

Retriever 101: Part I

Class is in session — At your side

Written by Butch Goodwin
of
Northern Flight Retrievers

This article appeared in Retriever Journal March/April 1999



"Down" is a command useful both in the field and around the house. It is also useful when dealing with "alpha" personality dogs, since the position is a submissive one.

The faded yellow tablet is more than two decades old. It sits inside a dusty folder on the top shelf of my bookcase along with a collection of other notes and articles that I have saved over the years. Scribbled on the tablet are notes from a seminar that I attended in my long-ago field trial days. The seminar had been put on by a well-known retriever field trial pro who had won acclaim by training several of the national retriever championship winners and their owners. When the opportunity presented itself, I attended one of his training seminars. The first words on the tablet were also the first words out of his mouth: "Field trials are won

or lost within six feet of the handler," he had said and I wrote it down. At that time, I can't say that I understood exactly what he meant, but I wrote it down anyhow. You see, in my naiveté at that time, it was my conviction that field trials were won or lost at great distances on magnum technical water blinds or marking tests. I had a lot to learn.

More than twenty years later and now as a professional retriever gun dog trainer myself, I have had the opportunity to look in the eyes of many, many dogs. Likewise, I have had the opportunity to learn from some of the best and most innovative amateur and professional gun dog and field trial trainers of the past half-century. There is little that I have learned in all of this time that has come to be more meaningful than that one sentence: "Field trials are won or lost within six feet of the handler."

It makes no difference that you may not be training your dog to be a field trial competitor. If you want a great hunting dog or to compete in hunt tests or obedience events you ultimately win or lose" within arms reach.

Retriever 101: Part I — Class is in session — At your side

Let me begin to explain by making my own statement: "ALL future training develops from and depends upon the training that you start with the dog at your side." If you don't have your dog under control at your side, you will never have him under control at a distance.



On "heel" the dog that plods ahead can be kept in check by utilizing a gut cinch.



Lagging behind can be corrected by placing the lead across your shin while walking.

Basic training begins and develops from the time that your pup first leaves mama and his siblings and comes to his new home. I won't go into a long discussion about early puppy training but without a doubt the three most important non-genetic factors in a pup's development are socialization, bonding and early training. Throughout the early months of their lives, young pups, both individually or in groups, need to be exposed to as many environments as possible. The only way to make these pups feel secure in any situation is to give them this kind of exposure at an early age. Loud noises, gunshots (starting at a distance and associated with something good such as food), being handled by a variety of people, exposure to water, mud, birds (I use pigeons both dead and alive), decoys, differing cover in the field and riding in the car are just a few of the things that pups should be exposed to.

Early training and exposure for a young retriever pup is critical! Absolutely critical! And, regardless of how well bred the pup is, inadequate early training can override all of his outstanding genetic traits. Unfortunately, I see this lack of early training almost every day in my training business. If only the owners had taken the time to expose their pups to a greater variety of environmental situations and done some early training, I wouldn't have to take the time that could be spent training their dog, trying to coax them through a "puppy problem."

Along with their other early puppy training, I encourage my training clients to work on teaching the "down" command to their youngsters before sending them to my kennel for basic field training. This is something, which they can teach at home while watching TV in the evenings, and is certainly much easier to do when the dog is still at a young and controllable size.

The dog should be taught to lie down with all four feet under him (like a herding dog - ready to spring), with his nose and head flat on the ground between his front legs. One of the obvious benefits of teaching the "down" command is obedience around the house. To the hunting dog, this command is nearly as important as the "sit" command. If the pup is taught the "down" command from early on, then it becomes just as easy to teach and just as ingrained in his mind and as teaching him to "sit" on command. Plus, there are great side benefits from teaching him

"down" on command and these all stem from the fact that this is a very submissive position for a dog. It is quite easy to gain domination over the dog without a great deal of unnecessary force and often without him even knowing that he has been dominated. This can be a very valuable tool to use when dealing with some of the often-uncontrollable "alpha" personality-type dogs.

Teaching "down" starts from the sitting position and needs to be taught and repeated until the dog will drop like a rock when given the command, "DOWN!" The dog should be taught to drop with his head flat on the ground between his front feet. The first command that most owners teach their dogs is to "sit." Often they teach this quite early by using treats or when feeding the pup. It is necessary that the dog know how to sit before starting to teach the "down."

Start by giving the dog the "sit" command and pulling forward on his front feet so that his body ... flattens on the ground with his legs squarely under him. This should be followed by the verbal command, "down." If you find it necessary, you might consider placing your hand on his withers to push down while pulling the legs forward with the other. At this time you might find it helpful to use a choke or pinch collar and a lead under your foot to force him to the ground. However, it is much more effective to get down on the ground and work with the dog at his



"Stay" means stay put, even when pressure on the lead is applied. Make sure your dog knows every command thoroughly before moving on to something new.

own level than trying to force him down. If you have a dog that violently resists going down, you might try putting a prong collar around his neck with the swivel for attaching the lead under his neck. It is often helpful to push down on the prongs on the back of his neck while PULLING down on the lead. Also, be sure to push his head down between his front feet and hold it in this position, all the while using lots of praise until he "gives-in."

When I get any dog into my kennel for basic field training, absolutely the first "training" that I do with him is to take him in my bird pen and expose him to live birds. Many are timid at first at the sight of several dozen pigeons flying around and ducks and pheasants running around on the ground and under his nose but eventually the "prey drive" takes over and the pup begins to get excited and wants to chase the birds and try to catch them. This is the behavior that I am looking for. I can tell a lot about a youngster from what he shows me early on in the bird pen. If I had to think of the single most important training "tool" that a professional gun dog trainer has at his disposal that most amateurs don't have, it would have to be a bird pen in which to expose the youngsters to live birds and observe their reactions. Ok, before anyone calls "foul" and claims that I am allowing the dogs to catch and kill birds, let me assure you that I start the dogs out on a check cord and stop them short of catching any of the birds until I feel confident that they will handle the birds without injuring them. My intention is to watch how the pup naturally handles birds. And, of course to build that burning desire for birds into the dog.

Another subtle and underlying advantage of taking a youngster into the bird pen is that by having him on a check cord, he is seeing the beginnings of my controlling him on a lead or a rope in an informal situation — AND, much like being taught the "down" command mentioned previously, he may not even realize that he is being controlled! Most dogs generally get so excited about the birds that they don't even get upset at being stopped short by a rope!

I want a young dog to be totally accustomed to having a rope snapped to a plain buckle-on collar attached to his neck before I begin putting any formal pressure on him - such as teaching him to heel or making him come when called. I snap a drag rope on his collar each time he comes out of his kennel. He drags the rope while he is aired with other dogs in the exercise yard or in the field; he drags the rope when we throw fun bumpers and he drags the rope while he is loose in the kennel yard while I am cleaning his kennel. Occasionally, I step on the rope as it goes past and say "here" as he hits the end of it. Sometimes I have to reel the dog in like a fish on a line to get him to come to me, but then he gets praised for coming when called. All of this is done in preparation for beginning his formal basic training and is done with a minimum of stress on the dog or me.

A youngster's formal basic training begins when he is accustomed to the lead and collar and doesn't fight having the rope control him. There is nothing that I hate worse than a dog showing all of his escape responses by screaming, doing flips, biting at the lead or my hand, foaming at the mouth and locking his legs or lying on his back while I have to drag him up and down my road trying to convince him that it is in his best interest to learn to "heel." I would rather the dog become accustomed to giving-in to the lead ahead of time. And, if the subtle methods of control that I employ don't seem to work, I put him on a "chain gang" and let his peers bounce and drag him around — but we'll save the subject of the "chain gang" for another time.

When I begin teaching a young dog to heel, I usually put him on my left side with a metal prong collar in place and begin walking. I like to use the prong collar because I feel that I can "steer" the dog into the positions that I expect with a minimum of stress on either of us. Also, I use an 8-foot cotton horse lead rope for all of this training and find that it is just about right for all of the basic training lead work.

The first step is walking in a straight line and expecting the dog to walk beside you. If he lunges ahead, an abrupt stop on your part along with holding the rope firmly and, perhaps, taking a few steps backward or a jerk on the rope is usually all that is necessary to bring him back into position while reminding him of the command to "heel. If you have a dog that continually tries to strain against the rope and stay in the front when heeling, try changing the point of contact. Take your rope, which is snapped to his collar and run it down his back and around his belly and then back under the rope so that you can continue to hold it by the end. This creates a "gut cinch" and a couple of well-timed jerks with the rope in this position will usually convince the most contrary individual that you are serious about this and that it is in his best interest to walk where he is told. If he lags behind, often speeding up the pace along with a few quick jerks on your lead should encourage him to catch up. Likewise, if he insists on lagging behind hold the rope firmly in your right hand and let the slack of the rope sag below your knee. By catching the rope across your shin as your leg moves forward he usually doesn't see it coming and you are jerking on the

dog at the level of his head rather than upward. Often this is effective enough to convince him to keep up with your pace.

This is also the time that I begin teaching the dog to sit beside me when commanded both by voice and whistle. I expect him to sit and sit quickly when he hears the command or the single crisp blast on the whistle. Likewise, I expect him to sit straight and square with my body. I accomplish this by pulling up on the rope and using a riding crop to pop him on his flank when I give the verbal "sit" command or the single blast "whistle sit" command. At this point, I come to an abrupt stop each time that I expect the dog to stop walking and sit. I don't feel that the use of the crop is to whip the dog into submission but to encourage him to sit by applying a mild form of pressure to the part of his body where the action occurs. But, if you have a dog who is particularly intimidated by the sight of the crop, try keeping it beside you and popping him with it from behind your back where he can't see it.

Whistle sits" at your side are extremely important and should be THOROUGHLY etched in the dog's mind. This is where you begin to teach your dog that the single blast from the whistle has JUST AS MUCH VALUE as the verbal command to "sit." This is the start of teaching the dog to sit anywhere, anytime that he hears a single blast on the whistle. This is the start of what will eventually be a dog that will stop on a whistle and take hand signals or casts or sit on the flush of an upland bird. It is imperative that this most basic combination of fundamentals be very, very solid in his mind.

You will find that throughout the training of your dog, whether that training is basic or advanced, every lesson needs to be solidly instilled in his mind before moving totally away from it. If by moving ahead he shows you that he doesn't understand what has been previously taught, it is necessary to backup to the point that he doesn't understand, try to simplify the lesson and review that phase again. It has been said that in today's world, we don't have the time to do things right but we have plenty of time to do them over. Everyone wants to advance their dog as quickly as possible, but spending the extra time to drill these fundamentals thoroughly will save you future grief and lost sleep while trying to figure out where your training program broke down. I have a friend who is a pointer trainer with many years of experience who believes that it takes just about 30 repetitions of teaching and reinforcing each command to get a dog to understand the command and be reliable.

In the next segment we will begin to teach the dog to move to the left and right and follow our body movements. We will teach him to sit and remain sitting until commanded to do something different. We will continue to reinforce our whistle training commands and begin to teach the dog to sit other than at the handler's side. And, perhaps just as importantly, we will learn more about recognizing and dealing with escape and avoidance responses that can affect all of the dog's future training.