

The Trained Retrieve

Force break, force fetch, stick fetch are all terms used for what is called **the trained retrieve**. The trained retrieve is the process used to train your dog (be it pointing, flushing, or a retrieving breed) to be an unconditional retriever, in water or on land, whether the game is woodcock, grouse, pheasant, duck, or goose. An unconditional retriever retrieves 100 % of the time-end of story. The process is time consuming and often frustrating, and no matter what way you slice it or what term you call it, there is plenty of force involved. To understand this process you must first delve into the way the dog thinks as well as how the handler thinks.

As a professional gun dog trainer, two of the three most important tasks people want their dogs to accomplish from training are to come when called and to retrieve birds to hand. Professional trainers find that a dog that has mastered the trained retrieve comes when called 100 percent of the times as well as retrieves 100 percent of the time.

Dogs are great creatures. They have a magical way of lulling their owners into not making them comply. Case in point: Out of ten of your friends with dogs, how many are trained or even well behaved (the dogs, not the friends)? If your friends are anything like mine are, not many. It amazes me when a dog comes to our facility that is out of control. Within one lesson the dog is listening, not jumping up, and coming when called. Why? Good question. Maybe it is because I'm great with dogs. Just kidding. It is because I use mostly action and few words. My favorite saying when people come to train with me is, "Your voice means nothing, action means everything."

What does this mean? People treat dogs as they would treat people. First they ask nicely, then they raise their voices, and finally they scream at them. Maybe this was an effective way 100 years ago (which I doubt) but it certainly isn't the most effective method of training. Instead, today we use a silent system or point of contact approach. This means we give a command to the dog and then back it up with action: a leash correction, an e-collar stimulation, an ear pinch or a combination of any or all of the above. This method of training works without exception.

Some of you are now thinking, "I don't want to do that because those methods are cruel." No, a 15" tire running over your dog is cruel, or your 70 lb dog jumping on a 3 year old child or elderly person is cruel. If your dog is not under control he will run away, get run over, bother the neighbors, will be lost or stolen, or will become involved in any other number of destructive or dangerous mishaps or tragedies.

So what does the trained retrieve have to do with any of this? The trained retrieve trains your dog to be compliant 100 % of the time. There are people who say that the trained retrieve is not necessary, they prefer the natural method. Most dogs that are what we call natural retrievers I classify as part time retrievers or conditional retrievers (by the way, the type of dog or breed doesn't matter).

This means that with varying degrees of proficiency the dog may or may not pick up the bird, some will come to you, maybe drop it halfway, or do what we call the victory lap all around the field. So, you might say, what's so bad about that? In hunting with a trained dog my goal is to have the dog expend the least amount of energy and disturb the least amount of ground in the task of hunting and retrieving.

Remember it is very natural for a dog to pursue downed game. It is a trained response for the dog to return to you immediately in a straight line, not plucking, chewing, eating and swallowing the bird. It is also totally unnatural for the dog to come out of water and not shake water off its coat. What does shaking have to do with all this? When the dog reaches land,

drops the bird and shakes, it will take an act of Congress to get the dog to pick up the bird again, unless it is trained to retrieve. You may say, "well I can walk to the water's edge and pick up the bird at my feet." This is true but if the bird is not dead and it is only crippled, then the chase will be on again. With a dog that has been trained to retrieve you do not have these issues - it is an unconditional retriever.

If you have ever duck or bird hunted, you know it is feast or famine. Long periods of no birds and short bursts of action tend to be the pattern. If your dog is dancing around near the shore trying to catch the cripple it just dropped, ducks coming into your decoys will flair away because of the commotion. The same will happen with your upland dog that dropped the grouse with a broken wing at your feet; the chase is on and your part time retriever (or pointer) is disturbing ground you have not yet hunted.

So much for the **why**, now on to the **how** of the trained retrieve. You can teach an old dog new tricks; however, it is way easier to start with a puppy. They are smaller, lighter, easier to handle, and they have fewer bad habits which leads to less resistance. Unlike other forms of dog training in which every lesson the dog should be better than the last, with force training, until you are done or have completed the trained retrieve you have nothing or less than nothing. This method of training does not work without commitment and patience.

The entire method progresses from taking a part time retriever or a non retriever and making him into a non retriever in order to become a fully trained, unconditional 100% retriever. It is like a young man going to marine boot camp, he is not allowed to think on his own. He is to do *only* what he is told. Force training is no different. After training over 1,000 dogs, I don't know any other way that works 100 % of the time.

Many people don't believe they can do this. However, in short, this is a method of obedience training. People talk about dogs that complete the force training in 15-25 sessions. That sounds great but I find it takes me 40-60 sessions to complete this program. Time, the know how, practice and patience are what it takes to force break a dog.

Volumes have been written on this subject, so I'm not going to try to shortcut it in this article. More importantly, I want people to know and understand what the trained retrieve is. If you would like this done with your dog and don't want to do it yourself, there are trainers out there, like myself, who do this type of training. However, you must understand up front that each dog takes a different amount of time and that there are no magic tricks to getting it done in a set time. Also remember that until you are finished you have NOTHING! If you want to do it yourself the book I strongly recommend is *Retriever Training* by Jim and Phyllis Dobb (\$26.95) and the companion tapes *Part 1: Hold* and *Part 2: Fetch* (\$38.95). These are excellent resources and break the methods down to very simple and structured tasks.

Remember the adage "Rome wasn't built in a day." Neither is a great dog. You can do this with your dog this summer and by next fall have a dog that is consistently and without exception and enjoyable companion, as well as being the envy of your friends. Once completed, you will wonder why you hadn't done it before.

Good luck and great hunting,

John