

## EXPECTATIONS, DEMANDS, AND CONSISTENCY IN RETRIEVER TRAINING

For many people the first time they have a “trained” retriever is when a professional does at least the force fetch, and collar conditioning. Sometimes more advanced marking, shore breaking and handling is included. The retriever has been taught to perform certain tasks. If the owner is to continue and progress in the retrievers training, the owner must know what the retriever has been taught.

If the retriever has been force fetched, the expectation is that the retriever will heel reasonably well to the line (on leash), sit and look out searching for the mark, and watch it go down. Mark and find the bird. The retriever should not need to have you point out the mark. Sometimes in training, the retriever misses a mark, or needs help to find it, or locating it before it is thrown. Help should be as little as possible.

Marking is of primary importance. A retriever is expected to; on their own, mark, and when commanded, find and retrieve the birds. You cannot progress in anything in retrievers unless you challenge the retriever, so there will be times when the retriever will be unable to locate the bird. When coming back with the bird, the retriever will go smartly into the heel position, sit reasonably straight, hold the bird until the handler commands the retriever to release the bird (“drop”). Now either intentionally or not by the retriever, it may not do one of these things. Say it drops the bird as the handler goes to take it from the retriever. The retriever should without command reach out and pick up the bird that was dropped. Unfortunately, the owner may feel that it was “Their (the owner’s) Fault” that the bird was dropped and pick up the bird themselves. This begins to undo all the hard work the pro did for the retriever. Since it does not matter in a test situation whose fault it is the retrievers or the handlers, the retriever **must** deliver to hand. Thus in a training situation, the handler must correct the retriever if it does not immediately try to pick up the dropped bird. The correction can be either collar (high continuous until the bird is picked up) or ear pinch (pinching until the bird is picked up) and the word “FETCH” in both cases. No second chance by asking the dog (perhaps several times) to fetch in training or it again tells the retriever that the handler is not serious about delivery to hand. Same standards apply with going into the heel position. If the retriever messes around and is sloppy it should be corrected by either collar (low nicks) or jerking the collar (and retriever) into the correct position and the word “HEEL”. These should be your expectations and in training you must demand that they be performed **EVERY TIME**. Consistency here cannot be over emphasized. The more consistent you can be, so will the retriever. Just as correction is important, so is praise. When the retriever has performed a task, particularly one which they are having problems with or are just learning, pour on the praise.

At a trial, things change a bit. You want to pass. Furthermore you cannot correct the retriever during the trial. Read and know the rules related to the organization and the particular test you are running. Use these rules to your advantage. You should still expect the retriever to perform as it does in training. With the added excitement and confusion be prepared for differences.

This can be dramatic even for experienced retrievers. It can be good or bad. One should again expect in the trial that the retriever will behave as in training. The difference in a test being that if the retriever is having a difficulty getting the heel, sit straight and hold the bird until commanded, do what it takes to pass: ex: in the JH get the bird before it hits the ground. Going to heel and sitting are optional. Yes, I would command in a demanding and firm but not intimidating voice to "fetch" and then "heel", then "sit". I would not make a big deal about the heeling or sitting straight, but be happy with what I could get. Even if you are running a stake like a WC or Started where delivery to hand is not required, if you ever intend to run AKC JH, require the delivery to hand in these lower stakes and you won't be disappointed in the upper levels.

Using this example as a guide, you can progress as an owner handler with your retriever, and not slip down that slippery slope where the retriever will learn (and relearn) poor habits that will be even more difficult (if not impossible) to break. Another problem that commonly happens with this issue will be that the retriever will perform satisfactorily, even brilliantly in practice, but at a trial will act as if they never were trained. Then you are sunk.