

RETRIEVER TRAINING – TEACHING VS TESTING

In retriever training I have found the best approach for training in general and particularly an intelligent dog such as the Toller is to teach, and build on what the retriever knows rather than just setting up a test, and testing the retriever. What is the difference? Teaching builds confidence, and enthusiasm, and a good training attitude. The retriever learns through his success rather than failure. It is more time consuming, but the results are well worth it. An example of teaching is when you introduce diversions such as ditches, roads, and cover changes; you shorten up the mark and position the thrower just beyond the diversion. When the retriever gets just past the diversion, he finds the bird, because there is little or no cover hiding it. Maybe you have even salted the area to increase the chances for quick success. As the retriever returns move back and increase the distance and thus complexity. Teaching is running sight blinds when you have a retriever first starting to run blinds, and running them first at a shortened distance, and then moving back. Teaching is running the key bird, or even all birds as singles, then coming back and running the multiple marks. Drills, either marking or blinds, are also a good example of teaching. When retrievers fail too often, they get down or nervous and worried and their attitude is not good.

This is not to say that testing is not an integral part of retriever training, it is. You need to set up a test in order to evaluate if you are ready to compete at a certain level. Testing is necessary to find out if your retriever understands a particular concept. However, testing puts pressure on a retriever, and with the greater chance of failure it presents, it is not necessary to use it as a staple diet.

Unfortunately, many beginners only test. They have only so much time, and they do not know any other method. They set up a test at the desired level, and they all run their retrievers. Dogs do not learn by testing, except perhaps how to fail. They do not advance much by testing. It should be used as an evaluation tool only. Testing puts pressure on the retriever, and you can only put so much pressure out in the field, before the retriever refuses to retrieve. This is particularly so with lesser-trained retrievers. Testing increases the retriever's chance of failure. Too many failures and the retriever begins to feel that he is going to fail, and thus this increases the chance of failure. The retriever's attitude becomes worried, confused, or on the other end defiant, belligerent.

That is why teaching is a much better approach. While there is still a challenge, it is not as likely to overwhelm the retriever, and the chances of success are increased. You can also make corrections, concentrating on one issue, not the whole test. And while this does put pressure on the retriever, it is not as intense, and the retriever learns to deal with it. You will find that if you teach, particularly utilizing drills, as teaching tools, you can concentrate on one item at a time, and the retriever will learn at a faster rate, and you will have better results than if you just tested.