

The Forced Retrieve

In dog training there is no such word as “democracy.” Sending a dog to retrieve a crippled greenhead from icy waters or a downed hot-footing pheasant from a slough is not an optional request. The dog should not have the choice of complying based on the water temperature, cover thickness or simply whether it feels like working. Neither should the hunter have to throw rocks to a floating bird and plead with the dog to fetch; nor, worse, jump into the water to show the dog how to do it. And bringing back crushed birds unfit for the table is unacceptable as well. The solution to all these problems is the forced retrieve.

Whatever new-millennium, politically correct term you care to use—be it trained retrieve, conditioned retrieve, forced retrieve, the bench, whatever—the fact is that

command—that there are no options or escape hatches. A dog that challenges all commands and schooling is much harder to train and a lot less fun to work with. Once force-trained, a timid dog becomes bolder and more confident. The dog learns to succeed

lead to the same destination. I have my way of doing things, but certainly there are other approaches that will work as well. Through our training schools and the work we’ve done with clients’ dogs and our own, I can’t tell you how many dogs I’ve put on the bench, but it would easily be in the hundreds. I’ve dealt with the gamut of dog personalities, from wimpy to aggressive. Every dog is different, and it is through these myriad experiences that we’ve developed our training methods.

I normally teach the forced retrieve to dogs that are between eight and 12 months old. (You can teach an old dog new tricks, but breaking old habits is just a wee bit more difficult.) By this time they have been exposed to lots of birds, have been shot over and have been properly introduced to the electronic collar (see “Electronic Training,” Sept/Oct ’97). The decision about when to teach each dog the forced retrieve is based on how the dog has progressed with basic yard

work and bird work in the field, not by the age of the dog. If a dog is a flat-out non-retriever or is a hardheaded delinquent, I will introduce bench training earlier. If a dog is unsure about birds and not hunting aggressively, I’ll delay bench training. I strongly recommend that a dog has had large numbers of birds shot over it before forced-retrieve training begins.

If an unwillingness to retrieve or a hard or butter mouth interferes with other aspects of training, I’ll normally put the dog on the bench. For example, I give flushing dogs lots of locked-wing pigeons during patterning work (see “Effective Patterning,” March/April ’98). If a dog smashes and kills every bird, this becomes an expensive proposition—and for economic reasons alone it’s worth putting the dog on the bench.

My bench for teaching retrieving is 2’ (w) x 16’(l). The table stands at about the height of my navel. At each end of the bench is a 10-foot piece of pipe that runs vertically from the ground to above the platform. Each pipe is rigidly affixed to the middle of each end of the table. I run a cable with a pulley on it between the tops of the pipes, parallel to the centerline of the



Using a toe hitch (left), the author applies pressure to get a dog to reach out and take a dummy.



this process requires that some “pressure” be applied to the dog. This pressure, or force, actually means pain in the beginning stages. But the end result is worth it—for everyone. The hunter wins because he ends up with a dog that finds and retrieves game. The dog wins because it pleases its master and earns its food and lodging. And the rest of us win because a dog that retrieves properly ensures that its owner will not shoot more than a legal limit, if all wounded birds are recovered.

Dogs that are hard-mouthed and present game unfit for consumption as well as dogs that are butter-mouthed will benefit from the forced retrieve. In addition, the forced retrieve will make subsequent aspects of training proceed more effectively. The reason is that the dog learns it *must* comply with the

and learns that it is the master of its own destiny. When the dog learns that it can prevent the problem (pressure) altogether, it becomes bolder and happier. By the same token, the incorrigible rebel becomes more compliant and a more enthusiastic student. It learns who is boss. Commands are not spineless pleas for compliance; they are orders to be followed immediately.

As mentioned, the forced retrieve does involve a certain amount of pain for the dog. This does not mean I am a callous trainer who doesn’t love his dogs. I have cleaned up a lot of poop in my day, fed in the rain and snow, and babysat pregnant bitches when any normal person would have been fast asleep. I love my dogs. I don’t like inflicting pain. But as a professional trainer, I recognize the benefits of this process. I know that a dog that complies to commands with excellence; that does its job with enthusiasm and style; and that is bold, confident and happy will be prized and rewarded. The pain is a small price compared to the gains afforded by the results.

Now that I have listed the benefits of the forced retrieve, I’ll describe the nuts and bolts of how to do it. As in most aspects of training, there are different avenues that will

bench. I attach a chain with a snap at each end to the pulley. That way I can adjust the length of the chain to accommodate dogs of different heights. One end of the chain is attached to the pulley, and the other end is attached to the dog's collar. This way, the dog can run up and down the length of the table but can't jump off or lie down.

Training a dog requires a building-block approach, with the success of any aspect of it being directly related to previous training and the dog's experience. I like to break down training into a series of steps, then train one step at a time, starting with the most basic. With bench work, I first get the youngster accustomed to running up and down the table. I make the bench an enjoyable place to be. I start putting pups on the bench when they are seven or eight weeks old. I play with them and feed them biscuits there. The goal is to have them become comfortable with the bench before training begins—to not have their initial experience with it be on the first day of training and have them associate it strictly as a place for work.

Once the dog is confident on the bench, I stand it there and place my index and middle fingers in its mouth and my thumb under its jaw. The pup will fight, but at such an early age it can't really bite me. Eventually, the pup will resign itself with a sigh and let me keep my fingers in its mouth. I pet the dog soothingly to show my approval. I do not say "Hold" or "Fetch" or anything at all. Months later, when I am ready to start teaching the dog to hold a dowel, a dummy and a bird, my job will be much easier because this preliminary work has been done regularly.

Next I strap the dog's head to the pipe at the end of the bench by running a collar through the dog's collar and cinching the second collar around the pipe. The dog is now immobile. It may try to pull. It may try to bite the pipe. I will gently massage the dog until it relaxes. I will leave the dog strapped to the pipe for longer periods during the ensuing weeks. The youngster should become completely comfortable with being restrained. Once the collar introduction and yard work are complete, along with the necessary bird and gun work, I am ready to proceed to teaching the command "Hold," or "Fetch." I use "Hold," but you can use "Rumpelstiltskin," if you wish. (Later I'll switch to using the dog's name so that if I'm running two dogs at once, there won't be any confusion as to which is being sent to retrieve.)

For this process, I use a toe hitch rather than an ear pinch, as I don't like my hands to be near the dog's mouth for the initial pressure. (I have never been bitten, and I'm going to do my best to keep it that way.) I use a 16-inch piece of clothesline for the toe hitch. To attach the hitch, I make a slip-knot and place it over the dog's ankle joint on one of its front legs (see photo, p. 24).

Whichever leg I choose, I make sure that I use the same leg every time. I run the line down the back of the dog's leg, under the dog's outside toe, over its two middle toes, then back between itself and the dog's leg. Now, by pulling on the end of the line, I'm able to exert pressure on the dog's two inner toes. The harder I pull, the more discomfort the dog will feel.

I next take a 12-inch wooden dowel (training dummies and birds come later) and wrap it tightly with a piece of rope, to prevent the dog from getting splinters in its mouth. With the dog's head strapped to the pipe, I pull hard enough on the line to make the dog open its mouth, in effect saying *Ouch!* When it does, I insert the dowel into its mouth. When the dog spits out the dowel, I don't say a word but simply administer the toe hitch and reinsert the dowel. After a number of repetitions the dog will understand that taking and keeping the dowel in its mouth will turn off the pressure. Now when I pull on the toe, the dog will reach out and take the dowel. This is a monumental breakthrough, as the dog has learned that it can turn the pressure off by itself.

Next I introduce the command to retrieve. Understand that at this point the dog does not know what "Hold" means. I say, "Hold," then immediately pull on the toe hitch. The dog takes the dowel in response. While the dog is holding the dowel, I do a lot of petting for reassurance. I also tap both ends of the dowel to ensure the dog has it securely and to prevent my hand reaching in from becoming a cue to drop it. I then take the dowel out of the dog's mouth. You might have to work at getting the dowel out. Once the dowel is out, I repeat, "Hold," and pull on the line. After a number of repetitions, the dog will anticipate that the toe pull follows the command, and when you say "Hold" will reach out and take the dowel before receiving pressure. At this point I praise the dog and give myself a pat on the back. The hard part is done.

When the dog is reliably taking the dowel on the command alone, I go to the electronic collar. The reason for the collar is that later, on the ground, it would be very awkward to have the dog running around with a toe hitch. I don't use the collar from the outset because stimulation shuts off after 10 seconds. A dog may not say *Ouch!* within that time, instead learning to grit its teeth and bear the pain until the collar cuts out.

I begin by turning on the lowest level of stimulation the dog feels, as ascertained in collar conditioning. I follow this *immediately* with the toe pull. The dog will take the dowel because of the toe hitch. After a few repetitions the dog, anticipating the toe pull, will begin taking the dowel on the stimulation alone. Now I say, "Hold," and if the dog does not take the dowel, I apply stimulation.

Once the dog is religiously taking the

dowel solely on the verbal command, I unstrap it from the pipe but keep it attached to the chain on the pulley. I hold the dowel a short distance away so that the dog has to take one baby step to grab it. If on the command the dog refuses, I turn on the stimulation until it takes the dowel. I *gradually* increase the distance the dog has to travel to get the dowel and also begin placing the dowel on the table. I make sure that the exercise is upbeat, giving the dog lots of praise when it succeeds. I apply stimulation if it fails. When the dog is running the length of the bench to pick up the dowel and bring it back, we move to the ground. Starting off in a confined area, such as a garage, is a good idea. I first get the dog, which is on a check cord, taking the dowel from my hand, then I begin throwing the dowel on the ground right in front of it. I continue increasing the distance the dog has to go to retrieve. Again, I keep things upbeat.

Once the dog is retrieving the dowel on the ground, we return to the bench. I get the dog to hold sundry articles, such as gloves, hats, whatever. The dog will probably fail on the first introduced object other than a dowel. I stimulate on failure, praise on success.

When the dog will take and hold various objects on command, I proceed to a locked-wing pigeon. When starting with a bird, I go back to the *very beginning* of the procedure, with the toe hitch. I mirror every step exactly as I did with the dowel. When the dog is consistently successful at a particular stage, only then do we progress to the next one. Once I can toss a clipped-wing pigeon and the dog retrieves it, I know we've made it.

Moving on to ducks, pheasants, chukar or geese, I go back to the *beginning* of the training procedure. However, each new bird will take only a few sessions, and perhaps the dog will succeed immediately. The complete process may take six or eight weeks. The important thing is to be patient and not rush. If your dog has retrieving problems and you don't have the time or inclination to deal with them properly, seek professional help. Retrieving is *that* important.

I tell gundog owners that if their dogs retrieve to their satisfaction without being put on the bench, they should forget the forced retrieve. However, if there are retrieving problems or attitude problems that need fixing, the forced retrieve is the way to go. The result is that you'll get an honest effort from your dog to bring back downed birds. You can't ask for more than that. ✈

Editor's Note: For video instruction on the forced retrieve, see "Training Pointing Dogs with George Hickox, Tape II" or "Training the Upland Flushing Dog with George Hickox, Part II." Both are available from Grouse Wing Kennel, PO Box 93, Temple, NH 03084; 603-924-2240 (phone & fax); www.grousewing.com.

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