

Retriever 101: Part II

Class is in session — At your side

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Looking away to avoid pressure before being taught "Look at me"



Extreme case of avoidance behavior to escape pressure of lead.

As a quick review, in the last issue I talked about how all future training begins at your side and builds on the fundamentals learned there. I suggested that if these basics weren't solid in your dog's mind, eventually your training program would likely fall apart. I told you about escape responses and how to begin to recognize and deal with them. We started your dog on the "down" command, basic heeling and beginning "whistle sit" commands. Now we will move ahead to teach your dog to move left and right and follow your body movements and continue with obedience and whistle training. If you aren't clear with what we have learned up to this point, before proceeding I would suggest that you review the previous segment.

While you are working on the fundamentals of "heel" and verbal and whistle "sit," it is time to start your dog moving left and right and following your body movements. Begin this by walking the dog on the lead rope at heel but instead of continuing only in a straight line as you previously did, start walking in large figure-eight patterns. Each time you turn to the left give dog the command, "heel." Each time you turn to the right, give the command, "here." (Now remember, this is for a dog that heels on the left side of the handler — the commands would be opposite for a right-side heeling dog) On the surface, using verbal commands as you walk to the left and right may seem quite absurd at first but please be assured that there is a good reason for teaching the dog to turn left by using the "heel" command and turn right by using the "here" command. I'll explain the reasoning in a moment.

As the dog gets more proficient at left and right turns, you will actually see him beginning to move his head and body to the left or right when he hears the verbal commands, "heel" or "here." The right turns are usually no problem as you can apply several jerks to the lead and get him to turn with you. If he resists turning to the left, try turning left into the dog and even consider giving him a knee to the side of his head, if necessary, to get him to watch and turn with you.

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Now is also the time to turn the figure-eight patterns into walking in ever-smaller circles to the left and to the right and continuing to reinforce the verbal commands. Eventually, your goal should be to be able to pivot or step to the right and have the dog move with you to the right when you give the "here" command. Likewise, the dog should rotate to the left while you move your body to the left when he hears the command, "heel."

"Heel" and "here" teaches your dog the basics necessary, which through drill work, can be developed into having him follow your body motions or look where you want him to look — perhaps following the swing of your gun. Whether on the line at a dog trial wanting to be assured that he gets a good look at the gunners in the field, lining the dog's body up like a gun sight for a blind retrieve or a mark that he has forgotten or in the duck blind when you swing your shotgun on a group of incoming birds, this is a drill which should be taught and retaught and revisited again and again. This is a drill that can eventually be developed to a very high level of sophistication. It is the start of a series of drills, which teach lining and marking off of the gun. It is one of the fundamentals, which is started at your side and by which "field trials are won or lost!"

When you feel that this is rock solid, it is time to begin to teach your dog to stay in place while you step away and work your way down the rope, gradually moving farther and farther away. Initially, the dog will likely want to follow and it will be necessary to remind him to "sit" as you step away. This is also a good time to use the crop again to pop him in the middle of his rump while you pull up on the lead to reinforce the "sit" command. I find that it often helps to pop him on the chest either with the crop or with the flat part of your foot to get him to understand that he is to stay in the sitting position. Personally, I don't teach the command "stay" at this point as I feel that it is redundant and just something else, which will serve only to clutter the youngster's mind. I feel that if a dog has been taught to sit and that action reinforced with the crop, if he is not sitting, then he not doing what he was commanded — it is time to backup and do more reinforcement of the "sit" command.



Sitting crookedly is corrected by pulling forward on the lead and using flat side of foot to put dog into position.



Use flat side of foot to reinforce staying in place.

Only after the dog understands that he is to sit until commanded to do something different and when you can walk around him holding the lead while he never moves, then it is time to begin to

reinforce his "sit" by adding the pressure from the lead. Start this by standing in front of him and gently tugging on the lead while reminding him to "sit." Move your position from side to side and gradually increase the pressure until the dog has to actually pull against the pressure of the lead to remain sitting. I have found that if I allow the collar with the attached snap from the end of the lead to rotate itself under his chin, I can use the weight of the snap to "chuck" him under the chin from a distance if he gives any indication that he intends to move.

Back in an earlier paragraph of this article (part I) I mentioned that often dogs exhibited escape or avoidance responses by screaming, doing flips, biting at the rope or throwing themselves on the ground the first time they were made to heel on a lead. If you remember, I explained how I try to condition the dog to a rope before he knows that he is being controlled. We are going to talk about curing several other escape behaviors before they become serious problems. SITTING CROOKED with the hind feet off to one side can become a chronic problem. As much as you may think that it is a "puppy thing," as the dog gets older it is a definite avoidance response. The dog is doing as he is told, however, he trying to do things on his terms and trying to gain control of the situation. Correct it every time you see it by pulling forward on the rope into the correct sitting position. If you have a dog that simply refuses to give-in and sit straight, it might be necessary to give him a boot on his flank with the flat side of your foot and verbally command him to "sit straight." Lots of repetition is often necessary but it eventually corrects the problem even with the most chronic abusers.

Another avoidance response is LOOKING AWAY or YAWNING. I think it is true with all animals that they try to avoid doing a particular task by looking away in order to evade the pressure. Dogs are no exception. Start to cure this by walking around your dog and tugging on the lead. Next begin using the command, "watch" or "look at me." Be sure to remind him to "sit" and reinforce the "sit" command both verbally and with the whistle as necessary. Every time that he looks away or yawns or tries to take his eyes off of you give him a snap with the lead and remind him to "look" or "watch." And, this means to watch your every movement as you walk all the way around him tugging on the lead. When he looks at you, verbally praise him and tell him how wonderful he is; when he looks away, give him a snap with the lead and remind him that he is to watch you. He gets rewarded for watching and corrected for avoiding you. This training drill is very important and with some dogs looking away sometimes becomes a difficult habit to break. It is imperative that this be thoroughly understood before you begin a force fetch program or your dog will continually be trying to look away in hopes of avoiding the inevitable pressure. I had a seasoned professional obedience trainer tell me several years ago that if you cure the escape and avoidance responses as they show up, the rest of the training is easy. From my experience, I believe that he was correct. I have only mentioned a couple of these but there are many, many more and every dog has his personal repertoire. If you become aware of every manner in which your dog reacts and why and learn to recognize and cure these as you see them, you will save yourself a great deal of frustration down the road. But again, that will have to be a subject for discussion in a future column.

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Now is the time to begin to teach the "here" or "come" command and begin teaching the "whistle sits" from in front of you rather than only at your side. Begin by standing in front of the dog and calling him toward you. You might have to give him a tug to get him to understand that he is expected to come toward you after he has just been taught to "sit" and remain sitting. I use the command "here," but if "come" is more to your liking, use it — just use the same command consistently. When he gets about halfway to where you are standing, tell him to "sit" followed by a short, crisp single blast on the whistle. It might be necessary to go to him and pull up on the lead and pop him on the rump with the crop in order to get him to understand that he is to sit each and every time that hears the whistle blast. You need to work this part of the training until he will sit each and every time he hears the single blast "whistle sit" command regardless of the distance that he is from you on the rope — if he doesn't sit, you have every right to make the necessary correction.



In the bird pen, learning about live birds and giving in to the rope.

I was listening to some tapes the other night of the interviews that DSL. Walters did in the early 1960's with the renowned retriever trainer, the late Charley Morgan. Morgan says on the tapes that a dog must "chill" to the sound of the single whistle blast. That advice is just as valid today as it was nearly four decades ago. On the rope is the time the dog should begin to "chill" to the whistle.

This is also when you should begin using your whistle for the command to come when called. Two or three quick blasts on the whistle is the commonly used whistle command for having the dog come to you. Use whatever verbal command you use to call him toward you and then begin to follow or "chain together" the verbal command with a whistle command. Again, it is necessary that this be taught and reinforced on the rope (and even by going to a longer rope, if necessary) until the dog thoroughly understands exactly what you expect of him. This can be worked in conjunction with the whistle command to sit. Most dogs have been taught at an early age to come when called but most do it only when they feel like it. The obedience drills which we have done previously will serve to show him that you are serious and EXPECT him to obey when he hears the whistle or verbal command to come.

Before anyone thinks that I have neglected teaching the dog to "finish" (which is to come from sitting in front to the heel position) or neglected to thoroughly steady the dog, let me say that I don't teach the dog to come from the front to heel until after he is force fetched and I am well into teaching him to cast. I find it easier to always have him come and sit in front facing me to deliver his bumpers until he knows all of his casts. I teach the dog to "finish" when I begin teaching his basic lining drills. Likewise, I don't thoroughly steady a dog until he completes his force fetch program. As is often the case, steadying can cause the dog to not want to retrieve. It is not uncommon to see an attitude where the dog begins to believe that by stopping him from retrieving as the bumper or bird is being thrown, you don't want him to retrieve at all! If I have the "FETCH" command thoroughly conditioned into the dog, I can always walk him out to the bird or bumper and tell him to "fetch." If he then refuses, I have the tools to correct him and remind him that he must fetch when commanded.

Before moving ahead to force fetch, it is time to begin to test and further reinforce what you have already taught. Begin by walking the dog at heel. Stop a few times using the single whistle blast command, expecting the dog to sit quickly. Use the crop if necessary to reinforce these "whistle sits." Then have him walk at heel and give him the "sit whistle" BUT NEVER BREAK YOUR STRIDE AND KEEP WALKING while the rope plays out through your hands. Walk right down to the end of the rope and WITHOUT looking back at him use the rope to put pressure on his collar. You should expect him to sit quickly upon hearing the whistle blast and remain sitting just as you had done when facing him earlier. If he won't do this, it is necessary to make whatever corrections are necessary to get him to "sit" on the whistle blast and remain sitting even though you kept walking and applied pressure to the lead. He must do this and remain sitting until he is given the whistle command to come.

After I trust the dog to perform the whistle commands at the level that I expect, I will do an entire sequence with the dog on the rope starting with the verbal command to "heel," and then "sit whistle," "here whistle," "sit whistle," "here whistle," "sit whistle" and so on all the way down my road never breaking my stride nor letting the dog figure out that I am looking back at him over my shoulder. I expect him to perform these whistle commands perfectly without me ever looking back at him before I move ahead. If they are not flawless, I go back and work on them until they are.

Before moving on to force fetch, I further test the dog by doing all of the obedience and commands that he has learned but instead of holding the rope, I let it drag. The dog believes that I still have control of the rope. However, if he doesn't perform as expected, I have the rope readily accessible to make corrections.

If you have done the previous drills thoroughly, your dog's obedience foundation should be fairly solid. At this point the dog is ready to begin a force fetch program or for reinforcing further with an electronic collar should you choose to use it. The electronic collar is not a replacement for basic training. It is neither a quick fix nor a magic wand. The dog MUST have a solid foundation of basic obedience as I have outlined here BEFORE introducing the collar. If you will teach these drills and commands thoroughly you should have little trouble transitioning to the electronic collar for reinforcement of the commands. If these drills are not solid in the dog's mind, you could be inviting serious damage to your training program.

Force fetch, on the other hand, is the springboard for the rest of your dog's life's work and future training. This includes teaching your dog to reliably deliver birds to hand without munching them, run lines, handle and take casts to a blind retrieve. The benefits are many and "fetching" is only a small part of the picture that a dog gains from force fetch training.

Remember three things while working your way through these fundamentals with your dog. First, if the dog doesn't seem to understand, break it down into individual commands or sequences and back-up until he does the exercise correctly and then move on. Sometimes correcting a problem, which hasn't been thoroughly taught, will have the effect of curing and preventing a whole host of seemingly unrelated future problems. Second, never stop reviewing and reinforcing the fundamentals that you have already taught. There are no shortcuts; dog training takes patience and a great deal of time. Third, to repeat the statement that I made near

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the beginning of this article: You ultimately "win or lose" within arms reach. I hope that this helps you to understand why — "ALL future training develops from and depends upon the training that you start with the dog at your side."

