

The Trained Retrieve - Part I

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Notice that we call this the "trained" retrieve, not the "force" retrieve. There is a world of difference, as Larry Mueller, gundog editor for *Outdoor Life* discovered during his visit to the Tri-Tronics Training Center. In an article about his experience entitled "A Farewell to Force Fetching," he wrote, "Teaching your dog to fetch no longer has to be a painful experience, because the current trend is toward the "trained retrieve."

In the trained retrieve, we show the dog how to be successful by first thoroughly teaching it what to do before we begin reinforcing the command "Fetch." We start by teaching the dog to hold an object calmly. "Hold" really tells the retriever, "Keep your mouth calm. In other words, don't drop or chew."

To teach the dog "Hold," we use a sequence that makes it easy for the dog to learn without stress. At first we place an object in the dog's mouth, so the dog can identify what is correct. Then we let it discover that not holding onto the object leads to mild discomfort, which is "turned off" when the object is back in the dog's mouth. Through this comparison the dog can easily identify what is correct.

We feel that there are two commands that are critical for the young retriever to learn early. Those commands are "Here" and "Hold." Only when the dog understands that it *must obey these two commands*, is it ready to begin marking practice in the field, or a season of hunting. When you have control in these two areas, you can begin to develop the young dog's retrieving desire, without it developing mouth problems, delivery problems, or problems identifying who's in charge (not your dog, we hope!).

Mouth Problems

To help prevent mouth problems, you should become aware of your dog's natural tendencies before you begin training "Hold." In general, excitable dogs are more prone to bite down hard and chew. Sensitive dogs are likely to pick things up by the end and frequently drop them. Many partially trained dogs tend to "claim the prey" and are reluctant to complete the retrieve because they want to keep it rather than delivering to you.

For the excitable dog, use hard, large-diameter objects. For the sensitive dog, use retrieving objects that have ends which are uncomfortable so that the dog will hold them in the center. (You can do this by removing the rope from a bumper and wrapping the ends with wire.)

For the dog that doesn't deliver to hand, spend time reinforcing the "Here" command. For those dogs that are reluctant to give up the bird, reinforce "Drop" with your collar. It shouldn't take but a session or two to convince the dog to deliver to hand properly.

You can also help avoid mouth problems if you don't put the dog in a situation that is too challenging before it's ready. The tendency to crush birds is often caused by allowing the dog to retrieve a wounded pheasant before it has been taught to hold properly. A dog that is unaccustomed to holding a struggling bird may discover that crushing it stops the flapping and scratching. Once started, such hardmouth problems are difficult to eliminate, so take the time to prevent them in the first place.

The Training Table



Slip two fingers of your gloved hand behind the dog's canine teeth, and place your thumb lightly under its chin. Note the Velcro hobbles to prevent the dog from pawing.

We start the trained retrieve on a training table, which is 16 feet long and two feet wide. A training table allows you to control the dog and keep it compliant. A table also saves your back if you're working several dogs.

When you introduce "Hold" and "Fetch" to the dog, you must be able to concentrate on what the dog is doing with its mouth. The training table limits the dog's motion and leaves your hands free. You can concentrate on teaching the lesson rather than physically struggling with the dog.

If the dog isn't familiar with a training table, have it walk back and forth and get used to being up there. After you see that the dog is comfortable on the table, secure it to a collar attached to the end post. Also, to prevent pawing, we put Velcro hobbles on the dog's front legs. You should remove the hobbles as soon as they are no longer needed.

Introduction to Holding

With the dog secured on the table so that it cannot move about, push your index finger into the corner of its mouth. As soon as the dog opens its mouth, slip two fingers of your gloved hand behind its canine teeth and place your thumb lightly under its chin.

Typically, when you put your fingers in the dog's mouth, it will try to spit them out. Don't let it succeed, and be sure to remain calm. If you get excited, the dog will too. *Do not* give the command to "Hold" at this stage of training. You will add that shortly.

The "Drop" Command

Keep two fingers behind the dog's canine teeth until the dog stops chewing. At that moment, say "Drop" and let the dog pull its mouth off your hand. The dog will soon realize that when it stops chewing you will allow it to get rid of your fingers. If the dog won't let go, just wiggle your index finger on the back of its tongue as you say "Drop."

The "Hold" Command

Now that the dog has learned that holding your fingers calmly will lead to getting them out of its mouth, you can begin teaching it to hold calmly for longer periods of time. To do this, leave your fingers in the dog's mouth after it has stopped chewing.

The moment the dog starts to chew again, grab the skin on the back of its neck with your free hand. This technique causes the dog to calm down and stop chewing. The timing makes the dog realize that chewing on your fingers leads to displeasure. Once the dog accepts holding your fingers without resisting, start giving the "Hold" command when you put your fingers into its mouth.

Holding the Dumbbell



After the dog will calmly hold your fingers for at least a minute, begin using a dumbbell. Open the dog's mouth and place the dumbbell behind the dog's canine teeth. Close its mouth over the dumbbell, and help the dog hold the dumbbell for a few moments by keeping your hand under its chin.

Now get ready to correct the dog for dropping the dumbbell. Take the dog's ear flap and hold it between your thumb and finger. When the dog drops the dumbbell, immediately apply mild pressure by rubbing your thumbnail and fingernail against the dog's ear while you pick up the dumbbell and put it back into the dog's mouth. Stop the pressure as soon as the dumbbell is back in its mouth. Calmly praise the dog. After the dog has held the dumbbell a moment, give the command "Drop."

Tap lightly on the bumper. When the dog drops it, use mild ear pressure until you have placed the bumper back into the dog's mouth.

At this stage, you are not trying to teach the dog to reach for the dumbbell. You are just teaching it to hold. Let the dog make the comparison. When it drops the dumbbell, it causes discomfort to its ear. When the dumbbell is in its mouth, there is no pressure,

just calm, soothing praise.

After several repetitions in which you see that the dog accepts holding the dumbbell, begin tapping lightly on the end of the dumbbell. At first, this tapping will cause the dog to drop the dumbbell. Soon, however, the dog will learn that dropping the dumbbell leads to uncomfortable ear pressure and will grip it more firmly.

Sometimes move your hand toward the top of the dog's head or toward its chest without taking the dumbbell. You do not want the dog to think that reaching toward its head is a signal to drop. Show the dog that only when you take hold of the dumbbell and command "Drop" is it supposed to release.

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Each time the dog drops the dumbbell before being given the release command, apply pressure on its ear until you get the dumbbell back in its mouth. Be consistent; create mild discomfort when the dog drops the dumbbell, and pleasure when it holds. Soon the dog will want to hold and not drop.

Holding Other Objects



To thoroughly prepare the dog, teach it to hold and carry several different objects before introducing birds.

When the dog is reliable at holding the dumbbell, remove the dog from the collar that is attached to the post. Attach a short lead around the post and through the dog's collar to give the dog enough freedom to move its head about 12 inches.

Place a bumper in the dog's mouth and say "Hold." If the dog drops the bumper, apply pressure on its ear. If the dog begins chewing after holding the bumper for a moment, grip the scruff of the neck and command

"Hold." Repeat the procedure using several different objects until the dog is reliable at holding all of them.

Introduction to Birds

Next, have the dog hold frozen birds, then freshly-killed ones. If possible, use all the types of birds the dog may retrieve in the future. Be sure to include large game birds such as ducks and pheasants.

Introducing birds when the dog is up on the table and under control enables you to help the dog learn how to hold them properly. When dogs are introduced to birds in this kind of controlled situation, they are much less likely to develop hardmouth problems.

Reinforcing "Hold" with the Tri-Tronics Collar

Once you have completed the above procedures, and you notice that the dog will open its mouth as you offer the bumper, you can begin using the Tri-Tronics collar to reinforce "Hold."

Place a bumper in the dog's mouth. If the dog drops the bumper, apply very low electrical stimulation. Release the button as you place the bumper back in the dog's mouth.

You must use a collar with continuous stimulation and variable intensity to work on the trained retrieve, including the "Hold" command. Continuous stimulation means that the stimulation stays on until the trainer releases the button. Variable intensity means you can change the strength of what the dog feels by changing colored plugs or contact points on the collar.

The correct level of stimulation to use to reinforce "Hold" is quite low. For example, if a dog works in the field with a # 4 plug, you'd normally use a # 1 or # 2 plug for reinforcing "Hold" in the yard.

Introduction to Carrying

You don't want the dog to "Hold" in a stationary position so long that it thinks "Hold" is a command that also means stand still. So unfasten the dog from the post, and lead it up and down the length of the table while having it carry a bumper.

When the dog drops the bumper, press the low button. Release the button as you place the bumper back in the dog's mouth. With repetition, the dog will realize that letting the bumper fall out of its mouth causes mild discomfort from the collar.

The Delivery to Hand

While the dog is up on the table and being taught "Hold," you have an ideal opportunity to develop a nice delivery. At this stage of training the dog would like to drop the object rather than hold it. So by allowing the dog to "get rid" of the object by giving it to you, the dog will develop a nice delivery to hand.

To develop your dog's delivery on the table, *don't* reach for the object the moment you stop walking and the dog stops beside you. Wait until the dog looks up at you. Attract it if necessary by tapping your chest or saying "Look." The moment it looks at you, take hold of the object and say "Drop." Because of the dog's desire to get rid of the object, it will soon be looking up and presenting the object for you to take.

"Hold" and Carry on the Ground

After the dog will carry a bumper while on the table, practice having it carry a bumper while off the table and walking on a leash. If the dog drops the bumper, reinforce "Hold" with the Tri-Tronics collar the same way you did when you walked the dog on the table.