

REFUSING TO RETRIEVE PRESSURE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE RETRIEVER

A good question was posed about a Toller that was force fetched (FF) who refused to retrieve at a WC test. I dodged the bullet, stating that none of my dogs FF or otherwise had failed the WC tests. However, this does not answer the question. The question has to do with a dog that is FF refusing a retrieve. This happens all the time. This article explores the hows and whys of pressure.

To some, pressure only means collar pressure; this is a very narrow definition. Pressure comes from many sources and from differing directions. A pup is born with two positive pressures (pressure at the line): desire to retrieve, and desire for birds. The two are not the same. Desire to retrieve is found in dogs that have no interest in birds. Border Collies and Shelties, for example have lots of retrieving desire. They will chase a ball until your arm drops off but with birds, no interest at all. On the other hand, birdyness is found in dogs that have little or no retrieving desire. Pointers and most spaniels are a good example. They are truly bird crazy, they go nuts looking for the birds, but retrieving is more of a parlor trick for them. They have little natural retrieving ability. A retriever has both, and needs both to do their job. This birdyness and desire to retrieve causes the retriever to want to go out, find and retrieve a bird. This is the inborn pressure on the retriever.

As we train the pup, we put obstacles in the pup's way, cover, water, terrain, etc. This puts pressure in the opposite direction, negative pressure. It causes the retriever to not want to go out and retrieve. Make the retrieve too difficult for the pup, and he will refuse to retrieve. In a young pup we want to avoid this kind of failure on a daily basis. We build each retrieve, extending the distance and complexity gradually. Yes sometimes they fail, but then we encourage them (help them to the bird). This builds confidence, and puts more positive pressure on the line. You generally can get through a WC level test, with no other positive pressure. At some point, when you need to shore break the retriever, when delivery to hand numerous yards from the shore is required, or when you start teaching blinds, one finds that this amount of pressure is inadequate for more advanced work. Most pros or amateurs that regularly train for advanced levels, generally accomplish the initial force fetch at 6 months or so. It is by far easier for me to FF the dog at 5-8 months of age then to continue to cajole the pup any further. By force fetching the pup at this age, one can avoid a multiplicity of common problems associated with non-FF retrievers. The initial FF is a relatively slow and detailed process where by the young retriever is taught with no enticements to retrieve.

Generally from start to finish (when the retriever is happily back to running marks and delivering to hand at heel) takes the better part of 12 weeks in Tollers. To retrieve becomes not just something they want to do, it becomes duty; they must do it. This becomes another positive pressure. It also changes the relationship the retriever and handler have. Generally the method to induce the retriever is an ear pinch and/or twist, or (less common) toe hitch.

In puppies and young dogs I like to personally in the case of the minority breeds to let the retriever have from a month to 6 months of marks before moving on to the collar force and force to the pile. This depends on the retriever's temperament. It also depends on the goal we have set for the retriever. A retriever that we wish to obtain a WC on will most likely never need collar force or force to a pile unless there are other issues. However, as you get more advanced this becomes necessary. You need more and more positive pressure to counteract the negative pressure out in the field.

So in answer to the question: What happened to the retriever that was FF and refused to retrieve a mark at a WC test? There was more negative pressure during the test, then positive. Perhaps the crowds, the nervousness of the handler that the retriever picked up on, different cover than the retriever was accustomed to, poor test set up by the judges, so many possibilities. I did not witness the retriever, or test in question. Did the retriever just simply mismark or not find the bird? For most beginning retrievers at the WC level, extended hunts even with the initial FF, will cause enough pressure that they will give up and come in. This is assuming that the retriever was truly FF, and that it was completing marks above the level of the test at home. Many times a beginner only trains to the level of the test and no further. So the test set up is just as difficult as it is at home. In actuality the test is now even harder if you factored in what I discussed above. So a good trainer always trains to a level above the test that they are going to compete in, so that when they go to the line at a test and the retriever looks out and sees an easier set of marks than they are accustomed to seeing, they think to themselves "this is a piece of cake", and complete the test in good shape. This balances out the pressure existing at the test. Even sometimes in OAA (Open All Age field trials), the negative pressure on the retriever is great enough to cause it to refuse to make a retrieve. The retriever will get buggy, even to the point of climbing the handler's leg. Some will lie down, roll over and submissively urinate. Bolting (common in Tollers) is another symptom. Tough, long, angled entries into the water, long distances, shorelines to avoid, points of land to avoid, tightness of the marks or blinds. These often cause even the stoutest retriever who has been fully and successfully forced to even refuse. Sometimes the retrievers bring this upon themselves. This is particularly true in an intelligent, sensitive retriever. They get too hung up on what they can get in trouble for. Some retrievers can't take too much negative pressure. Another statement is "there is not enough dog there". These sensitive retrievers can only be brought along very slowly, and many not that far. Being able to deal with pressure is one of the important factors of what separates an OAA contender and a MH. Or even on a beginning level, some retrievers are not capable of achieving more than a WC because they cannot take pressure. They just fall apart. In a good breeding program where success in either tough demanding hunting situations or the hunt test/field trial environment is desired, the ability to take pressure is something a breeder tries to breed in.