

The Hows and Whys of the Forced Retrieve

You just finished the VJP with your pup - congratulations! Time for a break, right? So why not go fishing instead of bugging poor junior with more training - after all, the HZP (Fall Intermediate Test) is so far away!

NOT! Now is the time to think seriously about training for the next test, especially those subjects that are new for the HZP. Junior is used to working with you now, he's tuned into learning. You have a better understanding of his personality due to your serious efforts to prepare him well for the VJP. And, most of all, your dog has reached the age where he's old enough to go to school and work! If you waste this opportunity, you'll pay for it on your HZP score sheet.

What's new in the HZP?

So, how do you go about setting up a plan that optimally prepares you and junior for the HZP? First we have to think about what the "new" subjects are we'll face in the HZP. Of course there is the duck work, which entails a search in dense vegetation for the swimming duck. Hey, Junior finds rabbits, so he won't have any problem finding the duck - right? Then there are two drag tracks - again no problem for Mr. Superdog: he did that rabbit track just fine, thank you!

But, all these phases end with one minor little problem: there is a dead thing to be picked up and carried back to the boss. "No big deal", you may think, "junior carries his rawhide toys just fine, and he just loves to chase bumpers, even in the water". The problem here is not that your pup won't retrieve at all, but rather that he will **only** retrieve when he feels like retrieving. What if the water is cold at the HZP, or the dragged rabbit is already a bit smelly? What if the pooch has a bad day?

The question is: Can you make him retrieve - no matter how he feels? Unless you have a much better way of convincing teenage canines than I have, it looks like you need some way of making sure junior remembers the line of duty when he finds that dead duck, rabbit or pheasant. But how?

Force Fetch

First, think about how you've been "training" so far: you used lots of praise and diplomacy and gracefully overlooked the times the pooch wanted to pursue his own agenda. We strictly adhered to the principle of never punishing the untrained dog, and that's exactly what we have now: an untrained dog with no experience in disciplinary matters. But can you honestly say junior reliably obeys every command, whistle blow or hand signal? Of course not!

Part of junior's growing pains is to learn about dominance (obedience) and general laws of the human/canine pack. And precisely for this purpose we use the retrieving training! Because we use some level of discomfort (force), we establish juniors respect for our dominance. Because we use discomfort, we teach junior to deal with emotional stress!

And, of course, we'll mold that raw, unruly pup into a polished retriever, that will reliably bring back what we shot or crippled - earning us the title "ethical sportsman" and some admiring looks from our hunting buddies! What else is the "hunter" without an efficient, reliable retriever than a slob of the worst kind?

Having established that we're going to need some level of force to teach junior all of the above lessons, we jump right into the first session. Of course we have made sure that we have all the necessary requisites at hand, which are:

- 1 leash
- 1 choke collar
- 1 prong (spike) collar
- 1 training buck
- 2-3 knobby dummies (bumpers)

(See mail order catalogs such as Foster & Smith, Dunn's, R.C Steele etc. for these items).

Open wide...

Next (assuming junior heels nicely by now and knows how to sit - an absolute necessary prerequisite for any further training!) we take junior on the leash and choke collar (which he should wear now during all training sessions!). If we have a training table available (which is nice but not necessary!) we'll put junior on the table, if not we'll just have him sit in front of us.

Now we open his mouth by pressing his lips against his teeth (near the corners of his mouth) with our left hand and gently place our right hand with palm up into his mouth. We command "hold" and keep a tight grip on juniors collar or neck, should he fight the whole exercise. The point of this step is to get the dog used to tolerate something in his mouth and to "learn" that it hurts if he refuses to open his mouth. In the beginning, we'll keep the hand in his mouth only as long as he struggles, to reward him with some "breathing room" for good behavior. Junior learns: the quickest way to get away is to do as told!

After several repetitions, often already after 3-5 min Junior has given up to struggle and tolerates the hand. From now on, we remove anything from his mouth only with the command "Giiive!" - a sound that is not used anywhere in the command language and can be spoken very calmly. It is important that the dog learns that releasing any item without the "Giiive"-command is followed by unpleasant experiences and has to be avoided! (You have made good progress if junior only reluctantly releases the item after repeated "Giiive" commands!).

Next, we extend the time we keep our hand in juniors mouth to 1-several minutes, and we move our left hand in the cleft between his lower jaws to support the jaw. Junior must learn that he actually has to **hold** the hand, not just tolerated it. Once he has ceased to resist the hand in his mouth (after 2-3 days), we can replace the hand with a wooden dowel of about 1 inch thickness (also called a training buck).

It shouldn't take more than a few days of consistent repetition until junior holds the dowel (buck) firmly without chewing or dropping it. These two, however are the most common and gravest mistakes, which will lead to sloppy work or even hard mouth later on. So make sure he holds the buck firmly for ca 30-60 sec without further jaw movements (and of course no help by the handler!) until commanded to release. Now you can move on to the next step:

Fetch!

The novelty of this step lies in the fact that we now convince junior that he has to actively look for the buck, not just passively endure its presence between his jaws. In order to teach this, we must apply some force to teach junior that he has to grab the buck when we command "fetch". We can use several methods of inflicting discomfort, ranging from the toe hitch to the ear twist to application of the spike collar. I prefer the latter two, mostly because it's too difficult to put a toe hitch quickly on a dog in the hunting field, should he refuse a retrieve later on (which -you can bet your money - will happen!).

It is important that junior is leashed with a choke chain, and that we have the buck in our left hand. Hold the buck in front of junior's mouth and apply "force" with your right hand by either twisting his left ear (don't worry, you can't rip it off!) or by grabbing the spike collar and twisting it so that it tightens and the spikes "speak". However you do it, it is important to inflict just enough pain for the dog to start squealing, for which he will open his mouth. At this moment, you gently insert the buck and immediately release all pressure on the dog's collar or ear. Praise calmly while commanding the already known "hold".

It is very important to **be nice** with junior at this point, because we want to teach him that the pain quickly goes away if he has the buck in his mouth! Repeat ca 20-30 times per day for several days, and sooner or later you will notice that junior starts looking for that blasted buck, just to feel better! Handler 1, junior 0...

Now that we have junior interested in a speedy attachment to the buck, we reinforce his desire by holding the buck ca 10 inches in front of him and jerking his head (via ear or spike collar) towards the buck. Most dogs learn very quickly to actually grab the buck to avoid being tweaked at all! Now you're rolling. Keep the lessons short and sweet, but make it clear that only a quick and snappy "fetch" will keep the pain center in his brain quiet! All through this, we enforce calm holding of the buck and a proper release after the "Giiiiive" command.

Low and (be-)hold!

Next, we increasingly hold the buck lower to the ground, to get junior accustomed to its "normal" gravitational position. Within a few days, junior should have no problems snatching the buck from the ground - as long as we hold it there. And now comes the point at which most people get desperate: junior will not fetch once the hand is not holding the buck any more! Instead he will look for your hand, may even try to snap at it. What have you done wrong? Nothing. Junior simply took the hand as the "guiding light" towards the buck, and that was ok as long as we held the buck. In order to teach him to actually look for the object, not the hand of the handler, we place the buck on top of two bricks, and initially just touch the buck with one finger.

We increasingly move the finger away from the buck with each repetition and it shouldn't take more than 3 or 4 days to have erased his memories of the "guiding hand". Of course we keep the pressure (ear tweak, spike collar) good and strong with the other hand all through this, as it speeds up his learning! Also, we often change sides, so junior learns that dummies are to be found on either side: left or right!

Field exercises

Once junior picks up the buck (or dummies) from the ground without the handler's hand as a visual cue and without harsh force we move to exercises in the field. So far all we needed was a comfortable chair (for the handler) and a dry, level ground for the dog (before I built a training table, I force-broke my dogs in my kitchen). Now we take junior out into the back yard or any quiet place. Of course, he's leashed with spike collar, sitting nicely at our left, eager to learn something new.

We toss the buck now ca 1 foot in front of him on the ground, and command "fetch!". If you've done all the work correctly so far, he'll probably just jump forward and pick it up. Now we take a quick step back, gently pull him around with the "here" command and make him sit in front of us. Pause a second, pet him on the head and take hold of the buck. Don't let him spit it out before you command "Giiive"! Praise!

Next, we throw the buck just a bit further, ca 1 yard. Should junior be hesitant, we again apply spike collar or ear tweak until he's convinced that nothing is more important (and painless!) than a quick retrieve. Over the next 2 weeks, we gradually increase the distance between dog and buck. But keep him on a long leash at all times! It must never cross his mind that he can "get away from it all" by any other way but retrieving! Praise lavishly for things done right, but don't spare "stimuli" if he could be just a bit snappier! However, make sure junior never attempts a retrieve without being commanded "fetch".

As with all commands we speak softly, never yelling or repeating the command a dog has heard and understood. With multiple, loud commands you don't impress junior, quite the contrary - you show him your weaknesses. Instead of the repeated command, use the next higher level of "force", and you'll make progress much faster! The last step of the training program of the "forced retrieve" is to have junior sit, while you walk away from him, drop a bumper in his view, walk back to him and send him to retrieve. Congratulations, you now have a basic retriever and you're ready to start tackling such complicated tasks as drags, steadiness to fall, and of course retrieving of game in all circumstances of the hunting field.

Lastly, let me point out some philosophical aspects. During training we use force, which means pain. Part of our persistent training program is designed to reduce the level of pain necessary to convince junior of our intent. After some rough experiences, many dogs (especially soft natured ones) will react to a slight jerk on the leash in just the same way as if I had just tried to rip their head off. Same with the ear tweak - often just touching or reaching for the ear is enough to make junior comply with our wishes. In some cases, he may even squeak although we haven't touched him at all! This is a sign of a training induced sensitivity that is very helpful later on as it allows us to just "threaten" with punishment, without actually having to do it!

Of course, where there are tears, there has to be laughter. Force training must not be a sad and joyless experience for junior, which will greatly diminish his mental ability to learn.

A balanced amount of "happy time" is very important after each lecture (of course without throwing dummies etc!) to make him see the sun again and not think of daddy as a "bad guy" who only tortures puppy dogs. I found that dogs learn quicker if they have something to look forward to after each lecture (food, a romp in the field, playtime etc.) than if they get shoved back into their kennel!

Just think back when you were a kid, sitting in math class and waiting for the bell to ring! Keep junior happy and let him be a dog, after all that's what he does best! As for time expectations - don't have any! I've "force-fetched" pups in a minimum of 11 days, and have needed as much as 42 days to reach the same level with another dog. Some dogs take longer than others, and usually the slower learners are the better retrievers later on. If you think junior will never learn - keep trying. Chances are he'll never forget either!

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