

Trained Retrieve, Balanced Training Method A Step by Step Technique

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Demonstrations by Laura White and the Retrievers at Cinnstar Retrievers

Photos by Birgit Steinich

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Preface

I have said for years that I was not going to write an article on how to teach a Trained Retrieve (Force Fetch) to a retriever. There are many reasons for this. Most importantly is that there are so many problems you can run into teaching a trained retrieve. It is impossible to list every answer to every problem or training scenario. Retrievers are individuals and to be able to suggest an answer to most problems you really need to see what is going on first hand with the retriever, prior to making a suggestion on how to correct the problem. Sometimes there might be more than one answer. And the answer is dependant on the retriever's individual temperament. One size does not fit all.

We at Cinnstar feel very strongly about not working from this article in a vacuum, alone. Please work with someone who has success with his or her own retrievers, or a professional who you have confidence in. I am also available to help. If you have any questions or are having problems, please email, or call me. I will do everything I can do to help. I want you to succeed.

I strongly suggest that prior to using this article that you take a bit of time and also read several other articles I have written. They give a good idea of my training philosophy and will help you understand the methodology of this article. These articles are: 1. Balanced Training, Theory and Methods, 2. Never Say Never, Never Say Always, 3. Developing a Good Training Attitude. 4. Pressure and it Effects on the Retriever. These are available on the website:

www.cinnstar.com/art.htm

This method of trained retrieve utilizes the Balanced Method of Training. Praise, Encouragement, Teaching, and Consequences (correction) are used together in combination. The terminology "force fetch" conjures up all kinds of horrors to some. As you read thru this article you will see that this is not what this article is all about. Thus I use the term force fetch and trained retrieve interchangeably. It is a Force Fetch method as force (ear pinch/twist) is used. However, Praise, Encouragement, and Teaching are used to motivate and train the behavior. It is completely different then the harsh methods used by some trainers. The Balanced Method of Training is suitable for almost all dogs, not just retrievers. It is a flexible program, using the dog's individual temperament as a key to what best motivates and achieves the results the trainer desires from the dog.

This article does not explain all the reasons of why or the philosophy of force fetching the retriever. That is detailed in a companion article. I have attempted this "how to" article first as it is what so many people request. They already know that they want to or have to force fetch their retriever; they just want a procedure on how to accomplish the task.

Any kind of trained retrieve will not make a retriever that lacks good basic retrieving instincts into something it is not. A trained retrieve supplements the retriever's natural desire. It prevents problems as much as cures currant problems. A trained retrieve for obedience, where the dog only has to go out at a fast trot 30 feet and retrieve a dumbbell can be taught in time, to most dogs. Retrieving in the hunting, hunt test or field trial environment is different. It requires a lot of

natural talent. All retrievers have a given amount of natural talent. It is difficult for the novice trainer to understand or accept if they discover that their retriever does not have the talent to reach the level they desire. Not every retriever has the talent to become a MH or Field Trial competitor, or even a JH. You have to make the best of what you have, or find another retriever that has the talent level you desire. It should also be mentioned that there are a few retrievers that should not be force fetched. Extremely shy, or that hold such resentment, or are not birdy enough to help overcome resentment. These thankfully are few and far between.

This method with only a few changes is very similar to the one I was taught in Los Angeles in my Open obedience class in 1968. I learned it with my Shelties. Giving credit where credit is due my instructor was Shirley Indelicato who has Miniature Poodles and is an AKC licensed obedience judge. If this method will not hurt (physically or mentally) a delicate Sheltie or Poodle, it will certainly not hurt your retriever. The only difference in my current method is: 1. The use of a table 2. A day or two of introductory acceptance of the dumbbell by opening the retriever's mouth and placing the dumbbell in, and teaching "hold" before force is ever applied. 3. Stressing "Hold" more than is taught for obedience 4. The last phase of learning to correctly retrieve a bumper and then a bird. 5. Retrievers are taught to go directly to heel, ready for the next retrieve. They do not sit in front of the handler. My retrievers hold obedience titles and field titles. Retrievers learn when the retrieve requires delivery in front, or delivery at heel. I teach the delivery to heel first as the field is my primary venue, but one could do this differently.

Obedience Retrieve vs Field Retrieve

The main difference in retrievers in the field vs obedience trial training is that a retriever has to retrieve and hold a heavier, larger object: a duck or goose that could be still alive and fighting. Thus the "hold" command is very important. The terrain, cover and distance make the pressure not to retrieve even more (negative pressure). In retrievers "hard mouth" and "stickiness" can be a problem. This is often caused by incorrect removal of the bird on the "drop" command. Thus the "drop" command is also more important. Another difference is that I do not teach the dog to wait (steady) at this time. Steadying a 6-month-old retriever will dampen their retrieving desire and create a methodical worker. In obedience trial training the dog has such a simpler retrieve to make, and they do not have to go faster than a brisk trot (which would be considered very slow for a retrieve in the field), thus steadying can be accomplished at the same time as the trained retrieve. There are comparatively few distractions in the controlled environment of the obedience ring versus out in a hunting/field test environment. Thus less enticement to do something different than go and return promptly. Finally in retriever training, very little can be accomplished until the retriever can deliver to hand. Unlike obedience where it does not matter if it takes six months to a year to teach a "motivational" (non forced) trained retrieve, no advanced work can be accomplished in the field without a reliable delivery to hand.

Amount of Time

This method takes about six to eight weeks to complete using a table. Time to teach is faster or slower depending on the retriever's temperament and trainability. Each day, the time it takes is not a lot. Do not "grind" on the retriever. Each retriever will have a maximum time they can or will concentrate. This ability to concentrate will increase as the retriever gets older AND with gradually extending the training time. Concentration and focus is in-born to a large extent. A good trainer will continue to develop this trait. Watch for tell tale signs of tiring (mentally) and heed them. On the same token, do not let your retriever "con" you. Take short breaks to pet and let the retriever relax. This is a great stress reliever.

You should work the retriever almost every day until the force fetch is complete. Yes, sometimes a day or so break is good for you and your retriever, but do not drag this on and on. You want to get it accomplished as expediently as possible without overwhelming your retriever. Taking longer than necessary causes more resentment.

You know your retriever is force fetched when: 1. While inducing pressure (ear pinch in this case), the retriever will pick up and retrieve to make the pressure stop. They will know how to “turn off” the pressure. 2. Without any inducement or encouragement they will retrieve a bumper or bird however many times you wish, returning smartly to heel.

This article only teaches the basic ear pinch trained retrieve. It does not go into the force to a pile, collar (e collar) conditioning, and collar force fetch. While all my retrievers are forced to a pile and collar conditioned and forced as part of their basics program, it is something the novice does not want to attempt on their own. You need to work with a professional or amateur that knows how to do this. There are some retrievers that cannot take this amount of pressure, and it is a very delicate line that you have to really know what you are doing.

Most professionals today, who care about the retrievers they train, use a method similar to this one. It is far from the “Hell Week” of old. Most of the time the procedure is fairly gentle. Force is just one component in the Balanced Training Method. Force or Correction is not anymore or less important than the use of: Teaching, Praise, and Encouragement. All four must be used in harmony. That is why the Balanced Method is suitable for most dogs. You adjust the amount of each component: Praise, Encouragement, Teaching, and Correction to suit each dog’s temperament. Know your dog, each one is an individual.

Use of the Table

Some of you show your retriever at conformation shows, so this analogy works well. A grooming table helps you to comfortably and quickly groom the dog for the show ring. They are at an appropriate level so your back does not hurt, and most have a noose to help hold the dog in one spot. You do not choke the dog on the grooming table with the noose. The table puts the dog at a disadvantage, and they are just a bit intimidated, so they stand better. A force fetch table does the same thing. The cable and runner system act as a third hand to keep the retriever where you want them. You Never choke the retriever. For much of the force fetch, the leash is actually hanging loose when the retriever is sitting, so they can reach the table to pick their bumper, dumbbell or bird off it. I shaved off two weeks by just using a table. No changes were made to my program. I would not however build a table to force fetch one retriever. But if you have access to one, by all means use it. A force table is commonly 8 to 16 feet long, and three feet wide. The height is made to the individual trainer. But it is typically about 18-24 inches off the ground.

Age to Teach the Trained Retrieve

To me, the force fetch is a beginning, not an ending. Without a trained retrieve of some kind, you cannot progress to any higher level of training of fieldwork. You cannot teach complex marking skills, or handling if you are worried about the whether the retriever will bring the bird (or bumper) back all the way.

I like to force fetch my retrievers as soon as they have lost all of their puppy teeth, anywhere from about five and a half months to six months of age on up. Much prior to that their mouths are sore from lack of teeth, and they are not really mentally mature enough or have the attention span. For a retriever that is not going to be shown in conformation, I like to get the pup thinking obedience first. I like them heeling and almost automatically sitting every time before I start to teach the force fetch. I also like them doing a sit stay at the end of the leash for a very short time. As we progress with the force fetch I continue their obedience training as well. Because my emphasis field training over obedience trials, I do not teach the entire Novice Obedience routine at this time, but one could. I have also forced fetched many older retrievers. Most of the time it is more difficult, but not necessarily. Trainability, independence and level in the pack (is the dog or bitch the alpha?) will play an even greater role in an older retriever. Plus you may have more bad habits, many of them deep-seated to overcome. For retrievers being shown in conformation, I have found if they are not thoroughly show trained before starting obedience training, they will tend to sit in the conformation ring. So I delay the obedience. They learn to sit, and go to heel ect

on the table. I do not practice heeling in the yard. But really, the important point to remember be it conformation training or obedience, the retriever should be under control, and mature enough mentally to learn a complex task such as the trained retrieve. The retriever must have “learned how to learn”.

Field Work While Teaching the Trained Retrieve

Depending on the retriever, many times you can continue training in the field while you are force fetching your retriever. Just accept the delivery of the bird or bumper that they give you. Sometimes this is not possible. They may run away with the bird, play around with it, or run out to it and refuse to pick it up. If this happens, it is just better to not train in the field until the force fetch is completed. Further if the retriever is able to associate the force fetch with retrieving in the field too early, they will most likely stop retrieving, or retrieving correctly. With my dogs (clients or my personal retrievers), I like to do what I can, even if it just a hand thrown bumper into the water. Not only does the retriever need the exercise, it needs to release all that pent up energy! Remember, the longer you take to complete a trained retrieve, the more issues you may have to overcome in the field. This is one of the big problems with either a “shaped” or “positive” retrieve: The Time Factor. In obedience training, this is not a real issue. If it takes 6 months or longer to teach a shaped or positive retrieve and this is the method you wish to use you can. You just delay going into the Open ring. Open obedience has so many other exercises you have to teach, (and you can teach many of the Utility exercises) that generally this is not a concern. But in retriever training in the 6 months or more you are teaching a shaped retrieve so many bad habits can be developed out in the field in this length of time that you will have to retrain. If you can! There is no real comparison or analogy in obedience training. A solution might be to not train in the field, or only do retrieves that the retriever shows no development of bad habits like I do. The 6-8 weeks it takes with the method presented here will feel like forever, I would not want to imagine what 6 months would feel like. Especially to a young retriever with all that pent up energy to retrieve. You are missing a critical stage in the young retriever’s development. Another issue is that for any advanced work you have to have a trained retrieve of some kind. This will be put on hold until latter.

“Happy Bumpers” and Play Retrieving While Teaching the Trained Retrieve

Out in the field, I tend to limit this until the force fetch is complete. You are not talking about a long span of time, so this is not a big deal. Again let the retriever’s actions be your guide. If they start a game of “keep away”, “parading”, or anything else, you are best advised not to continue. Try to prevent these bad habits from becoming chronic. They need to learn to distinguish “play” from “work”. Once delivery to hand is automatic, they will understand that work is delivery to hand, fun and play does not matter. Just be careful not to undermine all of your efforts. Do not use “happy bumpers” as praise for the trained retrieve. Imagine how confusing that is.

Final Thoughts

During the force fetch, there is a period of resentment by the dog, and resistance to do what you command them. The retriever has to go thru this phase and understand that the trainer is not requesting that the dog retrieve, but it is a duty. Refusing is not an option. This puts another form of positive pressure at the line. The ear pinch/twist MUST be used in conjunction with lots of Praise, Encouragement and Teaching the retriever what you want them to do. Once you have made the decision and start to force fetch your retriever it must be completed. If you do not force fetch the retriever correctly and completely, the retriever might never enjoy retrieving again, due to the resentment never overcome.

Some retrievers lack a certain amount of trainability. They get resentful and hold a grudge. They get down, and mope, or get submissive. It is your job as a good trainer to work with what you have in the retriever’s temperament and trainability. Some retrievers need lots of love and playing before, in between or after lessons. **Praise is an integral part in the process!** I encourage the retriever (a soft “goood”) at the point that the retriever is having difficulty with

(and doing correctly), or learning, which will not disturb them. And praise the retriever after each retrieve, and drop, especially at the beginning.

I like to do a bit of obedience training or conformation handling before I start force fetch. This puts them in the “work” mode. I like to end the session with obedience as well, or simply play, roughhouse and pet the retriever, or groom them before putting the retriever back in its kennel. My retrievers come out of the kennel generally in a happy, “lets go” attitude. Actually that is down playing it. They come out of the kennel like insane maniacs, especially if the dog truck is there.

In retriever training, I believe that most of the time the retriever **does** want to do what they are taught. They either want to please their trainer, or enjoy the work they do: retrieving! (Self-reinforcing). Most retrievers are not obstinate, stubborn and out to make the trainers life difficult. I do not believe that they get a perverse pleasure of “blowing you off”, thou they will test you. Many times the retriever does not understand what we want. This may appear like they are being stubborn or obstinate, “blowing us off”. Take time to figure out what is REALLY going on. You will often find that they do not understand what we want. We have taken too big of a step. Something in the environment is causing the problem. Many possibilities. It is up to the trainer to make the decision to correct the retriever or choose another possible reason why the retriever did not comply. You might start out training on one thing, and end up with teaching something different. TEACH! It is up to us to teach them. Brake down the exercise into the component elements. Teaching and showing the retriever what we want and makes for a happy “up” retriever, not a fearful one. If too much force or correction is used, that is what you will get. A retriever should not do its job because it is fearful of correction. Are they running to something or away from something?

One good point about retrievers is that you can make mistakes and it is not the end of the world. They as a whole are a forgiving group, so do not be so afraid to “damage” or “hurt their feelings” irrevocably. Using common sense will go a long way here.

Force fetch procedures are very detailed and at times tedious. You make very slow progress, very small steps at a time. It is very detailed orientated. This is also why it is very difficult to teach the force fetch by writing an article. A trained retrieve is not a single action or process, it is a chain of many, many smaller ones. Each one has to be trained.

This article is long and detailed. I would read the whole article first, several times and then start teaching your retriever. This gives you an idea where each part fits in with the whole. In the currant obedience vernacular, we back chain the retrieve from the hold. The saying “Make Haste Slowly” cannot be over emphasized. Teach each step before going on to the next. Don’t skip or rush. Each step is built on the previous. I like to see the retriever repeat the step three times in a row successfully before I feel they know it. Once is just a fluke, twice is developing a habit, and three times they understand. At least for that day.

I use the word “Fetch” for the command to retrieve; it is shorter, blunter, more authoritative then “Take It”. I prefer to use the word “Drop” for the release command. “Give” is more of a request type of a word, and you are not requesting. But you can use any word you wish. From the beginning when out in the field on a mark I always send the dog on its name. As you transition from the work in the yard to the field, you can start to use the retriever’s name, and drop the word “fetch” unless needed. Normally retrievers are sent on a marked retrieve with their name, and “back” on a blind.

Step-by-Step Procedures

Slide Shows: There are 7 printable pdf. slide shows in this article. The slide shows are an integral part of this article. The web page: www.cinnstar.com/trained_ret_art.htm has links to the

appropriate slide show. This printable .pdf article does not. I would recommend printing the article and each of the slide shows before you set out to use this article as a “how to” guide.

Learning to Accept and Hold a Dumbbell Prior to Force Fetch. Slide Show One

I like to use an Open obedience trial dumbbell first prior to using a bumper or bird. A dumbbell facilitates picking up off the ground (or table). We are teaching as much as forcing, and anything to teach what we want better and faster should be utilized. The retriever does not come to hate their dumbbell. If you have ever seen Flash in the Open obedience ring, you know that the dumbbell is his most beloved object. Well, actually next to his squeaky toys. Also when he lived at the kennel, Flash sunbathed on the force table that was in his run.

I like to start the force fetch program with the retriever learning to accept a dumbbell. It seems no use to me to start twisting a dog’s ear and then have them fight you to keep the dumbbell in their mouth. This exercise can be continued to include a sit stay holding the dumbbell, or coming to heel holding the dumbbell if desired, though I don’t as a general rule teach this for the hold alone. If you use a table, I like to tie the leash to one pole, wrapping it to the pole to help keep the retriever from moving around, not to choke the retriever!

Whether on the table, or on the ground, have the retriever sitting in the heel position on the left side. Hold the dumbbell in front of the retriever’s mouth held by your right hand on one of the “bells”. Command “Fetch” and simply open the retriever’s mouth with your left thumb and fore (pointing) finger going over the retriever’s muzzle, and pinch in at the lips gently, to open the mouth far enough to put the dumbbell gently in. Do not hit the retriever’s gums or teeth with the dumbbell. Gently but firmly keep the dumbbell in the retriever’s mouth. Many things can happen when you put the dumbbell in your retriever’s mouth. Some retrievers object violently trying to thrash and spit this foreign object out. Some object in a less extreme manner, and try to spit the object out. A few, do not really object. And a few will clamp their mouth shut so you have a difficult time getting the dumbbell in, or out. Do not let the retriever spit the dumbbell out!

Command gently, not loudly, but firmly “Hold”, and repeat the command several times as you make the retriever hold the dumbbell. Eventually they will stop trying to get rid of the dumbbell, if only for a second. “Hold, Good” Then command the word “Drop” and allow the retriever to release (spit out) the dumbbell. If the retriever does not release the dumbbell, (and this does happen), using the same method you used to put the dumbbell in, use it to remove the dumbbell. Praise the retriever. You will need to repeat numerous times, perhaps as many as 10 depending on how much the retriever has objected. I like to quit when the retriever stops resisting, or has shown progress. Most of the time, being gentle but firm, the retriever will learn to accept the dumbbell, and not resist in a couple of days. Then you can progress to the actual ear pinch. Make sure that as you have the retriever holding the dumbbell, you repeat the words “Hold” and “Good” calmly to encourage the retriever to hold the dumbbell and associate the action to the word “hold”. After you have the retriever release the dumbbell, again praise the retriever. Let him know you are happy for his efforts.

The Ear Pinch Method. Slide Show Two

I do not usually have long nails. Most of the time you do not need them. With the retriever in heel position on the ground or table, grasp the retriever’s right ear at the upper inboard corner between the thumb and index finger of your left hand. Use your thumbnail to pinch as required to get the desired response. At the same time you pinch the ear, twist the ear sharply counter clockwise. You will quickly find out how much pinch and twist is required to get the desired response. Use that, And No More. More is being abusive. If all it takes is a light touch, that is all you use. If it takes a thumbnail (or other object) hard to get any response, that unfortunately what you will have to do. Use the least amount of force necessary to get the job accomplished. The amount of force required might change as you force fetch your retriever. Important note: It is very important to keep up the pressure until the retriever has the dumbbell (bumper, bird) in its

MOUTH. Do not stop when they open their mouth, or they will not finish the action. Or they will quickly get in the habit of starting to pick up the dumbbell, then stopping. Not Good. I like to steady the retriever's head by holding the collar with my three fingers (pinky, ring and middle) going under the collar, not just holding the retriever with the two fingers I am pinching with. I also use this to guide the retriever at first toward the dumbbell.

Learning to Open the Mouth for the Dumbbell

Referring to the ear pinch previously detailed, put the dumbbell in front of the retrievers mouth, command the word "Fetch", and pinch/twist the retrievers ear hard enough to have them open their mouths so that you can put the dumbbell swiftly in the retrievers mouth. The sharper and quicker you can pinch and twist their ear, the more effective it is. If you go slowly it gives the retriever a chance to react, move its head, clamp down with its jaws to not allow you to put the dumbbell in its mouth. Then it will take more force on your part to make the retriever open its mouth. I always give a slight hesitation after the command to "Fetch" before pinching the retrievers ear. It should not take more then a couple of sessions for the retriever to learn to open their mouth when you command "Fetch". You are hesitating so that you give the retriever a chance to open their mouth on their own: to be successful. Also to equate the word with the required action. Remember to praise the retriever each time. Also have the retriever hold the dumbbell until you command "drop". I normally have the retriever hold the dumbbell for about five seconds, saying, "Hold, Good, Hold".

Correctly Taking the Dumbbell (or Bumper or Bird) from Your Retriever is Very Important

In the field, the command "drop" is much more important to define then in obedience trial training. Mouth problems are not uncommon in retrievers at some point in their training. Most mouth problems are handler/trainer induced. A release should be done in a deliberate, slow manner, NEVER in a rush, ripping bird or bumper from the retriever's mouth. This helps to prevent problems such as hard mouth and stickiness. Grabbing the bird from a young puppy will make it not want to come back to you. Stickiness in its worse presentation the retriever seems to go into a trance, eyes glaze over and the bird becomes irrevocably locked in their mouth. Stickiness can be less severe, a reluctance to let go of the bird, "This one's Mine!"

The retriever should be content to sit at heel with the bird in its mouth until commanded to release. Latter, in advanced training, you should be able to tell the retriever to hold and then walk back to the line, perhaps 100 or more yards away. You want a firm grip to hold a heavy bird, but you do not want your bird mashed either. When you go to remove the bird or bumper, always have your hand firmly holding the bird (or other retrieving object) so it will not fall on the ground, command "drop", and allow the retriever to spit the bird out on their own. If they do not release, at first gently open their mouth, repeating the command "drop". Do not pull the bird from their mouth. If you notice this reluctance more then once or twice, you will need to force on "drop". Simply repeat the word "drop" and pinch/twist to get the reluctant retriever to release. Lots of Praise! Habitual hard mouth and stickiness will have to be cured in a more concerted effort. I have devoted an entire article on it also available on the website.

A retriever should not be allowed to mouth a dumbbell anymore then you would want the retriever to mouth (crunch) a bird. A light tap on the retrievers lower jaw commanding to "Hold" will teach them at the beginning with the dumbbell not to do this, not latter in the field with a bird, when you have developed a problem. **Praise** the retriever for releasing correctly is very important. Again, much more so then in obedience trial training.

Rhythm and Focus

Very important. A retriever will get distracted and loose concentration if the pace or rhythm of training is slow. A series of three or four repetitions in a row, followed by petting and praising break (relaxing), keep the retriever focused and alert. At the same time a break will help relieve

any stress. But on the same token, too much praise can be a distraction if the retriever gets too excited.

Progress on “Hold”

Once the retriever has stopped resisting the dumbbell being put in their mouths, you want to stress the command “Hold” This command is far more important in retriever training than in obedience competition for the reasons I discussed previously. Once the dumbbell is in the retriever’s mouth either from an ear pinch or you placing it in their mouth, slowly begin to release the hold on their mouth. If they start to spit the dumbbell, close the mouth gently and repeat the command “Hold”. Sometimes you get an opposite effect by doing this, the retriever now tries to spit the dumbbell out from the correction. This is normal. In the summer outside, “hold” is a very difficult command to work on. Often I go inside in air-conditioned comfort to work on it. If the retriever is panting, it is difficult to teach them to hold on to the dumbbell. A bumper or bird is worse. You can also tip their head up a little to facilitate the holding of the dumbbell. In a few tries the retriever will begin to hold the dumbbell on their own. You can also support their lower jaw to help, but slowly wean them away from this. I tap them **gently** with the hand that is holding their jaw up, upwards to teach them to get a grip on the dumbbell and not let it roll out of their mouths. Eventually you want to progress to the retriever holding the dumbbell on their own until you command them to release. Some trainers have the retriever do a sit stay, and a recall with the retriever holding the dumbbell. This can certainly be done, though I normally do not do it. If I have a retriever that is particularly bad on hold, I use it.

I like to tap on the dumbbell ends to encourage the retriever to have a good hold on the dumbbell. I do a similar thing with the bumper; I pull on the attached rope, or tap on the ends. The retriever must not release until commanded. I repeat the command “hold” at first to emphasize how I want the retriever to respond.

Some retrievers develop a bad habit of starting to release or releasing the dumbbell (bumper or bird) the moment the handler’s hand comes down to take it (anticipation). To prevent this problem, just because your hand is there, do not immediately command the retriever to release like you are worried that they will drop it. Instead, delay the command, and correct as necessary if the retriever starts to release (or does) anticipating the command. The correction can be repeating the command to hold, or a light tap on the lower jaw. The tap is a reminder to hold, not a punishment. If the retriever drops the dumbbell (bumper, bird), let it drop on the ground (table). Enforce fetch with the ear pinch. For the release, put your hand on the dumbbell (or bird) get a firm grip, hesitate, then command “Drop”. When eventually back in the field remember to take that bird in the correct manner. There will be no need to rush; the retriever should hold the bird.

Reaching for the dumbbell

In a day or so your retriever should be opening their mouth to accept you putting it in their mouth. Now they need to learn to reach, then reach further and further toward the ground (or table). Instead of putting the dumbbell into the retriever’s mouth, this time pull on their collar as you pinch and twist the ear guiding their head toward the dumbbell. As the days pass, make them stretch further and further to the ground (or table). Sometimes they will lie down. This is ok; just gently pull them up into sitting position after they have the dumbbell. Only remove the dumbbell from their mouth when they are sitting. If they stand up and reach for the dumbbell, this is ok to, just have them sit afterward, before you take the dumbbell. If the retriever does not want to reach down toward the dumbbell, and freezes in the sit position, do not put the dumbbell directly down in front of the retriever, make them stretch out instead. Hold the dumbbell a foot away at head height of the retriever to get their dumbbell. This will cause them to get up, (un freeze) which is what you want. A really freeze prone retriever might need to be heeled with the dumbbell. When the retriever will put their head down close to the table to get their dumbbell, they need to learn to get up and walk to the dumbbell and reach down for it. Start moving the dumbbell further away in successive retrieves so they have to get up and walk. After the retriever has the dumbbell

in their mouth and is standing an arms distance, remind them to hold, and then command “here” or “come” whatever word you use for that command. Then, when they get close, command “heel” and have them go into heel position. In-between remind/encourage them to: “hold, good dog, hold, heel, good dog”. Help the retriever by gently supporting, their lower jaw as they move. Avoid letting the retriever drop the dumbbell. Support their jaw, repete “hold” and encourage and show the retriever what you want. It seems like they cannot “walk and chew gun at the same time”. You are in a “Teaching” phase at this point. Use the ear pinch as needed only to get the retriever to reach for the dumbbell. If you help them to hold the dumbbell at first, you will not be in the position of having to correct them for dropping it. Latter as you progress, if they drop the dumbbell enforce “fetch” and ear pinch them and make them pick it up and hold it. But not at the very beginning.

I like the retriever to start moving before they are actually picking the dumbbell off the table. It will take a while sometimes for the retriever to take a few steps on their own and pick up their dumbbell off the table. I alternate with the simple ear pinch to reach, take a couple of steps, then sit, and alternately the turn and go to heel. Three of one type, relax, pet and praise the retriever. Then three of the other, relax, ect. Break it up. Relieve the stress. Be patient. Eventually they will move all the way down to the table with your hand on the dumbbell.

Picking the dumbbell up off the table

Now comes the more difficult part, picking the dumbbell actually up with your hand not on the dumbbell. This seems to be the trouble spot in many retrievers. So alternate sometimes the hand is on, sometimes not. Use your hand on the collar and ear to guide the retriever to the dumbbell with your hand off the dumbbell. Enforce the command only when you meet resistance. Resist the temptation while ear pinching to place your hand on the dumbbell so it does not move. Once the retriever will go out a few steps on their own and pick up the dumbbell and return to heel, start placing the dumbbell further and further away. At first you will place the dumbbell to facilitate picking it up, so all the retriever will have to do is put it head down straight. As you progress, place it at different positions, so the retriever has to move its head/body in the correct position to pick it up. Once you get more then 6 feet, you are ready to toss it rather then place it. Start tossing the dumbbell just a foot or so from the retriever, and progress to the full length of the table. Yes, on occasion you might bounce the dumbbell off the table, try not to, but it is not the end of the world if you do. Just pick it up and try again. The tossing of the dumbbell is just a method of placing the dumbbell further away while the trainer stays at heel. It should NOT be used to encourage the retriever to retrieve.

Off the Table, On the Ground, Slide Shows Three thru Seven

Once the retriever is confident and happy retrieving a dumbbell tossed to the end of the table, it is time to come off the table with the dumbbell. Starting at the very beginning, the retriever sitting at heel, and dumbbell just in front of their mouth, telling them to “fetch” and placing the dumbbell in their mouth. You should be able to quickly progress to throwing the dumbbell. Keep the retriever on leash, and then progress to a long line. This keeps you in control. It prevents all kinds of possible problems. Do not try to excite the retriever into going out and picking up the dumbbell (ie teasing the retriever with the dumbbell). Make sure the retriever comes back smartly to heel position and holds the dumbbell until commanded to release. If you have done all your work on the table correctly, the transition should not take more then a couple of days. Do not progress too fast to the retrieve the dumbbell (or bumper and bird) without a leash.

Back on the Table on to the Bumper

At about the point the retriever is picking up the dumbbell you tossed on it’s own, on leash from the ground, and returning to heel and holding, you can start all over at the beginning with the bumper. Use a white one. You will either find this a breeze or a pain. Some retrievers that did great with the dumbbell do not transfer this task to the bumper. Picking up off the table (or ground) seems to be especially difficult: there are no bells holding the bumper off the table. I

give them a bit of help at first. I hold the bumper by the rope so one end is on the table and the rope end is an inch off the table. This helps them learn. Enforce the command “fetch” until they get the bumper in their mouth. Remember, pinch until the retriever has the bumper in mouth, not still reaching!

Sometimes to help transfer/associate this known task from the dumbbell to the bumper, I will do the step with the dumbbell, immediately followed by repeating it with the bumper. The same criteria for going to the ground with the bumper, is the same as with the dumbbell: You should be able to toss the bumper to the end of the table and the retriever happily go out and retrieve it, and go to heel to deliver. Remember to encourage and praise the retriever all thru the teaching and force process.

On the Ground with the Bumper

In very short order you should be able to toss the bumper to the other side of the table, and will be ready to go to the ground with the bumper. Start at the beginning with the hold then fetch close to the mouth. Progress as fast as the retriever shows they understand what you are commanding. You should always work on ground with close-cropped grass, dirt, or gravel with a small white bumper. You do not want the retriever to have to hunt!

Finally, The Bird

Once your retriever is happy retrieving the bumper, where you can give it a good throw on bare ground and have the dog run out and retrieve to hand at heel, you are ready to start with the bird. You should not have to do much correction using the bird. On occasions you find resistance in picking the bird up (opening mouth), which you will need to correct for, but every other issue should be resolved before you start with a bird.

I like to start with a frozen pigeon, as it is lighter than a duck. Frozen, it is more like a bumper with wings. You can use a bumper with duck wings, but it is not the same. You can also use a “Dokken”, as a transitional stage. I just use a frozen pigeon. At this point you can be on the ground, and just like the bumper start with the fetch close to the dog's mouth. Sometimes you will have to open their mouth the first few times to get the retriever to open their mouth all the way. Once the retriever is proficient with the pigeon frozen, let it thaw, and repeat the process with the thawed pigeon. Or you can use a fresh killed one for this step. Finally introduce the duck. They are bigger and heavier. Save them for last. Use a partially thawed one first. At this point you can start transitioning to using their name to send them for their bird. Use fetch only if the either get confused, drop their bird, or refuse. I like to finish the force fetch process ie the retriever is happily back to retrieving marks thrown in the field delivering to hand at heel before introducing live birds.

Back to the field

Now you are ready to take your force fetch into the field on a mark. Go somewhere familiar to the retriever. Make it a very simple short mark where you can back up to make the succeeding retrieves longer. It should be on short grass, where the retriever can see the bird when it gets there. I like to use a pigeon, and depending on the retriever, might even use a bumper for the first few throws if the bird is too much of a distraction in itself. The retriever should be on a long line or drag the leash. Hold on to the retriever's collar keeping them in the sitting position. The retriever should sit until released, but still is allowed to slightly pull. Eager, but under control. Steadying the retriever will come latter. Do not allow the retriever to make noise or jump up. Start with the thrower just standing there, and the handler throw the first bird (or bumper). Start with the handler close enough to throw the bird in the spot the thrower will throw it the next time. The whole idea is to have the retriever succeed, not fail. Hesitate a second before sending the retriever. Use the retriever's name to send, not “fetch”. As soon as the retriever picks up the bird the trainer just threw, the trainer should encourage the retriever to come back to heel. Not too excited, but encourage using the known commands “good dog, here!” and “hold” and “heel” if necessary as you did in the yard at first. Be calm. Wait a second before commanding “drop”,

and removing the bird from the retriever's mouth. Concentrate on the primary objectives of these first marks: Going out, prompt return and delivery at heel. Do not demand perfection on minor issues like sitting straight yet.

The first trip to the field can be done without a thrower. Just throw simple short throws in short grass.

Hopefully the retriever did not drop the bird while coming in. If they did, but picked it up on their own accord this is good. If not, and they seem perplexed, repeat the command to fetch. If they do not pick up the bird, you will have to correct the retriever with an ear pinch. Don't over correct. If you were successful, now have the thrower throw the bird. As the retriever returns take several steps backward. Repeat now from this spot. Again as the retriever returns take several steps backward. Do this several more times, each time taking a few steps backward, so the retriever has to go further each succeeding time. Make sure that your retriever comes back directly. Reassure if necessary. Remember to praise the retriever after each successful retrieve. There should be no playing around or detours allowed. It will take several sessions before you are back to doing "normal" marks. When the retriever has developed confidence with pigeons, both frozen and fresh killed (or thawed), try the duck. Start shorter than you are currently doing, and move back after each retrieve.

Note on Dropping the Duck

Unlike a light obedience dumbbell, a duck is heavier, and the retriever will sometimes particularly at the beginning inadvertently drop it because they do not have a good grip position. Nerves sometimes cause this. Sometimes it is hot and they are panting. A retriever should automatically pick up the bird without further command. At first they might be puzzled, freeze, knowing they were not supposed to drop it, but not knowing the correct response. Or they might start to continue coming in without the bird. So command them to fetch. If necessary you will have to ear pinch them for compliance. Soon, they will automatically pick it up on their own if this happens. Remember to praise them if they pick it right back up on their own to encourage repeated behavior. There are a few retrievers, and not necessarily small ones, that develop the bad habit of dropping their bird or even a bumper several times on their way back. Shorten up your retrieves and have a long line on for control. With a retriever like this, enforce fetch with the ear pinch to stop this bad habit. Command "fetch" in a scolding tone, and give the retriever a good correction. With a retriever like this, do not repeat the command to fetch until you are there holding the retriever to make a correction.

Let Water Lag Behind Land

So far we have only discussed land retrieves, and with good reason. The urge to drop the bird and shake is very strong, so you want to be confident with the land before attempting the water. A small square pond or agricultural channel works best for beginning water retrieves. Entry/exit should be gradual, no difficult banks to climb up. Hand-throw a white bumper the first time yourself. Just an easy short throw, distance will come in succeeding throws. As the retriever returns and is exiting the water, remind them to hold, especially if they look like they want to shake. You might have to take the retriever by the collar and prevent the shake. Remind them to "heel". Normally if you keep telling them to hold and heel, they have their mind on that, not shaking. I like to use a release word like "OK shake" to let the retriever know when they can shake after the retriever has delivered the bird correctly. Start out with the thrower on the opposite side of the pond or channel, using a white bumper and make a long throw to almost the side where the handler and retriever are, maybe only a few yards from shore. In succeeding throws and days, the bumper should land closer and closer to the shore near the thrower and eventually on the shore, which should be at first devoid of cover. The handler can also extend the retrieves by stepping back from the shore. The return just after coming up on shore on the opposite side as well with the handler far from the shore will be difficult. Progress slowly, building on what the retriever already knows. They should understand the trained retrieve very

well now. Make sure you set up your water marks to discourage shoring early and running the bank.

Introduction to Live Birds

Now you are ready to teach the retriever to bring back a (simulated) cripple by using a clip wing pigeon. Retrievers should deliver “tenderly to hand” not “tenderized”. The pigeon if only used a few times should be unharmed. So you will need more than one. Use a piece of tape to wrap the bird’s flight feathers on one wing so they cannot fly. Flight feathers are the ones closest to the wing tip. Tie the legs with surveyors tape so they cannot run away. Hand throw the pigeon on grass, and send the retriever for it. If the retriever gets too excited when you throw, make them settle down before releasing to make the retrieve. Otherwise they might unintentionally crunch the pigeon. Enforce “fetch” if necessary, and encourage “hold” (no mouthing or crunching). After the retriever is reliable with a pigeon that’s legs are tied (this might be several sessions), now have only the one wing taped. They will make a long glide before landing, so have a close-cropped field of some size so the retriever will not have to hunt. The retriever will have to chase the running, flapping pigeon down. You can encourage the retriever the first few times as the retrieve object running away perplexes some retrievers. Again, the retriever should not crunch or mouth the pigeon as they return. A few timid retrievers will get scared of the pigeon, rather than excited. The force fetch teaches that they must pick up what you told them to. Either they pick up a flapping ¾ pound “killer” pigeon, or deal with a 100-pound plus handler. Remind them in a commanding voice “fetch” which helps them make the correct decision. Hopefully you will not have to enforce “fetch”.

Now you are ready for a live duck. Tie the legs above the joint of the leg with surveyors tape. With the wings, bring them together and using (preferably) 1-inch strips of tire tube, cross the wings and tie them together at the body. Only throw live ducks tied like this in water, never on the land. If you do not have an old tire tube that you can cut up, you can use surveyors tape, but it tends to cut into the ducks skin. The inner tube is better as it has some flexibility.

With overly timid retrievers you can start with the pigeons wings tied like the ducks so they do not flap very much, then slowly progress. Overly timid retrievers can overcome this issue, but it will take lots of effort on the trainer’s part. You will need to take more time to introduce live birds. There are a lot of other issues connected with a timid retriever. You can’t make a retriever like birds, though certain exercises can help. Most retrievers are bird and retrieve (not the same thing either) crazy. Like I said, a few retrievers are not born with enough talent to make creditable retrievers in the field.

Final Words

As the weeks go by, you should phase out the encouragement to hold and heel, it will not be necessary. The “Come In” Whistle, duck calls, shots, and all the other hunt test distractions can be reintroduced. Your retriever is force fetched. You did not “break their spirit”. The retriever should return every time correctly, eagerly. The return to hand at heel will become automatic. With a trained retrieve under your belt, you now can go on to more advanced work, and solve issues if they show up.

Good Retrieving