" keeps the dog in balance. Since the dog has learned to pivot to the left, the "Close" command will require the dog to move its shoulders to the right

Start with the dog on a leash and choke chain, and give the verbal command "Close" as you step sideways to your right and simultaneously give a low leash correction to the right. Hold the leash in your right hand for this one.

The "One-Step Sit drill"



In the one step sit drill, take one step 90 degrees to the right.

Step No. 8 is the one-step sit drill. Leave the dog on a sit, and you take one step forward. Command "Heel" and the dog should come up into the heel position, in line with the direction you're facing.

When the dog is good at this, make your step at an angle away from the dog. Take one step 90 degrees left or right from the dog so that it is sitting perpendicular to you, and have it come to heel on command. Then take one step backward, and finally a step to the side. Expect the dog to be able to find the heel position and sit straight in the direction that you're facing regardless of what reorientation you've added to the puzzle.

Now advance to having the dog move with you as you take your one step, rather than stay on a sit and move to you on your command.

Help the dog line up straight as it comes to heel. If its butt tends to end up behind you, block this area with your right foot so it can't sit there. If its butt tends to be out to the left, practice next to curbs. If you block off the wrong place to sit, the dog will learn the habit of sitting straight on its first try.

The next step - Initial Lining Drills



The dog should be able to move into the heel position and align itself straight in the direction you are facing.

Now the dog sits straight at heel, and it is prepared for the initial lining drills that come next: The four-bumper, and eight-bumper wagon wheels, the "focal realignment" drill, the staggered wagon wheel and the 16-bumper wagon wheel. These drills will be the subject of our next articles.

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