

Training Group Etiquette

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WORKING YOUR RETRIEVER WITH A GROUP of other trainers can be rewarding in several ways. Sharing the work involved in setting up tests, handling equipment, securing grounds, and throwing marks for each other's dogs keeps these tasks manageable. When the work is fairly divided, training sessions can progress smoothly, minimizing the likelihood of any participant being made to feel like a "workhorse."

Groups also offer the advantage of a learning experience for the participants, as they are able to compare methods and results. Members can assist with each other's dogs more effectively than when they are working alone, as the opportunity to demonstrate and to see the dog's response is a great aid to communication regarding training problems.

It is less likely that an owner will work his or her dog into the ground when training in a group, because time will not allow it. Sessions with each dog will be kept short rather than lengthy ordeals.

In a well-conducted training group, in which the essentials of etiquette are observed, a high level of efficiency and progress will develop, along with camaraderie within the group. If principles of consideration for the welfare and progress of everyone's dog are not judiciously maintained, the training group is likely to fall apart.

There are inherent challenges to training with a group, which inevitably create problems unless addressed with careful planning. It is often difficult to coordinate time so that everyone can make it on a regular basis. It is better to have less-frequent sessions in which there is sufficient time for everyone's dog to have a good workout, than to meet every afternoon for such a short period that someone gets left out.

It takes more time to train in a group than it does to hire bird throwers and train on your own. For this reason, pros, with a large number of dogs, can rarely entertain guest trainers other than their own clients. It is best not to impose on professional trainers for help without the understanding that there will be a fee.

A danger with training groups is that the sessions will turn into competitions in which the members try to outdo each other's dogs. This is unfortunate as it is generally counterproductive in terms of training value, as well as contrary to the principle of group work designed for the improvement of all. A training group should not exist as a showcase for the supremacy of any individual dog or handler.

Since people vary greatly in energy and ability to do certain kinds of work, the tendency for the bulk of the hard labor to fall on certain individuals is always present. When this happens, those who feel they are being taken advantage of will become dissatisfied and may leave the group.

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The solution to this problem is, of course, for everyone to pitch in. Arriving on time, prepared to work, contributes to the effectiveness of the session and makes a good impression on your training partners as well.

Many training procedures require one or more people to help the dog handler. Simple activities such as training the dog to come when called or to be honest in the water, shooting birds, and throwing dummies are, while not impossible, are difficult for the individual to accomplish without help. In a well-run training group it takes very little time to adjust the program to the particular needs of each dog.

FINDING, AND KEEPING, TRAINING GROUNDS in this day of development of every scrap of land available has become one of the biggest obstacles to the retriever owner's success. Everyone in the group should share the responsibility of finding grounds and making them available for group functions. In this way, overworking any particular tract of land or water can be minimized. Some landowners are generous and will welcome a trainer to work on their property occasionally. If it becomes too frequent, most will tire of it and ask you not to come back.

For this reason, it is extremely bad form to return to training grounds provided by another member of your group without invitation. Don't even ask as it might put your friend in the awkward position of having to say no.

Every effort should be made to leave training grounds in precisely the condition they were in when you came — no trash, of course, but also no bad tire tracks. Stay on established roads and trails with vehicles, and should a mishap occur, such as getting stuck, repair the ruts to original condition with shovels and rakes. These tools should be included in your training kit.

When asking permission to use someone's land, we always assure the owner that we will pick up trash others have left and dispose of it. It is also important to show your appreciation for the use of land frequently with your thanks and possibly some token gift, if they have refused monetary payment.

In conducting marking and blind tests during a group session it is advisable to agree in advance how much repetition time will allow. The individual who continually requests repeats for his or her dogs at the expense of others' training time will quickly become unpopular.

Keep things moving. Excess conversation between dogs, long coffee or beer drinking breaks, and the like eat into everyone's training time. If necessary, take charge as an organizer, call dogs to the line, keep in touch with throwers and blind planter by two-way radio, and establish a rhythm and momentum in the session. Your efforts will be appreciated.

When working in the field, that is, throwing birds or shooting fliers, act in a consistent manner for all dogs. Stay alert, keep your timing the same, and be ready to help if the handler calls for it. Above all, learn to throw the dummies or birds in the same, correct place every time. Any knowledgeable training group will not tolerate poor, erratic throws for long. Get good at it by practicing in your back yard.

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When throwing, hazing a dog off the shore, or any other activity where you assist another handler, **follow instructions** as precisely as possible. Don't improvise! The handler knows what he or she wants for the dog, and must be able to depend on you.

Try to be generous and equitable in sharing and providing equipment. Such things as two-way radios, blank pistols, white jackets, birds, etc. are expensive and the burden for supplying these things should not fall heavily on any individual. Birds are a particular problem. They are costly and hard to find. Do your best to locate and supply at least your share of the birds. Keep an old refrigerator in the garage running to keep used birds fresh as long as possible. If you should be so fortunate as to live where you can maintain a holding pen for live birds and can provide that service for your little club, you will soon be seen as indispensable.

When using equipment supplied by others, treat it with great care. Keep radios dry and firearms clean. Do not set blank pistols down in the sand or dirt, or put them in bags with dummies. Your group should have a protocol for whether radios stay at the station or move with the person, when you rotate in and out of the field. At the end of the session, turn radios off and make sure all equipment gets back to its owner. Picking everything up and putting it away is part of the group's responsibility, and your staying until the job is finished will be appreciated.

MAKE SURE that your dog does not interfere with others. Quickly remove your dog from the working line on lead when finished and put him or her in a crate or on a tie-out until your turn comes up again. Dogs on the loose, bumping other dogs, instigating fights, and interfering with the working dog, are not acceptable. If your dog is a nuisance barker, get a bark collar or park far enough from the training test so as not to create a problem. Unless formally honoring, do not keep your dog out as a test of its obedience--this is distracting to other handlers.

Things may happen within a training group and among members' dogs, which are best kept within the group. Some dogs, most in fact, will go through extended periods of poor work--looking bad, confused, and seemingly making little progress. It is unwise to say much to outsiders about the negative side of anyone's dog's progress. The training either will work or it won't work, and the results will be there for all to see if the dog is entered in competition. Intelligent discussion within the group concerning what to do with a dog that is in a severe slump can be beneficial. Frequently, some member will have had a dog with a similar problem that he or she has been able to see through with success. Just keep it within the group.

When training with an established group of participants, limited in number for obvious reasons, it is very bad form to show up with a guest and his or her dog (or dogs) without first inquiring of the other members if it is O.K. Training groups frequently and readily become too large, requiring members to contribute excessive time for the training benefits they obtain. It is unfair to the other members to invite someone without permission. Some groups, perhaps wisely, have by-laws that state: "We will operate with no more than four members, and no more than two dogs per member" — or some variation thereof. Guests' vehicles can also be a problem, not only adding to wear and tear on the grounds, but also perhaps inflating your presence in the eyes of the landowner. Having to alter plans and grounds at the last minute to accommodate uninvited guests is a severe disruption to a training day.

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If the training group of which you are a member gradually becomes oversized and cumbersome, despite your efforts to prevent this, you have a couple of alternatives. One is to suggest splitting the group into smaller units organized on the basis of working dogs of similar age and training experience together. The other is to politely bow out, thanking everyone for their help, wishing them the very best with their dogs, and seeking other training partners.

GUN HANDLING SAFETY IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE. We have seen bird throwers seriously injured with shotgun blanks. We all suffer hearing loss from blank pistols, especially if we use no hearing protection and, of course, the shotgun with live loads on the bird shooting station must be handled with the greatest care. All members of a training group who handle firearms should be licensed hunters who have passed a firearms safety course. They should always be aware of the locations of all of their partners, and willing to let a bird go if there is any doubt of the safety of shooting it. If you are training with experienced gun handlers, as you most likely will be, nothing will get you excluded from the group more quickly than careless gun handling. The successful, and safe, conduct of a retriever training group hinges on a mutual respect for the rights and training opportunities of all. Enjoy the progress and success of your friends' dogs as well as your own and your work with retrievers will improve.