

## Dog Training — the Basic Steps

### Part XI

It was early in 1951 that I joined one of the few obedience dog training clubs in Great Britain. At sixteen years of age I was the youngest member in the Epsom and Ewell Branch of the Associated Sheep, Police and Army Dog Society. The club had some most dedicated instructors who taught us to make things simple, progressive and interesting for our dogs. We were encouraged to either enter obedience competitions or compete in friendly matches with other dog training clubs. Many did both and in addition clubs were often asked to put on demonstrations at carnivals and fetes.

All the obedience trials in the UK are known as obedience tests. There are five all together and the retrieve exercise exists in each; quite different from here in Australia where a dog has to advance through novice to gain a CD title before entering Open in which every dog has to retrieve. Many readers will probably think that it is a hard task to train a dog to retrieve for the first test it enters. No, not as hard as one might think at first, but let me explain that in the first test called special beginners and the second test called special novice, handlers are allowed to talk and signal to their dogs as much as they like, except in the sit and down stays. In subsequent tests A, B and C extra commands are penalised. So beginners and novice give great encouragement for the handlers and their dogs gain much confidence in working in the ring.

#### Retrieve

I well remember how the instructors showed handlers in the beginner classes how to get their dogs interested by treating the retrieve exercise as a game. By whirling around clockwise a couple of times, with handler holding the leash in the left hand and article in the right, it wasn't long before the dog thought it was great fun and would seize the opportunity of grabbing the article presented across in front of its nose. As this was about to happen the calm word, "Hold" was given. Immediately the dog took it praise was given, "Very good dog" and the handler was asked to trot around to the right in a gradual curve. Whilst on the move the handler was told to take hold of the article protruding from the side of the dog's mouth, say, "Give" and praise as soon as the dog released its grip and both came to a stop.

Ideally, this should be started by the time the dog has had two or three lessons of simple heelwork. It is necessary for the dog to have some respect for its handler, and more importantly it is necessary for the handler to know how to hold a leash correctly, how to use an encouraging voice and all the other points I have talked about in previous articles, particularly correct timing. In subsequent lessons, when a dog shows great eagerness, the handler should toss the article a few yards out in front, say, "Fetch" and go with the dog on the leash towards the article on the ground. As soon as the dog uses its initiative to pick it up, praise must be given followed by, "Come, good dog" as the handler walks backwards on the same track and takes the article from the dog whilst still walking. It is not advisable to get the dog to sit in front of you in the early days of retrieving; otherwise the dog may drop the article. One should always achieve taking it before the dog drops it.

Contrary to other exercises in which corrections are sometimes necessary, never correct your dog if it drops the article. If you do your dog will think you are telling him off for carrying the article. That would totally destroy its initiative. Instead, help the dog by getting him interested again and give plenty of enthusiastic praise as he carries it again. Never over train! If your dog has done let's say two retrieves, be content with those results. More retrieves may put your dog off. On the final good result talk to your dog as you mysteriously hide it down inside your jumper, saying, "Look, where has it gone?" That should keep her hungry for it, so that, in perhaps in twenty-four hours time, when you take her out for a walk, say in a mysterious voice, as you slowly pull out the article from the top of your jumper, "Millie, look what I've got here!" That is how you can draw out the interest from your dog. Once again only do two, perhaps three, retrieves. Make it the very first exercise you do with your dog, when its mind is very alert and willing. If you did other exercises before like heelwork, recalls, stays etc, your dog may become too mentally tired to do a retrieve. This is also a tip for club instructors: always teach the retrieve before doing the other obedience exercises. True, the retrieve exercise can be difficult to teach in a class at a dog club because there are so many distractions. Nevertheless handlers should be shown how to teach their dogs so that they can do it at home during the week. Here's another useful tip, particularly with dogs which lose interest very quickly. Find the best time of the day when you feel your dog is most excited about seeing you. This may vary from dog to dog. Many years ago I had a dog which was slow in learning the retrieve in the early days. However, I found that she was most excited when she saw me arrive home from work every day. So I kept the dumb-bell in the glove box of my car. When I arrived home I raced into the back yard and hurled the dumb-bell up the lawn saying, "Fetch". She raced after it and brought it back to me, where upon I threw it again and achieved the same result. I worked on that for a few weeks, and then I was able to do three retrieves in a row. Later: four, then five, then six! Then I introduced the sit in front, then the finish, then the sit at my heel as I threw the dumb-bell. It took several weeks, but this shows how one can gradually achieve the ultimate if one is patient and takes everything step by step.

Now a few words about the article you choose for your dog to retrieve. One doesn't have to start with a dumb-bell, although that is the requirement in obedience trials. Whatever is chosen it should be something comfortable for the dog to carry. An old leather glove rolled with say a couple of elastic bands around each end of it to keep it in a long secure shape will serve the purpose. Old socks secured in a similar way are also suitable. When dogs like retrieving those types of articles for some time, they can be secured around the centre parts of dumb-bells. Later, when dogs are used to those, the coverings of leather gloves or socks can be removed so that the dumb-bells can be used on their own. A dumb-bell should be the right size for the dog to put its mouth around. They should not be too heavy or too light. Some dogs tend to mouth light weight articles, but will grip harder if they are made a little heavier.

A piece of broomstick, about ten inches long, covered in leather to prevent the wood splintering, is also a suitable article with which to start. Later, two small blocks can be attached to the ends to form a dumb-bell. So you see there are various ways of going about it.

When a dog has been taught how to retrieve, it opens the way for many more exercises to be taught, for example: scent discrimination, seek forward and seek back plus tricks in demonstration work. It is all good fun for both dogs and handlers.

For those who are interested, the obedience tests in the UK are the same as in New Zealand and South Africa. In the top class – Test C the retrieve article is provided by the judge. This is the real test. So from one obedience show to the next, handlers have no idea what their dogs will be required to retrieve until they arrive at the ringside. To become an obedience champion, a dog must win Test C three times, under three different judges and be awarded at least 290 points out of 300 each time. That is asking a lot, isn't it? Sadly, as competition has grown to such a high degree in the UK nearly everyone realises, and they have now for some time, that to stand any chance at all of winning handlers must have Border Collies. When one views that situation, I guess we have a fairer way of gaining obedience titles. Next month, I shall be happy to talk about scent work. Cheers!

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