

Training the Perfect Retriever: Drags, Marks and Blinds

Last issue, we discussed how to train your pup in the forced retrieve. By now, the pooch probably has successfully completed this first step in becoming an efficient and reliable retriever of any game you or your hunter friends may shoot or cripple. Now it's time to move afield and get your dog into more realistic retrieving situations - after all, what's got a dummy to do with hunting?

DRAGS

Since you're most likely to be asked to perform a drag at the next test you and junior attend (HZP or VGP), drags are important part of your training program. When we talk about drags, we envision the scent track made by a person dragging a bird or mammal (rabbit, fox or any other predator) on the ground for a few hundred yards.

Once set on this scent trail, the dog is supposed to follow the track, find the dragged animal and retrieve it promptly and properly to hand.

Of course, before we let junior tackle a 300 yard drag, we must gradually introduce him to this new subject. As in blood tracking, we use the long leash for this purpose to keep junior moving slowly and purposefully on the drag. By having control over the dog, we avoid any wild scent chase or free search, which is the ruin of all retriever-dom.

Probably the majority of unsatisfactory scores given in this subject at the HZP or VGP goes to dogs that run wild and free and only by luck or happenstance stumble upon the bird. They have never learned to calmly track in a concentrated manner, and in all likelihood they will fail tracking that winged quail or "nicked" rabbit - which still has plenty of speed and a bag full of tricks to elude the following dog.

My favorite method to introduce a dog to tracking work is to walk with junior at heel (of course with a 100 ft check chord dragging behind), dropping a dead bird and after another 5-10 yards of walking, turning around and sending him for the bird. Make sure you keep the rope short and follow him to the bird, praising lavishly when he finds and retrieves.

Gradually increase the distance up to 30 yards, then move into deep grass where the bird can't be spotted easily. Junior will already have learned to backtrack your trail, so he shouldn't have any problems finding the bird, of course always with you in tow. Make sure, that he follows the exact route you walked, without any undue excursions into the wild. Should he get off track, immediately stop and make him sit or lie down wherever he is. Let him cool off for a minute, then heel him up and start him again on the track. The basic message to your dog is: "you ain't going nowhere but on the track".

Next we move on to second grade, where he no longer just has to remember where he walked, but actually has to follow a scent trail. So here we are afield with a dead pigeon or quail, a string for dragging and junior and his long leash. First, let's put the dog out of sight of

the following preparation: take the bird into an open meadow and place a hat or any other marker (twig, flagging tape, etc) at the beginning of our first drag. We then scrape the soil a bit with our foot and pull some feathers from the bird. Both the wound in the topsoil and the feathers mark the beginning of the track for the dog. Now we walk with the wind in our back ca 30 yards in a straight line, dragging the bird on the ground behind us. Place the bird (without the string attached) on the ground, and return in a wide circle on the downwind side of the drag.

Now get junior out, put a spike collar on him, snap the 30 foot rope on, and take him at heel over to the start of the track. Make sure you approach the track exactly in the direction the drag is laid, so there will be no turn to make once you get started.

At the marked spot, you best make junior lie down with his nose right on top of the feathers. Let him absorb the smell, but make sure he stays put for about a minute or so. Now you tell him "dead bird" and point forward along the drag, keeping the rope good and tight to prevent him storming forward. As long as he moves with his nose on the ground and on the drag, we let him move forward. At this point, we don't give him more than about a yard of rope, to prevent him from getting too far off the track. Of course, junior really doesn't know what to do yet, so he will probably pick up his head trying to sniff some airborne scent. At this point it is useful if you can make him lie down again on top of the scent track, but maybe pointing with your hand to the ground will do the trick too.

At any rate, you must make it clear that you are interested in that scent trail, and that you want him to follow it. If you're lucky, he won't need much convincing and gets to the bird quickly, but chances are that he will start getting excited, or strays off the drag. With the rope attached to the spike collar you can and should stop him from moving off the drag. He's only permitted to go on directly on the drag, all sideways movements are to be avoided.

After several drags, junior will have learned that the quickest way to find the bird is by following the drag directly with his nose low and in a controlled speed (maximally a trot!). Do not allow him to sniff the air, to jump or run on the drag or to veer sideways. Naturally, you must make sure he always stays in front of you, never circling back. If junior needs more encouragement, just command "dead bird, fetch!", which will bring back memories of duty and drill from our back yard training.

With some luck and lots of help from you, junior finally finds the bird. Make sure he quickly picks it up without undue excitement, chewing or delay, and then take him back to the start of the drag at a brisk pace. There you make him sit, hold the bird while you pet his head and talk to him softly. After the proper command to release the bird ("Giiiiive"), you praise junior and let him play. I always make sure that after releasing the bird, junior gets a chance to release some of the tension too, by throwing a bumper or otherwise putting up a bit of horseplay.

Of course, we don't do another drag that day, but from now on we do at least one per day. Most importantly, we make sure that junior always is on the long leash, always gets reprimanded for sloppy, inconcentrated work, and always finds a bird. We gradually increase the length of the drag to 100 yards, and then start putting some bends (never sharper than 90

degrees) into the track. After some 50 drags (which will take about a month) you should have junior trained enough that he will calmly follow a 300 yard track with 2 kinks in it, pick up a bird and carry it back to the starting point.

We also make sure that the drag is laid by different people, so the dog will not always have the handler scent to follow.

Now is the time to reduce some of the handler influences, by letting the leash drag while following the dog closely. Increasingly we let him get further ahead, but ready to reprimand/punish him should he break into a canter or - the sin of all sins - even picks up his head to catch some airborne whiffs. There is always a brisk breeze of dominance and control blowing while we work drags, so junior is kept in the line of duty.

In contrast to blood tracking, we "make" junior do drags, and he should have no uncertain feelings about our readiness to force him all the way, should he decide in favor of more pleasurable activities. Keep cool, calm and control!

Only after junior reliably follows the track without corrections we let him go without our company. In the beginning we stop about 50 yards before the end of the drag, then 75 yards and so forth until we only walk him ca 30 yards from the start. Every time we increase the length of the drag junior has to work without our direct influence we also shorten the rope dragging behind him. At the end (which can be only a couple of days before the test if necessary!) we no longer let him drag a rope at all, but loop it through the collar, holding both ends at the beginning of the drag and then stopping at about 30 yards and letting one end go. The loose end will slip through the collar.

The last step is to "test" junior if he really understood the message. We let a friend lay a 300 yard drag, ending directly under a tree, which the friend climbs, taking the bird with him. Send junior to retrieve, and - not able to find the bird at the end of the drag - he'll come back empty. Now is your time to leash him (remember: never punish an unleashed dog!) and to lay it on him, reprimanding him sharply for coming back without a bird. This must be a "memorable" experience for junior, one he's always thinking of should the tracking get difficult. Send him back out with as much authority you can muster, and signal your buddy in the tree to drop the bird. Bingo, junior finds and retrieves properly, and both of you engage in some happy time. This last step is very important, and it will make your dog search until "hell freezes over" before he comes back empty. Reliable? You betcha!

At the HZP, your drag will be laid by a judge. He will place a fresh animal at the end of both drags (you'll have to do a rabbit drag and a bird drag), and then hide with the dragged animal placed in front of him. If junior overshoots the animal at the end of the drag, no big deal, since he's allowed to pick up the animal at the judges feet. It pays to expose junior to the fact that there is always a bird or rabbit at the feet of the guy hiding in the bushes - it may save your tail at the test. At least, the pooch isn't gonna get scared by the judge (some of which may look quite strange indeed!) and he won't come flying home to Daddy without a bird.

MARKS

Marks are probably the easiest thing to teach your dog once he's force broke. In all likelihood your dogs does them already, at least if you ever have thrown him a bird or bumper at all. The idea of a proper mark is that the dog watches the fall of the bird or bumper and runs straight at it when commanded - not earlier! You can train the marking skills of your dog by first heeling him up and then tossing a bumper out in front of you. If junior lunges ahead without waiting for your command make sure you have the long rope attached to his spike collar and have an assistant holding onto the end a few yards behind you. Junior will punish himself for "breaking"!

Next you put him on a sit-stay, walk ca 20 yards in front of the dog, face him and then toss a bumper at a 45 degree angle towards the dog. You, junior and the bumper should all be about equally far from each other, forming a triangle. With a hand signal and the fetch command you send the dog towards the bumper. This theme can be varied by tossing 2 bumpers (one to each side of the dog), hereby forming a diamond. Randomly pick one to send the dog to, then have the other one picked up from a heeling position. This will sharpen the dogs sense of "space" as he will learn to remember the position of a bumper, even if his own location changes.

BLINDS

Working junior to find blinds is relatively easy because you can build on his expertise in marking. Just put him on a sit-stay, walk some 30-50 yards, drop a bird with junior watching you and return. With junior at heel, hold your left hand in a vertical position over his head, indicating the exact direction of the bird. Only when junior looks exactly in the direction of the bird release him with the "fetch" command.

Gradually increase the distance and cover in the area. Next, have an assistant throw a bird without the dog seeing it or throw it out of the window of your vehicle while driving across your training field (so there is no scent track leading to it). Under all circumstances junior must retrieve the bird (dummy), and he never should be allowed to break before he's properly "lined up". Try to help him as much as you can with hand signals.

The goal of the whole exercise is to make your dog "handleable" in the field, that you can direct him to a bird he didn't see fall. Once you have junior sufficiently conditioned that he will "take a line", i.e. run straight out in the direction your left hand is pointing, we move to tackle the water blind, which is part of the HZP. Of course, your dog knows how to swim by now (if not, you're in trouble!) and has retrieved many bumpers from deep water.

In order to introduce him to the blind retrieve, we start out by giving junior an easy "mark". Have an assistant throw a bird or dummy from the opposite bank of a small but sufficiently deep pond, and let the dog watch. Of course, he wears his old battle gear, the spike collar with the long leash attached. Send him out to make this relatively easy retrieve, but be alert to reel him in should he take just a split second longer than necessary to pick up the bird and come cruising back to you. Some dogs like to mouth a large bird (especially ducks) when

they first grab them. Do not allow any corrections of the grip by speaking "spike collar". Junior must get into the habit of quickly and firmly grabbing the bird in its middle and not change his hold until you command the release. Once your pooch does this exercise well (after 3 successive repeats) you can move to the next step.

For this, you have junior on two ropes, one dragging behind him from his normal collar or choker, and the other (attached to the spike collar) leading across the water to your assistant. From a heeling position give the dog a proper "line" pointing directly to your assistant, and command "fetch". Of course, there is nothing in the water to fetch - yet. Once you spoke the word, junior should enter the water and start swimming out towards the helper. If not, have the assistant jerk him a couple of times or even drag him if necessary. All the time, you command him to fetch with utmost authority. Once junior is paddling away, you throw a dummy or bird over and in front of him, ca 15 yards out in the water. After a proper delivery, repeat this exercise a few times, each time making sure that your helper enforces a speedy entry into the water. The whole message of this exercise is that the dog learns to enter the water first and later the bird will appear "magically".

If you have no helper you can place a spiral ground stake at the opposite bank of the pond and run an "endless" rope from your dog's collar through the ring at the stake into your hand and back to the collar. This can get pretty messy if the dog puts up a fight, but it works well on small streams or gullies, where you have less than 10 yards of water to cover. At any rate, junior must be convinced that he has to enter the water pronto when you tell him to fetch, whether he's seen a bird fall or not.

Next, you toss a bumper or dead bird in some vegetation without junior watching these preparations. Send him out again on the double rope, directing him straight to the bird. After a few repeats, he will understand that there is always a bird or bumper in the water, and that under no circumstances he wants to return without one. With the double rope, you have the means to keep him out there until he has picked up the bird - of course any time you use the rope to direct or restrict his movement, you give the proper hand signal for the direction he is supposed to take.

The last step of the trained blind retrieve from water is to gradually increase the amount of vegetation between you and the fallen bird. Start out at a pond with some low growing weeds and move into denser cattails when junior does not seem to be bothered by the stuff. Under no circumstances should you get into the habit of throwing stones at the swimming bumper, unless junior really has a hard time finding it and won't take your hand signals (which indicates some sloppy work earlier on in the program). Stones are the last resort, and should be used in extremely rare cases. You want to get your dog to actively search for the bird, not just passively being guided to it.

At the HZP, the judges will throw a bird into a some cattails, without the dog being able to see the throw. Here it pays to have a dog that already knows where to "expect" a bird (in or near vegetation) and that can take and hold a "line". It is not important that junior does the perfect "Labrador" retrieve, but he should convey the image of a dog that knows what he's supposed to do and that wants to find a bird. Of course you can give hand and whistle

signals, but constant influencing of the dog's work will lessen his score. If you throw a stone or shoot into the water, your dog cannot get a better score than good (6-8 points).

Lastly, here are a few tricks that will make it easier for you get a very good score at the test. First, after the judges have thrown the bird and call you, you want to take it slow. Tie a shoelace or do some other lengthy preparation with your dog, of course without making the judges mad! In contrast to the scent of a live duck which dissipates quickly across open water the duck at the blind retrieve is dead and stays put. It will give off more scent the longer it is in the water. Taking your time helps to develop a scent cone around the bird.

Secondly, always send your dog a fair bit on the downwind side of the fallen bird. Most dogs have a tendency to veer into the wind anyway, so you have to adjust for that. Also, the scent of the bird is scattered over a larger area on the downwind side, and your dog will have a much easier time to pick it up.

And finally you want to get him a bit excited (as if there was another live duck out there) to make sure he's all fired up for a bold and speedy entry into the water. All this adds up to a solid performance and eventually will get you that very good score you have deserved for your hard work.

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