

**FIRST RETRIEVE**  
**TOLLER FIELD TRAINING TIPS**  
**6 WEEKS TO 3 MONTHS**

The main focus of early puppy field training is to kindle the pup's inborn desire to retrieve. At this point, we do not want to get complex in terrain or demand perfect retrieves that will come later. These first weeks of training should be the high point of the pup's day. The pup should look forward to it in eager anticipation.

There are many reasons why one starts training this young. First of all, early training creates a strong bond between you as the leader and the pup. This bond sets up a positive framework for more formal training. Most people want to hunt the dog as soon as possible, therefore, the more training before the first season the better. Also, small pups have no preconceived ideas of what they like or dislike, or what they are afraid of. So the earlier you introduce feathers, guns, water, etc., in a fun and positive way, the more enthused the grown dog is likely to be. Thus when formal training such as force retrieving or blinds is introduced, you will get a more positive response. Even if you do not plan to do the formal training yourself, I recommend doing this puppy training. Using this basic framework, these tips can be used for older pups as well.

The main difference I have found in starting a Toller in field training is a Toller pup at 6-8 weeks is simply too small to pick up a pigeon. Thus, while a Toller pup is mentally the right age to start, physically it is too small. Unless you want to wait until the pup is 10 weeks or older, specific methods must be developed to compensate for size.

For a 6-8 week old pup, start with a dried pigeon or duck wing. In the backyard away from all distractions (all other dogs out of sight), show the pup the wing and let him sniff it. Most pups will sniff the wing, and then grab it. Rather than holding on to the wing and engaging in a tug of war, gently hold the pup and let him hold the wing. Praise the pup and let him know that that you are not going to take his wing. Pups will often chew on the wing, do not panic this is not a sign of hard mouth. All very young pups will chew on something that smells good. By 12 weeks this will have passed.

Gently take the wing from the pup and tease him and let him try to grab it. Don't be very rough. Then when the pup is intense on the wing, throw it a foot or so. If you throw it farther than this, the pup will not be able to see it, as its eyesight is not fully developed. Most pups will bound over, pounce on the wing and grab it. When the puppy has the wing in his mouth, call the pup to you and run a few feet to get the pup to chase you.

Do not be surprised if the pup runs in a different direction or veers away at the last moment. This is common in all retrievers at first! As most of this very early training is done on your hands and knees, if the pup starts to go in a different direction, crawl over to where he is headed and give him lots of praise for coming to you. Repeat the teasing and retrieving from that spot as the pup will tend to return to the same spot. Always praise the pup before taking the wing away. Never grab or yank the wing away, or scold the pup if he does not do things perfectly. This is supposed to be fun and a game. Three or four retrieves is all a very young pup can take without becoming bored.

As the pup gets more proficient, lengthen the distance and increase the number of retrieves. Do this very slowly, and if the pup gets confused or tired, go back a step. Do not get exasperated or mad and take it out on the pup. Patience, praise and almost daily training will get you the results you desire.

As the pup grows, I also use a small canvas dummy with wings taped or tied on. It is light enough for a pup 9 weeks old, but it is bulky. Also you can throw it farther than the wing and the pup can see it. Once your pup will retrieve the dummy from a 30-foot throw, it is time to leave the peace and quiet of your yard and take to the field.

I like to take my pups out to my training area as soon as they have their 2nd DHLPP/Parvo shot and are fully protected from disease. The first trip I do not train them, but let them explore. This is very important, to let the pups discover things on their own. Let your pup follow you through the cover or shore. My pups watch me train the other dogs so they hear the shots and watch other dogs get excited, and the pups too get excited. I want my dogs to associate the gun with something they enjoy and want to do.

Do not yet shoot directly over the pup. First let the pup learn what the gun means: **retrieving**. At this young age I do not use a gun in training. Wait until the pup has advanced to your needing a helper (fondly called a pigeon chucker) before using a gun in training. Using this approach, I have never had a gun-shy dog. At about 10 weeks the pup will be large enough to pick up a pigeon. Please use a dead one. While the pup might not be afraid of a flapping bird, it might encourage the pup to bite or be rough with it. We do not want to discipline the pup and turn it off retrieving, but we do not want to start any bad habits either. Frozen birds are the best to start with, as they remind the pup of a dummy with wings.

As the pup develops confidence, you can use fresh-killed birds, or live ones shackled with rubber bands. Again, start by letting the pup sniff the bird, tease him a little, and then toss it a few feet. Run back and encourage the pup to come to you. Gradually increase the distance you throw the bird. While it can land in very light cover, the pup should see the mark. Also at this point do not hold the pup when you throw the bird or, if do, release the pup as you throw. I like to alternate holding and no holding. Holding too long seems to dampen the pup's enthusiasm. Keep the training fun with lots of praise, and in the next article we will discuss training from 3 months. If you have any questions or topics you would like to see in the future, please email me. GOOD RETRIEVING