

Steadying the Retriever – Part I

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Among the most important attributes of a quality retriever is steadiness to shot and fall of game. Little else can spoil an otherwise promising wing shoot quicker than an uncontrollable, disruptive, untrained dog who associates gunfire with immediately breaking for a retrieve. An unsteady dog cannot be considered properly trained since it is disregarding the sit command. Many individuals simply do not give equal billing and attention to conditioning steadiness in their training process as compared to other skills such as marking, water work or handling. Yet, the fact is, steadiness is a fundamental element to the success of other gundog skills such as marking, honoring, flushing and sitting quietly in the blind while birds work. Steadiness is being under control at all times despite distractions, diversions or temptations.



Steadying a dog is not achieved through a few quick lessons drilled in an enthusiastic dog as a secondary consideration. Steadiness conditioning should be interwoven into the ongoing training process beginning quite early and progressing throughout the dog's entire life. It is unwise to just one day decide to steady-up our prospect. By following a logical progression in training, one can develop a naturally steady dog without interfering with retrieving desire or use of unnatural force methods.

First, consider the preliminaries:

- ◆ Steadiness is an extension of obedience. Ensure compliance with obedience command prior to enforcing steadiness.
- ◆ Avoid too many meaningless retrieves for pups. They only serve to over-excite the dog. Keep retrieves between 2 to 4 per week in pre-training; 6 to 8 marks per week in early basic training and reduce marking drills to perhaps one session in five as training progresses. Concentrate on memories, site blinds, diversions, etc.
- ◆ Don't expose your retriever prospects to hunting situations until basic training is completed. Ideally the age for a pup's first hunt should exceed 12 months allowing greater maturity.
- ◆ Too many birds at a young age over-excite pups. Keep bird exposure limited to brief sessions re-introduced periodically throughout basic training. Avoid "bird crazy" training sessions unless you have a very low-drive dog needing motivation.

- ◆ Include dogs in-group work where the retriever must remain patient, still and quiet while honoring other dogs. The quietest dogs gets the retrieve, thereby dogs soon realize that patience brings about the reward of a retrieve.
- ◆ Make the association between gunfire and something to retrieve the best kept secret possible between you and your young dog. The connection will be realized quickly enough. Train young dogs to sit at the sound of gunfire.
- ◆ Pick up 75% of all downed birds yourself the first hunting season keeping the rookie tied in the blind or at heel to avoid mishaps. We do not want to reward running in with a retrieve thereby reinforcing negative behavior.

Training Steadiness

Approach the conditioning of steadiness from 3 positions. These concepts apply equally to young prospects and to seasoned pro retrievers in need of a bit of a tune up.

Denials

The dog does not get the mark, retrieve or bird. Either you or another dog picks up the fall. A gundog must realize two things: 1. All retrieves are not theirs and 2. Whining, creeping, or movement will not result in a retrieve; only patience results in a retrieve. Denials also apply to hunting situations. A pup normally should pick up only 25% of the falls they encounter their entire first season. For the old pro, a couple of denials are equally effective in maintaining steadiness. Use a second dog or pick up the fall yourself.

Delays

Don't send the dog on a retrieve too quickly after a shot or fall. Let time pass, move about, talk, reload, and then send. Hone patience. Initially, with a pup, the delay will only be brief. Later, the duration between fall and release expands. In training, the young dog may be actually heeled away and re-sent from another position.

Diversions


Effectively ignoring diversions or distractions, whether in the blind or when completing a retrieve, is actually a derivative of steadiness. Steadiness includes quietly honoring other working dogs, ignoring secondary falls on a retrieve without switching, handling flushing birds, and not pursuing off game and remaining undisturbed by other hunters and their gunfire. Steady dogs can manage temptations while remaining focused on their job.

Steadiness conditioning by no means should be entrenched at the peril of retrieving desire. This need not be the case if the dog has natural retrieving instinct, the conditioning occurs progressively with minimal force, and the process is begun at the early stages of training.

Remember, control coupled with keenness and natural ability are the desirable qualities of a fine shooting dog. Our training methods must be structured to accomplish this goal.

Steadying the Retriever – Part II

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It is important to structure training exercises and drills that do not compromise steadiness. Too many marks, quickly releasing dogs for retrieves, and associating gunfire with immediate retrieves all serve to undermine steadying efforts. As often as possible, utilize training methods that protect steadiness integrity.

Part I of "Steadying the Retriever" presented the preliminaries. Part II will offer proven methods to help produce that rock-steady, shooting dog.

The Beginning

Steadiness conditioning must begin early. Young pups should not be "spun up" with repeated, meaningless retrieves. Keep pups calm and focused with only a few retrieves per week.

When the time comes to delay the pup's release on a retrieve, don't use forceful restraints. Place the pup between your legs as you kneel down. Place your hands across the pup's chest and cradle the pup against the legs. Pitch the bumper and release when ready by simply removing your hands. Now we are already in the kneeling position to encourage prompt return. As the pup understands the concept of the delay and becomes calmer, lengthen the extent of the delay.

Next, restrain the pup lightly from the side to delay the release. When the pup is patient for short periods prior to release, move out in front of the pup to toss the bumper. Place yourself between the bumper and the pup by tossing the bumper over your shoulder. The pup's path is blocked to the bumper and the sit command can be encouraged. If pup runs in, he can be stopped or you can quickly pick up the bumper yourself.

Group Dynamics

Once your pup understands the concept of steadiness, begin to steady him in groups of other dogs. Pups pick up on the mannerisms and actions of other dogs in the group. It is quite easy to steady 3 to 4 pups together since one often mimics the actions of the others. This exercise also begins the concept of honoring.

Walkups

Walkup exercises become possible after the pup can promptly respond to sit and heel. A "walkup" is heeling the dog across fields while bumpers are tossed out front, similar to a bird being flushed. The pup is required to sit on command as the bumper is thrown. This begins the concept of sit to flush. Whether or not the dog will ever be on an upland hunt, the drill pays

dividends. A handler is actually training the pup to sit when the bird/mark is thrown and a shot is fired. The counteraction (sit) is conditioned to minimize the likelihood of the undesirable reaction (run in). Use bumpers, cold game, remote launchers, and planted, live birds to condition pups to sit on flyers.

Memories

Substitute memories for marks. Excessive marking destabilizes steadiness and promotes independent action on the part of the dog. Memories involve placing bumpers or birds in varied locations and sending dogs back for the retrieve at a later time from a different location. Site, trailing and circle memories enhance steadiness, as will sending dogs away from thrown marks back to previously placed memories. The key is that the dog is not sent straight away for the retrieve.

Distractions

Another important part of steadiness is the ability of the dog to handle distractions in the field, especially on the retrieve. Involve planted birds, thrown bumpers as diversions, flushing birds, gunfire, and other dogs working on land or in water as your dog remains focused on making their retrieves. Steadiness also involves sitting quietly without noise or movement in the blind for long periods as other dogs work, calls are blown, guns are fired, and birds are working in the sky-even sitting motionless as birds land directly on the water in front of the dog.

Conditioning

Steadiness conditioning must be drilled before each hunting season, even in older dogs. The excitement of the hunt may well destabilize the most experienced dog. Get the dog some birds and shooting exposure prior to the opening day. Private game farms and sporting clay shoots offer great preseason training opportunities. Live pigeons, pen-raised quail, or domestic ducks can provide a bit of live game exposure to reinforce steadiness. As a final point, don't leave anything to chance in the field with your first-season pup. Tie young pups on their first hunts to ensure no breaks or creeping.

One of the most important goals to have for a new retriever prospect for the first year in the field is to develop steadiness to shot and fall. This skill is considered by most wingshooters as the cornerstone to a fine gundog.

Shortchanging the training program for steadiness in early training limits the potential of your hunting companion long term.