

Retrieve to Hand- My Journey to Success

by
Tawna Skinner

Imagine, your dog intently pointing. The bird flushes. You make a fine shot and the bird falls in the field some 50 yards away. Quietly, you send your dog. She makes a beeline to the bird, picks it up and trots enthusiastically back to you. She sits in front of you waiting for you to take the bird, which you do. You smile and feel the joy of the teamwork and skill between you and your dog. It is a beautiful and wonderful thing!

That was my dream after watching my first NAVHDA Utility test back in the early 80's. Watching those dogs perform the myriad skills required to pass a UT test amazed me. I never knew a dog could do all those things. It was then and there that I knew that "I wanted a dog like that!" Thus, began my "dog training" journey that continues to this day.

In the beginning, I used the NAVHDA training bible The Training and Care of the Versatile Dog by Sigbot Winterhelle and Edward Bailey. The "green" book as it was referred to, gave step by step instructions on creating a fully trained gundog. I followed it to a "t". I built a training table, went through all the steps. I had success in most areas, but with retrieving I had problems. In fact, I nearly ruined my first dog, Chelsea, for retrieving. I had to quit for 6 months or more and start over. Looking back, I realize as a neophyte trainer there was a lot I didn't know or understand and being afraid to ask for help caused me to make mistakes. I trained under false assumptions, such as assuming that my or any dog, if I followed the steps in the book, would become a happy, willing retriever or that force: "you will pick up this dummy, by God" and pain— "if you don't then you will get your ear pinched" would yield the result I wanted. Other unworkable assumptions on my part included: a particular result could and should be accomplished in "my" timeline; and that the dog should obey no matter what they think or feel about it. Because this method was frustrating and painful for me and my dog and ended up yielding an anxious and sullen, but generally obedient retriever, I kept looking for an alternative method.

Eventually, I decided I needed to get "professional" instruction so I attended a weeklong George Hickox seminar. Here I learned to use an e-collar to "train" dogs to do what I wanted, including retrieving. I thought it better in some ways. When used correctly, dogs learned quickly to do the "right" thing. There was less pain and suffering for me and the dog. I felt less frustration and anger when things did not go well. Using an e-collar did get me closer to my dream and my dogs were much happier about doing their job. Yet, there were some glitches along the way, so to solidify my knowledge and technique I attended another GH week long training.

Though effective, I still was not totally satisfied with training with an e-collar. It can become a crutch for obedience. It says that I do not trust my dog. It shows an emphasis on absolute obedience as opposed to cooperative teamwork. So, I kept wondering, thinking, searching and reading.

In addition to my own troubled experience with "training the retrieve", as a WPGCA Judge, I was noticing the difficulties that handler's and their dogs were having with the retrieving portions of the Intermediate Field Test. I wondered what factors were contributing to this. Could it be:

1. That the young dogs could not take the stress of the "force" fetch method. Were we asking for too much, too soon?

2. That the handlers did not like or know how to teach “the retrieve” using the force fetch or trained retrieve methods?
3. That the handlers were relying/depending on a young dog’s natural desire to retrieve?
4. That the dogs did not have enough experience yet?
5. That the new surroundings and activities caused too much distraction and stress or was it something else...?

Other judges were also concerned with these retrieving problems. At one of our Judge’s Seminars, Rick Sodja shared with us the idea that there was a ‘change of attitude’ in the retrieving dog as it got closer to the handler. He demonstrated in a graph that a dog was motivated by cooperation up until about twenty yards from the handler and then obedience became the key factor in the dog retrieving the bird to hand. For further explanation of this “changing attitude by distance” read the article by Joe Schmutz in the April, 2015 GDS.

Though no actual remedy to this situation was given, I wondered if more obedience work was thought to be the key to overcoming the hump of having the dog come willingly, and directly back to the handler. I had already been questioning and picking apart the “retrieve” training process, identifying each individual part. I asked myself if my dogs knew all these parts and what I needed to change in my training regimen to make sure they learned each individual part and then, how to put all the parts together into a finished package. Because dogs learn by association and have difficulty in making large cognitive leaps and generalizations, I figured that breaking the training process down into smaller parts would yield a better result.

I found that focusing on teaching each individual part and “taking the time it takes” for the dog to learn, understand, practice and become comfortable with each part of the retrieving process did yield a more relaxed, willing, reliable and confident dog.

During all this time I was still reading lots of books on dog training, dog psychology, dog history, etc. Two books I read were on “service” dogs. I learned that many service dogs, when they go to their new owners, know up to 90 commands and these are mostly taught in the first year of their lives. “Wow,” I thought, “I am not tapping into anywhere close to my dog’s potential nor am I starting early enough!” Then I thought, “how do they do that?” That my friends is “the rest of the story.”

After more research, I found that most ‘service’ and ‘therapy dogs are now trained using a positive training approach. It is based on “positive reinforcement” meaning that if you reward a behavior you like, there is a better chance of that behavior being repeated. Victoria Stillwell, founder of Positively Dog Training states that “when paired with negative punishment (the removal or withholding of something the dog wants, (like food, attention, toys or human contact for a short period of time) or using a vocal interrupter to redirect negative behavior onto a wanted behavior and to guide a dog into making the right choices, these methods are the foundation elements...of positive training.” Positive training avoids harsh physical punishment or fear for incorrect behavior and believes in owners developing a healthy, functional relationship with their dogs, along with learning about the canine experience from the dog’s point of view.

I first learned about “positive reinforcement” training when I began training my young colt. Having seen so many horses abused in their “training” as I was growing up, I wanted nothing to do with those “dominance and submission” methods. In researching other training methods, I found a book called [Clicker Training for Your Horse](#) by Alexandra Kurland. I bought it and started experimenting with it. I soon had my colt doing a variety of things, including trailer loading. I was hooked.

“Clicker training “is the name given to an animal training method wherein a desirable behavior (for example: a sit) is marked with a sound (the clicker) and then rewarded. It is based on the scientist B.F. Skinner’s principles of operant conditioning and later work by two of his students, Marian and Keller Breland. The Breland’s came up with the idea of a secondary reinforcer such as a click or whistle to serve as a bridging mechanism or sound marker to let an animal know that it had done a correct action.

In addition to my horse, I also started ‘clicker training’ my dogs. With the help of a book, I soon had my pup (at that time) well versed in her basic obedience skills of sit, stay, come, kennel and down. It was easy, fun and my dogs loved it. Ever seeking, I wondered if I could teach my dog to retrieve using the ‘clicker’ method and avoid all that frustration, anger, pain and anxiety that I had felt teaching my earlier dogs to retrieve. I am here to tell you that yes, I did and so can you.

In part two of this article I am going to explain more about ‘clicker’ training and give a step by step guide on how to teach your dog to retrieve to hand. In the meantime, get a book on clicker training. [Clicking with your Dog](#) by Peggy Tillman is the one I started with. Practice with it to develop your timing. Teach your dog to sit, stay and come. These are all parts of the retrieve to hand sequence, in addition to skills necessary for any dog to be a well mannered and safe companion. See you in the next issue.