

Training Your Dog to Cast

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In our last *Retriever Journal* article we wrote about steadying the dog with the aid of a 2' x 3' platform. In this article we will use platforms again, this time to teach the dog to cast.

We can accomplish two goals with this training. First, we can teach the dog to cast. Second, we can give him plenty of practice on remaining steady and not creeping. Your dog is ready for these lessons after he's learned to be steady on a platform, and to leave your side to go to a platform to turn off low-level continuous stimulation.

Advantages of casting to platforms

We have found that teaching beginning casting to platforms has several advantages.

1. The dog is already used to responding to the reinforcement of the collar to go to a platform. He is therefore conditioned to understand a correction if you need to reinforce your cast.
2. Because the dog is casting to a visible platform, you can begin meaningful training on casting even before the dog has learned to fetch reliably from a pile. If you cast the beginning dog to traditional bumper piles, you would run the risk of confusion between casting and retrieving. With the traditional method, if the dog took the proper cast to the pile but didn't fetch "correctly," (he dropped or chewed the bumper, or shopped the pile without a prompt pick-up), you would have to correct him (or accept bad habits developing). The dog might think the correction was for taking your cast, and might not go at all on the next repetition. By rewarding the dog with a marked retrieve *after* he gets to the platform, you separate the tasks in the beginning dog's mind.
3. The dog is being conditioned to work for the handler to get the retrieve. If he accepts your control and takes the correct cast, he earns a bumper, which you throw. This becomes a game that dogs really enjoy while at the same time respecting your leadership.
4. The dog gets lots and lots of practice being steady, and the platform acts as an aid to prevent creeping, even when the dog is excited.
5. The method also works with dogs that have a low retrieve drive. Your dog is probably perfect, but you may know some other dogs that don't have that burning desire to have a piece of plastic in their mouths. They're the dogs with the attitude: "I don't do bumpers! Shoot me a bird if you want me to play your game." A thrown object is still interesting to a retriever even if a pile of bumpers isn't, and if the dog likes birds, throw him birds for his retrieve reward. (If he doesn't like birds either, throw his tennis ball. But you might want to consider getting a second dog before hunting season). Meanwhile, using the platforms gives you a target for reinforcing the all-important "Go when sent" lesson without fighting the "Fetch" issue.

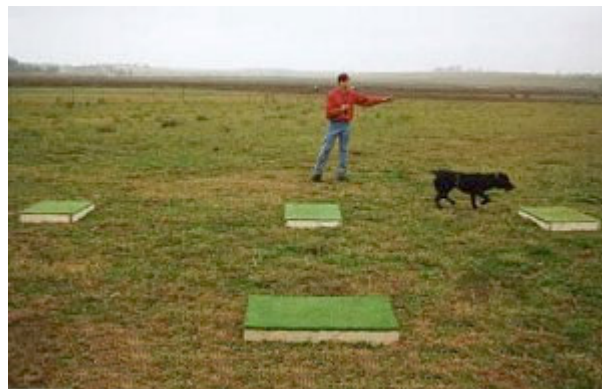
Step 1 – "Here" from the platform

As preparation for using the platforms for casting targets, the dog must know that he shouldn't always stay parked on a platform just because it's in the training area! So after he gets on the platform on your command, praise him, have him wait a moment, then call him back to you with "Here." If he doesn't come on the first command, reinforce a second "Here" command with the collar. Release the button the moment he steps off the platform, then encourage him all the way to you with lots of praise.

If he won't come off the platform on the second command, you may have to increase intensity as you give a third command. The dog needs to learn that, even though he's on a platform, obeying your command takes precedence.

Step 2 – Teaching "Over"

Set up your platform and send the dog to it once from heel. Then sit him with his side toward it, about four feet away. Stand about six feet in front of him, and give him an "Over" signal toward it. As you give the signal, use whatever command you used that meant "get on the platform," such as "Place." After a few repetitions, start using the "Over" command instead of the "Place" command as you give the cast.



If he doesn't take the cast, press the button and repeat the command as you step toward the platform.

If he doesn't take the cast, press the button and repeat the command as you step toward the platform. Release the button when his front feet step on the platform.

Praise him and have him wait a moment. Then throw a bumper off to the side. He must wait on the platform until sent! When it's clear he's not going to break, release him for the retrieve. This drill gives the dog many repetitions of being steady, while at the same time, he's learning to cast. Repeat until the dog is confident at taking your cast. Now use the same procedure, but position yourself to cast in the opposite direction.

Step 3 – Practicing both "Overs"

Once he is confident, put him between two platforms and alternate between left- and right-hand "Over." When you begin working with two platforms, first position the dog off-center, so he's closer to the platform you plan to send him to. If he doesn't go on your first cast, reinforce your second cast with low-level stimulation. Release the button the moment he turns to go.

Practice until the dog is going quickly on the first cast, and waiting eagerly on the platform for his bumper reward. Gradually increase distance over several sessions by moving the platforms farther apart, and moving your position farther from him when you cast, until both these distances are at least 10-15 yards.



After he goes to the correct platform, throw a bumper off to the side. He must wait on the platform until sent.

Every time the dog does it right and is on the platform, throw him his bumper. If the dog moves toward the platform before you cast him, remind him to sit. He will quickly learn that he must wait for the cast.

Step 4 – Teaching "Back"

Follow the same procedure as for "Over." Start the dog close to a platform (about 4 feet), with you a little farther from the dog than he is from the platform. To eliminate confusion when you first introduce this exercise, make sure the dog is much closer to the "Back" platform than either of the "Over" platforms.

Remember, if you want to teach him both left and right-hand backs (which we recommend), start by making it easy for him to turn the way you want so that he'll always be successful. You mustn't stop an inexperienced dog if he gives you the wrong "Back," because he'll think you don't want him to go. So sit him canted slightly in the direction you want him to turn. Take a slight step sideways as you cast "Back" to make it obvious for him which way to turn. Gradually phase out these helpful hints until he does correct "Back" casts to either side while sitting straight in front of you.

Be sure to give him plenty of practice on both sides. If he seems to have more trouble with one side, practice that one more than the other.

Step 5 – Combining "Back" and "Over"

When he's good at taking both left and right hand "Overs" and is also good at the "Back" cast, use two platforms placed in a "Back" and one "Over" location. Alternate between the "Over" and "Back" casts. First put opposite "Backs" and "Overs" together as a pair (for example, left-hand "Back" with right-hand "Over"). When the dog is getting pretty good, practice alternating between "Back" and "Over" on the same side. This will make him think a little more.



Once he is confident with both "over" and "back" casts, practice all four in a session. Start with the dog on a platform in the center.

Step 6 – Combining all casts

Add a third and fourth platform, as shown in the picture. Now the dog can practice all four casts in a session, left- and right-hand "Back," and left- and right-hand "Over," starting from a position on the platform in the center. This gives him experience in *leaving a platform on command* to go to another platform, which solidifies his understanding of casting. Don't forget to sometimes call him to you with "Here" or your Come-In whistle, because in the field a Come-In toward you is another cast you will need.

Common problems

Breaking

If he breaks, press the button the moment he steps off the platform and command "Place." Release the button when his front feet get back on the platform. He should remember these lessons from his platform steadying practice (last issue's article).

If he goes anyway, you'll have to release the button, but better to find out now and not later that he obviously needs the steadying practice! Reduce the attraction of the throws by placing your throw so that you're positioned somewhat between the platform and the fall. As the dog proves he can be trusted to remain steady, gradually make your throws more exciting.

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If he continues to try to break after the second correction, go to a higher intensity level. You don't want him to learn to "run through" corrections by experiencing repeated ineffective ones. Realize you have some steadying issues to resolve before you can use the excitement of retrieving bumpers as a reward in casting drills.

Going for the wrong platform

If the dog heads toward the wrong platform, stop him with "No." If he disregards you, call him back with "Here." Then just take it from the top again, sitting him in his starting place, and casting again. He'll learn that he has to work for *you* and not for himself if he wants to earn that bumper reward!

If he makes the same mistake twice, simplify for him by starting him a little closer to the desired platform. Remember, he gets a thrown bumper as a reward every time he's right. Have fun!

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