



Training a *Reliable* Retrieve

For as long as I've been a member of NAVHDA, we've been training our dogs to be reliable retrievers.

No matter what you call it or how you do it, from the beginner to the professional, the trained retrieve can be an ominous task. Some dogs inherit a love to retrieve; some do not. Some dogs inherit a willingness to please their owners; some do not.

In 2002, I got a puppy and wanted to try a different approach to training. I'd been watching and reading a lot about positive training, rewards and the clicker. It intrigued me. I read the book, *The Clicked Retriever*, by Lana Mitchell. "The retrieve is one of the most difficult skills for most dogs to master in competition obedience. It is difficult because it involves a long series of steps that a dog must learn in order to complete the exercise successfully. Many trainers are realizing that teaching a complex series of behaviors like this is most easily done through the use of clicker training."

At about the same time I read that book, I attended a dog-training seminar by Jim and Phyllis Dobbs. Jim talked about starting the retrieving process when the pups are young, before they become opinionated teenagers. Waiting for your pup to gain 50 pounds and become full of himself made no sense. Jim demonstrated his retrieve-training technique by starting with training the "hold." He did not progress to the force until the dog fully understood this first, important step.

With this advice added to the information I learned from Mitchell's book, to top it off, I again read NAVHDA's green book, *The Training and Care of the Versatile Hunting Dog*, by Bodo Winterhelt and Ed Bailey. That book says, "All retrieving training for all dogs should be force training." They further explain that by the word "force," they mean force

of will, not abuse in any way. They conclude, "Force training is the only way to get consistent retrieving performance. It is the only way that gives the trainer the right to tell the dog to fetch with the certain knowledge that the dog will obey."

Armed with three different ideas to train the retrieve, Tera and I headed to the basement to begin our experiment. Tera was only three months old, so training sessions were short and positive, with a lot of praise and treats. I chose two commands, one meaning to "hold" and one meaning to "drop." I started with a gloved hand, because I find it easier to manage a squirmy puppy and a lot of treats in the beginning stages of "hold." Jim Dobbs says that it's simple; just think that you are teaching the pup that "inside the canines is good and outside is bad."

I commanded "fetch" as I placed my gloved hand into Tera's mouth. Tera fought the object but I calmly kept the glove inside her mouth while repeating "fetch...fetch...fetch." The moment she relaxed with any glimpse of acceptance, I said "drop," and gave her a treat and praise. This is extremely important! My goal was to help Tera learn how to get the treat, first by "holding" and then by "releasing." In a few short sessions, Tera was "holding" the glove quietly, waiting for the "release" command and then looking for the treat.

Then it was time to reread the Green Book's chapter, "Retrieving on Land," and progress through Step 1 and Step 2 on training the "hold." The written text and pictures nicely explain the progression of "hold." My only addition is to add a lot of positive reinforcement by ending each short (5-10 minutes) session with fun retrieving of Tera's favorite stuffed toy.

Working a young pup gives you the luxury of time. Those battles of will, so much a part of the trained





Sandy Runyon starts the hold process with his young pup.

retrieve process, are no longer. In just a few months, Tera, willingly and happily, walked and carried everything I asked. Tera looked forward to her training and would happily jump up on the training table and wait to do her work. To thoroughly train the “hold,” I usually give myself two months. Then, and only then, do I progress to the “force” part of the trained retrieve. The “force” usually took only **2-3 days** to complete, because Tera understood what I wanted and she liked doing it. I was amazed!

I still meet with trainers who question why I do the “force” when the puppy is so young. My answer to them all is, “Because it works for me.” Blaine and I guide all our puppy owners successfully through the same process. Gone forever are the tough force sessions of years gone by. I recently hunted in Georgia with Tera’s granddaughter, Tiza, at 11 months. Tiza happily retrieved more than 50 quail to my hand. Got to love her!