

Retrieve to Hand-Via the Clicker Method

by Tawna Skinner

“The dog should find the game willingly, and...pickup the game without hesitation and bring it to the handler enthusiastically without any further influence by his handler. The dog should sit or stand quietly by his handler and hold the game until commanded to release it.”

This quote is from the BWP/GCA Intermediate Hunting Dog Test Regulations. It defines “retrieve to hand”. The retrieve to hand, as defined, is made up of six parts 1) waiting for the command; 2) going swiftly to the object to be retrieved; 3) picking up the object; 4) returning directly to the handler with the object; 5) waiting for the release command and 6) willingly giving up the object on command. These six behaviors are performed in a specific order and as a result of a single command.

Retrieving is not only important for testing, it is imperative for any good field hunting dog. Otherwise, the handler/hunter will have to wade into the brambles, cattails, slough or lake to retrieve their birds. Hmm, that is certainly not my preference.

Though there are some “natural” retrievers who are consistently willing to return to you with “the bird” or other object, for reliability in the field, most hunting dogs need to be ‘trained’ to retrieve. They need to learn, understand and be able to execute each part of the retrieve sequence.

There are several methods for teaching retrieving to a dog. As I mentioned in my previous article, “clicker” training is the method that I have found to be the quickest and most effective, based on the qualities of enthusiasm, willingness, speed, and dependability that I desire in my dogs.

CLICKER

“Clicker” training is a type of operant conditioning. Operant conditioning is the act of reinforcing any and all desired behaviors that an animal offers so that it will offer them again.

In “clicker” training, the clicker is the ‘marker’ that lets the dog know that the particular behavior it was exhibiting **at the moment of the click** is the desired behavior. Immediately following the click, the dog receives a treat. Both the click and the treat are the reinforcement for the behavior. The click tells the dog that a treat is coming. Without the treat, the clicker will lose its power and the dog’s progress will slow or even end. Knowing that a treat is coming motivates the dog to repeat the behavior, however, when the dog hears the click, the dog will stop what it is doing and will seek the treat. This is an important part of the game, because this ‘stopping of the behavior’ enables the dog to re-offer the behavior again, thus creating practice of the behavior and imprinting the behavior into its mind.

TREATS

The primary reinforcer, the treat, is what the dog is working to get. It is the payment for performing. Treats for some dogs are so important that they will get pushy-- jumping, diving, grabbing for the treats. Keep your treats handy, but out of reach. The dog must learn that they only get treats that they earn.

Become aware of the treats your dog especially likes and have those on hand for the times you will be asking the dog to do something difficult. I start with kibble and use it as long as possible. One piece is the reward, not a handful. This is pretty easy with puppies and young dogs, because they are generally always hungry. Save those hot dogs, cheese, or steak bits for later, when distractions are high or when your dog did something especially brilliant.

Do not worry that your dog will become a food hound with clicker training. Remember that learning progresses fastest when there is high motivation and food can be a great motivator. In the beginning, you will treat the dog after every click. As his skill progresses, treating will be on a variable schedule and eventually, can be phased out altogether. If your dog is not food motivated you can use a favorite toy as a reward or a short play session after each successful behavior.

SHAPING

“Shaping” is the term used in the clicker world for reinforcing a behavior that is being offered so that it will be repeated. There are some rules for shaping that when followed will enhance your success.

- 1) Criteria must be raised slowly, in small increments. If you are having difficulty, look at whether you are asking for more than the dog understands at that point or is willing to do. Lower the criteria any time the dog seems confused or stressed.
- 2) Train, in a session, for only one thing at a time. If you are wanting a speedy return and a correct hold, each has to be shaped (reinforced) separately.
- 3) Once a behavior is learned, it should be reinforced only occasionally (variable schedule) to maintain it at its present level.
- 4) What a dog learns is never forgotten but may fall apart when some new criteria are added. When teaching a new behavior, lower your standards for performing old behaviors until the new behavior is learned.
- 5) Dogs may make a breakthrough, leaping beyond what is currently being taught. Be prepared to ‘Jackpot’ (bonus treats for a job well done) those sudden improvements.
- 6) Have only one trainer work with the dog.
- 7) Not every method works with every dog to induce a certain behavior. If something is not working, be creative and try something else.
- 8) Always have a definite start and stop time for each session. Phone calls, outside conversations leave a dog hanging, not knowing whether this is still training or not.

- 9) If a behavior deteriorates, just go back to something easy, reviewing what the dog already knows.
- 10) Keep training sessions short and frequent. The length of the session will depend on the attention span of the dog. The session should always terminate on a high note, with the dog wanting more.
- 11) Avoid corrections, either verbal or physical when shaping new behaviors, as this can cause a learning set back.

CHALLENGES

There are two separate occasions that take place in the training process, where a known behavior is voluntarily abandoned by the dog. They occur most often during the beginning phases. In the first instance, a dog will stop offering the behavior that was just reinforced and try something else instead or just stare at the treat or wander off. If the trainer is calm and just waits, the dog will most likely try the desired behavior again, will receive a treat and be back in the game again. The second instance may occur shortly after the first. This time the dog may go for the clicker or the hand or container of treats. The dog may just stand and stare at the handler or the treat, appearing to wait for the handler to give and treat him for nothing. Once again, be patient and wait. The dog will offer the behavior again. It is wise, at this point, to ask for a couple more successful behaviors and then end the session.

You the trainer can be a challenge to the dog's progress. Avoid helping the dog verbally or physically. This is a thinking game for your dog. Any words of encouragement are a distraction to your dog. Keep quiet.

Raising criteria too high can cause behavior to deteriorate. Raise criteria in one area at a time, such as duration, distance, intensity, distraction, speed. See shaping rules above.

Know your dog's limitations. Watch for signs of stress. Be aware of distractions that may be influencing your dog's willingness to work (kids, the TV, cell phone, other dogs or pets, etc.)

Training too long or too fast can cause stress in your dog and could cause problems later on. Always end a session with a success and when your dog is still in the game.

TRAINING

This type of training is pretty easy, though to be effective, it requires some discipline on the part of the trainer. The trainer needs to do a minimum of 3 sessions a day (short 5-10 minutes) for 3-4 days in a row on the particular skill you and the dog are working on. I have found that taking a couple of days break on a particular skill before continuing allows for latent learning to take place. When you go back to that particular skill the dog is usually enthusiastic to play the game again and sometimes makes progressive leaps in learning.

It is important to follow the shaping rules mentioned above, especially in adding new criteria. There are many steps and skills to be mastered to have a reliable “retrieve to hand”.

The “take” is the first skill to teach. The training sequence begins with a look at the dummy, to sniffing the dummy, to touching the dummy with nose or lips. It continues to teeth on or biting the dummy and then taking the dummy from the hand. Proceeding further includes the dog taking the dummy from down, left and right and then reaching to take the dummy. Moving the dummy to the floor and then the dog walking a step or two forward to pickup the dummy from the floor are the final components of the “take”, just before the last which is adding a “cue” (command) to the sequence.

Due to lack of space this is only a general description of the components of the “take” not the actual training details. For a detailed step by step “how to” check out our BWPGCA website.

I start this training in the house in a quiet, non- distracting room. After my dog can do all of the above on cue in that room I will add the criteria of distance in that room until the dog can retrieve on command the full length of the room. Then I will change the criteria of place and do the retrieving in another room until the dog is comfortable performing the retrieve in that room. I will proceed to all the rooms in the house before I move outside. I may also change ‘what’ is being retrieved, from a dummy to a toy or a dokken bird.

The reason I move from one room to another is because dogs do not generalize well, as we do. Every place is new criteria for them. Just because your dog knows and does something in the house, it may not do it in the yard. Similarly, a dog that does things perfectly in the yard, most likely will not do it in the field, especially on test day. We have all heard (or said) “I don’t understand why she didn’t do that, she was doing it perfectly at home...” A professional trainer once told me a dog needs to learn a skill in seven different places before they are able to generalize that they can do it in most places. Do not be in a hurry to move outside. Build a strong base inside first. There are many distractions outside that can interfere with the dog’s attention to you.

While training the basic retrieve, you also need to be training sit, stay and come, if your dog does not yet know these skills. These skills are all part of the retrieve to hand sequence. Do this training in different sessions than your retrieve training. Going to a puppy obedience class can help you and your dog master those skills quickly. Many classes use the clicker approach which will teach both you and the dog the basics.

If this seems like a lot of information and time involved, do not worry. This method is fun and a great way to interact and build a great relationship with your dog. It only takes a few minutes each day. The overall time to get that finished Retrieve to Hand will depend on how often you train, how well the dog understands and progresses and how well you follow the shaping rules. Good luck and have fun.

