

How to get Your Money's Worth out of Professional Training

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One thing is clear about having your retriever professionally trained — it is expensive. From the trainer's point of view, at present-day training rates, he is providing a lot of service for his monthly fee. From the dog owner's viewpoint, however, it may be difficult to justify putting thousands of dollars into training a dog to be used only during a brief hunting season. Both of these viewpoints have merit. If the owner decides he can afford to have his dog trained and is interested in maintaining the dog's training as a sport and recreational activity throughout the dog's life, however, then pro training is a wonderful investment, and often a great buy in services. It should also be remembered that, for a person working full-time at a profession or business, the investments in time, equipment, transportation, and help in the training field are going to cost several times the cost of professional training. Each owner must make the decision whether pro training is worth the fee — but once this decision is made, there is a great deal the owner can do to make sure it is money well spent.

Probably the first and most important step in making training dollars spent pay off is to begin with a good dog! Get a good, well-bred puppy, ideally from a repeat breeding, which has produced dogs you know you would like. Raise your puppy well. Teach it manners, basic obedience, take it places with you, and in general develop a close relationship that will serve as the basis for future training. Human contact makes the difference between an eager learner and a dog, which is very difficult to teach. Exposure to different situations develops confidence, while lack of exposure usually results in a shy dog, which spooks at anything and everything new.



Raise your puppy with plenty of human contact.

Failure either to select a good prospect or to bring it up well usually results in a dog which after many months of training is mediocre at best, perhaps able to find the easy falls in the decoys but not much more. If you have two puppies (which is rarely advisable) and you're in a quandary as to which one to have professionally trained, try to avoid the pitfall of reasoning that you should send the worse pup to be trained because he is more in need of the training. Send the good pup. You'll get more for your money.

Preliminary training that can well be done at home before sending your youngster out for professional training includes: basic manners, "No" for anything you don't want the puppy to do — don't jump on people, bite at hands, etc., housebreaking, learning its name and to come when called, heel, sit, stay, basic retrieving at the play level, and introduction to birds — most likely freshly killed pigeons. If you cover these basics and do not expose your pup to an undue level of harsh training correction, your young prospect should arrive at the trainer's in good shape, ready

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to train, and ahead of the rest of the class by a couple of months. Your trainer will doubtless recognize the quality of your puppy and the effort you have put into it, and compliment you on your work. Often this head start will give your trainer a more positive attitude toward you and your puppy, which could result in better and faster results in his/her training program.

It is of utmost importance, when selecting a trainer, to get one who suits you and your dog's needs. If you make a visit to a trainer's establishment and find that you can have a harmonious relationship with the trainer, the dogs look and act good and appear to be well-trained for the stage they are in, and that the most advanced dogs can smoothly demonstrate a level of working expertise that meets your expectations, then that trainer is probably competent to do your work. Of course the facilities, kennel compound, general cleanliness, etc. must be satisfactory. Most retriever trainers we know are strong in the area of dog care. This includes feeding — usually the trainer knows through experience what brand of feed will keep the dogs healthy and fit through the rigors of training, so it is not generally a good idea to ask that your dog be fed a special diet (which is apt to be less beneficial).

Once you have decided on a trainer, and this may involve some travel, several interviews, and possibly recommendations from various clients, you are ready to commit yourself, and your young dog, to his services. This is a big step, but one that we believe must be made in order to achieve the best results. You should in no way suspect your trainer of dishonesty, erratic training habits, bill padding, etc. If these questions are in your mind you should probably still be shopping. If you cannot find it in yourself to place your trust in a trainer, then professional training may not be for you. The vast majority of trainers work hard and conscientiously for their monthly fee, so your chances of being ripped-off are fairly small.



Make sure the facilities meet your requirements.

Trust is particularly important when the trainer says something you don't want to hear. Some dogs, for example, will be severely set back if taken hunting early in their training. Their ability to learn, and in particular to transfer their responsiveness from trainer to owner and to the hunting environment, may be irreparably damaged, or they may need several months to make up what they have lost. Based on evaluation, over weeks or months of work with your dog, the trainer may recommend against such an interruption. This may be a big disappointment, but trusting your trainer's judgment will pay off in subsequent hunting seasons. There are many situations where the trainer's professional judgment could appear to the distrustful client as self-interest, so the issues of trust and commitment must be resolved ahead of time.

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The time a retriever must stay in training to achieve a satisfactory result is extremely variable, so you should not expect your trainer to say, "This can be done in 6 weeks; that in 12 weeks," etc. Dogs have greatly different learning rates, and the time needed to transfer learned behavior into habitual behavior also varies depending on their breeding and upbringing. Until the trained routines, such as force fetching, delivery, steadiness, and many other areas of schooling become habitual, they are likely to disappear quickly if not attended to through daily drills.

So, since no one can predict how long a particular goal will take, you must be willing to work with your trainer within general time frameworks, with monthly reports as to your dog's progress. It is easier for a trainer to make time-in-training predictions as the dog's training progresses, but even after several months of work, the trainer will usually say something to the effect that "the job isn't done until its done, and it isn't done until..." you know the rest. This is particularly true of force fetching, force on back, stopping on the whistle, and so forth. Areas such as quality of marking and development of momentum are much less tangible, tending to improve with experience (although not steadily).

As your trainer works through the training program it will become evident that your dog is ahead or behind the average schedule. If it takes somewhat longer you're probably making a wise choice to go with the extended period of training. If your pup is way ahead of schedule, feel blessed as you may be able to have it trained to a level you had not planned on within your budget and time framework.

Training a retriever is definitely a step-by-step procedure, so believe your trainer when he says your dog needs another week, or month, of a particular phase of his training to make him solid. The value of succeeding steps depends largely on preceding steps. Short cuts in training are rarely beneficial and will ultimately cost you more than they save.

It is particularly unwise to take your dog out of training on surprise notice. Your dog will probably be in the middle of some procedure that has not been completed, and the interruption will at the least negate any value, which may have been derived from that stage of his training. At the worst, an interruption in training at any of several points may set the entire training program back. If you must pick up your dog before the time you have agreed upon, make sure your trainer knows of this as far in advance as possible so he or she may consult with you and bring the training to the most valuable conclusion possible for both you and your dog.

When your dog has reached the desired conclusion to its training, be sure you go to pick it up, and spend some time with the trainer. Unless you are an experienced handler and familiar with this trainer's methods, the things you learn on this visit are critical to your ability to make use of the dog's training. Listen carefully to your trainer, take notes, videos if necessary, and follow his instruction on working with your dog to maintain and further its level of competence. Little things like where to hold your hand when sending, the proper posture for casting on blind retrieves, how to line your dog up for marks and blinds, are all of great importance to minimize confusion on the dog's part as it switches from the trainer to its owner's handling. Voice, body gestures, and other forms of communication have been established by your trainer and must be as nearly as possible duplicated for best results.

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Spend time with the trainer learning to handle your dog and carry on its training.

The more you understand about training the better use you will be able to make of the trainer's work, so it is also to your advantage if you can visit while your dog is in training and watch how the trainer handles all of the dogs. Recognize, though, that a trainer needs to accomplish a lot in the course of a training day. If you make sure you fit in with the trainer's routine, rather than interrupting it, he or she will probably encourage you to come back.

Your trainer will probably also give you advice on taking your dog on its first few hunts, things to look out for, how to enforce steadiness in the hunting situation and other precautions. The trainer knows that however well-trained your prospect is, a long day in the field or duck blind is going to place demands on your dog that have not been totally covered in training. Heed this advice and try to give your dog the breaks it needs to make the transition from training to the hunting field. No matter how we as trainers try, they are not identical. Your trainer will probably tell you to restrict your dog's activities in order to best ensure high energy during training sessions and attentiveness to the job. Roughhousing with people and other dogs, free time with the cats, and unrestricted liberty to roam large tracts of land are generally counterproductive to high quality work.

If you have decided to become involved in competitive field trials or noncompetitive hunt tests, trust your trainer's judgment as to your dog's readiness for such events. Bad habits and trial-wiseness can be developed by running a dog in formal events in which there is nothing you can do to correct the errors and infractions your dog may commit. Even with a well-trained and reliable dog it is unwise to run an excess of events, i.e. too many weekends in a row, two stakes in one weekend, until the dog is so habituated to reliable and excellent performance that this can be done without much risk of damaging its training.

Changing trainers, although sometimes necessary if there is a gross mismatch between the temperaments of trainer and dog, usually works to the detriment of the dog and its progress. In extreme cases, promising young dogs have become recalcitrant or uncontrollable. More often, excess training time is needed to make up for a change in method or a poorly timed break in training. An inexperienced dog may not work well for a new trainer without a lot of review of fundamentals. This is another reason it is important to satisfy all of your doubts ahead of time, and choose a trainer to whom you can make a commitment.

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In addition to all of the factors, which affect your dog's success, consideration of the trainer's time and privacy will be appreciated. When you visit with your prospective trainer for the first time, make an appointment. Don't drop in out of the blue on Sunday afternoon! Ask if it's O.K. to bring your puppy and show him what it can do. If the trainer agrees to this, and gives you an appointment, be punctual. A trainer's time is valuable, his help's time is expensive, and he doesn't have time to wait around for latecomers and no shows. Then get out your puppy and show the trainer what it knows. Don't bother bragging on the puppy, as it will quickly become evident what the puppy knows. Does it know its name? Does it come when called; will it heel and sit on command? Can you get it to retrieve a dummy or bird to hand? If so, good. If not, more work for the pro to do on things you could have taken care of at home. Try not to fall back on excuses like "Oh! he never does that at home," or "he always comes when I call him in the back yard" (feed dish in hand) they never impress the trainer. Pull no punches, describe your pup honestly and don't make excuses for slips. The trainer will respect you and your dog for it.

Although you may be eager for news of your dog, try to get by without constant updates. Most trainers will give you a monthly written report on your retriever's progress, and perhaps one phone call a month is permissible. It is probably a bad idea to call your trainer more frequently as a dog's progress is generally gradual, and too much telephone time with your pro may constitute an intrusion on his privacy. He is already giving you two daily training sessions, feed, and care for your monthly fee, so it may be unwise to push it with excessive phone calls, unless you have a friendly relationship that permits extra conversations.

When we review the dogs we've trained in recent years that we consider successes, in that they met or exceeded their owners' expectations, or failures, which were not able to function as basic gun dogs, the difference in almost every case was in the owners' adherence to the guidelines laid out in this article. If you have decided to commit the money necessary to train a dog, protect your investment by starting with a dog worth training, choosing a trainer you can trust, following instructions and learning as much from the trainer as possible, and refraining from insisting on training shortcuts.