

Is Your Dog Working for You or Is He Self-Employed?

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Can a young dog develop any bad habits if he's given lots of retrieving practice without a foundation in obedience? Are some shortcomings simply innocent indicators of a dog that isn't fully trained, while other misbehaviors are danger signals?

If you are new to retriever training, you may be wrestling with this issue. You get your puppy when he's seven or eight weeks old and you naturally want to throw something for him to retrieve. But do possible problems mean you shouldn't develop a young pup's enthusiasm for retrieving? What about advancing an older pup's skills at field marking before basics are completed? Is this okay?

Like a lot of things in dog training, it all depends on you and the dog. Each dog is an individual, and each pup's relationship with his owner will vary. A young retriever of four to eight months of age may do just fine being marked in the field before completing "basics." Or he may develop many bad habits that can be difficult or next-to-impossible to correct.

As your dog's trainer, you must be aware of possible problems and constantly assess his behavior. Below are some danger signs we watch for when doing retrieve work. These danger signs fall into two categories: prey-possession and extreme excitability.

Prey Possession

A dog that wants to possess or keep the retrieve object (the prey) for himself is being "prey possessive." The dog may even think that you are an unwelcome competitor for "the prize." A trained retriever should have the attitude that he's working for you. You can count on problems if he has been allowed to believe that he's self-employed and you're one of his employees.

Some prey possessiveness is natural. However, prey possessive behaviors that become habits are in direct conflict with a proper working attitude, because *the dog is working for himself*. That's why you should be wary of marking a young dog that exhibits prey possession to any significant degree.



Prey-possessive behaviors include running past the handler and around him, parading with the bird.

What to Look For

Prey possessive behaviors include the following: (a) running away with the retrieve object, (b) standing over a bird and pulling feathers, (c) returning very slowly — perhaps stopping to pee several times en route, (d) parading by the thrower with the bird or bumper, (e) returning to the handler but running past and around him, again parading with the prize, (f) turning the head away to block the handler from taking the object, (g) playing with the retrieve object, tossing or chewing it, and (h) freezing on the object by clamping onto it and not letting go.



Of course, many very young pups will try some or all of these things when first introduced to the fun of retrieving, and that is no big deal. Some tactful "finessing" by you should succeed in ending puppy prey-possessiveness after a few attempts.

A prey-possessive dog may freeze on the retrieve object, not letting go.

"Finessing" a Pup

How do you "finesse" a pup into returning to you with the retrieve object? One way is to throw the object down the hall. Or you can stand in a gate or receive the returning pup at the water's edge. These methods prevent him from running past you and around you. Another method is to have him come to you to earn a food treat and give up his object to get that treat. You can also induce him to come to you by attracting him to another object in your hand. Sometimes, simply using bumpers instead of birds will keep the youngster from having "mouth trouble," allowing you to give him marks without forming any bad habits.

Remember that when you introduce retrieving to the puppy of seven or eight weeks, you should exercise tact in how you treat the "prize" that he just retrieved. Snatching it away from him immediately can be discouraging to him. But at the same time, you don't want to let a chewing habit get started by letting him keep the object too long. After a few sessions, it should be possible to persuade him that the fun game is in earning another retrieve, and therefore giving up the object isn't bad after all.

Extreme Excitability

Excitability is another area where the dog's frame of mind is at odds with a "working attitude." But in this case, the problem isn't that the dog sees his owner as a competitor, but rather that the dog sees retrieving as so incredibly exciting that it mentally deranges him. Each successive retrieve seems to make the dog more excited and less clear headed.

This is the second area where we think there are serious "danger signals" to watch for. If you see them start to develop, either find an effective temporary fix, or don't mark the dog until he understands the control components of his job. Letting a young retriever learn to become physically or mentally unstable while retrieving can be a very bad idea.

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One symptom of extreme excitability would be giving voice, especially when barking increases in anticipation of the retrieve. The dog barks while on his way to the fall, or he barks before, during or after the throw.

Another example of extreme excitability is the young dog that won't hold still long enough to watch the fall. We don't expect an untrained retriever to be steady, but he should be learning that *watching* what is thrown is a necessary precursor to retrieving fun.

What Are "Basics"?

When we say "basics" in this column, we are thinking of the following: basic obedience, collar conditioning, and the trained retrieve. At each stage, not only is the dog learning a set of skills, but he is also developing a working attitude.

Basic obedience includes "Here," "Heel" and "Sit." This training develops a working attitude in the dog, as it introduces the idea that he is working for you and you are in charge.

Collar conditioning trains the dog to understand the e-collar reinforcement of known commands, "Here" and "Sit" at a minimum. (At the Dobbs Training Center, this stage also includes the concept of going to and staying on a place board, which is the foundation for becoming steady as well as for the "Back" command.)

Collar conditioning establishes something that's very important for field dogs — it ensures that basic control can be maintained at a distance. In particular, collar conditioning ensures that coming when called is completely "non-negotiable."

Trained retrieve (also called "force fetch"). This training includes two commands, "Hold" and "Fetch." The "Hold" command teaches the dog to hold, carry and deliver to hand. The "Fetch" command teaches the dog to pick up a retrieve object on command, even if he doesn't want to.

The trained retrieve also develops "working attitude," because the dog now understands that when he is retrieving he is working for you and not just for himself. He must handle game and other retrieve objects properly and not treat them as his personal possessions to be chewed on, dropped or tossed about. And the dog must willingly relinquish or deliver the object to his handler.

A Complete Package

It's important to view basic training as a complete package, not as a piecemeal problem-solving venture that you achieve by simply disciplining infractions as they occur. Unfortunately, the frustrated owner often tries to address the various inconvenient symptoms of prey possessiveness by piecemeal problem solving. The piecemeal approach may sometimes actually motivate the dog to learn *additional* undesirable behaviors.

For example, the pup won't give you the retrieve object, so you forcibly removed his "prize" from his mouth. Now he decides that you aren't fun to come to any more, so you put him on a

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check cord to eliminate his option of running away. This might fix things, or it might cause the pup to develop more severe mouth problems such as hard-mouthing the retrieve object while returning to you. Essentially, he is still trying to possess the retrieve object for himself after you eliminated his first and second choices.

Sometimes the new behaviors created by piecemeal problem solving can be hard to eliminate even *after* force fetching. Not only that, but some are the type of misbehaviors that tend to show up at the test or trial — when you can't do anything about them — rather than on training day.

Instead of piecemeal problem solving, basic training addresses *all sub tasks* of the retrieve, and gives the dog what he needs to be able to succeed in a control situation. He learns to pick the bird up quickly, to hold and carry it properly, to return promptly, and to deliver it willingly to hand. He learns that these control elements are part and parcel of the retrieving he loves to do. He does not resent you for "making" him do them. He becomes comfortable doing things your way *before* he gets an arsenal of misbehaviors to the contrary.

What About the Dog Who Trains His Owner?

If the trainer does his own throwing, it's not uncommon to see a young dog "make the owner obey." This is the dog who, every time he returns with the retrieve object, drops it in front of the owner, looks up at him, and requests another throw in "dog language." If the owner delays, perhaps the dog nudges the object with his nose ("hint, hint!"), or backs up, wagging his tail, and barks.

This dog is exhibiting another variation on the theme of "dog is self-employed — trainer is the employee." It's cute, but...

If this is your dog, instead of "obeying" and cheerfully producing another throw because he's demanding it, get training benefit out of the interaction. Have your dog *earn* another throw by sitting for it.