Reliable Retrieve

By Lonnie Olson

This is an excellent method for teaching a reliable retrieve in with a minimum investment of time and effort!

At Dog Scout Camp there are many reasons for having a good retrieve on your dog.  For Water Rescue, IMPROV Obedience, Flyball, Scent Hurdle Racing, Retriever Training, and other activities, the dog needs to retrieve.  This manuscript is an effort to provide people with more preparatory materials, so that they can get a jump on the training they will receive.

For a demo at camp, we choose a dog whose owner says he "won't retrieve."  By the end of the first one-hour session, we often have a retrieving maniac.  When people see it happen right before their eyes, like that, they realize that there's nothing magical or difficult about teaching a dog to retrieve, you just have to show him that it pays off to do so.

You will need a clicker and a large pile of small treats (break them up to the size of small peas).  These need to be yummy, too.  Don't get cheap and try to pass off some jive dry dog biscuit to teach your dog to fetch.  You will also need an object to get your dog to learn on.  Depending on the dog, this might work best with a slender wooden dowel (or even a plastic soda straw), or a small rubber ball.

We teach the retrieve by using backward behavior chaining, because the retrieve is not ONE behavior, but a SERIES of behaviors put together to get the finished product.  The exercise involves having the dog GET something and place it into the palm of your hand.  The principal part of this exercise is the "palm of your hand" part, not the "getting" part, and that's where everyone goes wrong.  They are trying too hard to get the dog to "TAKE" something (which he doesn't want to do at the moment), instead of trying to get the dog to give something.

Because backward chaining starts with the last link in the chain, we begin by teaching the dog to SPIT OUT the dowel into the hand.  This is ever so easy to do, since the first thing the dog wants to do with this object is to spit it out!  Eureka!  He's got that part right already!  We're off to a good start!

**The GIVE**

Begin by ever so calmly and quietly and with as little ado as possible, slipping the dowel into the dog's mouth.  This is NOT the important part, so don't make a big production out of it!  DO NOT say "take it" or anything.  Just slide it in there and I can almost guarantee you that he will instantly spew it back out at you.  When he does this, click it, and give him a treat (if you don't understand clicker training yet, you better go visit that web page first--right NOW!).  Repeat this several times... dozens of times.  The dog is going to start wondering what it is that he's doing that is earning him a treat.  "Could it be so simple as spitting this wretched dowel into my owner's hand?"  You want him to say to himself, "Cool!  I'll spit that sucker all day long!--Let's do it again!"

As this starts to become predictable, add the new cue, "THANK YOU," before you let him spit it out.  I say "new" cue... what was the old cue?  Putting it in his mouth was the old cue to spit it out.  Now, the new cue has to come BEFORE the old cue, for the dog to learn it, so practice that for a while.  To get the behavior under stimulus control, show the dog that you will only reward the behavior if you've asked for it with the cue.  In other words, if he spits it out without hearing the cue word, don't reward him.  Just slip it in again and make sure you get out the cue before he can spit it.

**The HOLD**

According to "Don't Shoot The Dog," by Karen Pryor, if you want to eliminate a behavior you don't want, you can put it on cue, and then just never give the cue, right?  So, theoretically, you can, once you have the behavior under stimulus control, not give the cue, and you will not get the spitting out behavior.  What is left for the dog to do then, but to hold the dowel?

Now, sometimes it's not all that easy for a novice trainer to quickly get a behavior under stimulus control like this, so I will go on to the next step back in the behavior chain: the HOLD.  If your dog is waiting for the cue to spit the dowel into your hand, as he has been taught, you will have an automatic "hold."  If there is still some reluctance to hold the dowel, despite not giving the cue to release it to your hand, you may encourage the dog to hold it, by gently holding his mouth closed on the dowel for a fraction of a second, then asking him to release it ("THANK YOU"), and clicking and treating.  Your fractions of a second will get longer and longer, as you require the dog to hold the dowel a little bit more each time before he gives it up.  The click and food always come at the end of the chain, but it's ok to give what I call a "KEEP GOING" cue, to tell the dog he's on the right track and should continue.  I say, "Good Hold", in a praiseful tone of voice.  As the dog gets better and better at holding for longer and longer periods before dropping the dowel into your hand on cue, you are getting closer to adding the first part of the chain:  the TAKE.

**The TAKE**

If, while you're working on the hold, YOU SCREW UP, and the dog somehow was allowed to drop the dumbbell without a cue, do not scold the dog.  Do better the next time, so that you can make the dog successful, ending up in a click and food.  If he drops it, you just have to do it over.  There is no penalty, except that the dog does not earn a treat for that.

To teach the dog to take it would be more difficult if we started on "that" end to begin with, but now that he already knows how to hold it and give it up, the "take it" is a "piece of cake."  Hold the dowel out in front of your dog's nose (about 2 inches away).  If he even so much as flexes a neck muscle to lean toward it, click and feed.  Forget the hold and give for right now, we're only working on the take.  Shape the dog to make more and more contact with the dowel.  First a bob, then a poke, then a nudge, then an open-mouthed reach, then a tooth touch, then an open mouthed, double teeth touch, then a bite, then a grab, then a reach and grab.  Pretty soon, you won't be rewarding anything but a nice reach and grab.  Have him reach to the left and right for it, and up and down for it.  Have him get up and walk one step to it.  This is like the "touch stick" all over again, but this time, he must close his mouth on the target to get a click (read about teaching the touch stick on another web page).  When he will take several steps to the dowel to take it into his mouth, each time you present it to him, replace the old cue with the new cue.  The new cue is the word, "Get it".  The old cue was what?  Placing the dowel in front of him was the old cue.  Remember, new cue first, then old cue, then behavior and reinforcement.

**The WHOLE CHAIN**

Ok, the next step is to put the "take" together with the "hold" and "give" which were previously taught.  This means, that you must immediately STOP rewarding just the "take."  You are going to go back to rewarding just the last part of the chain, the "give."  So, you hold out the dowel, you say "Get it!"  The dog walks out and takes it.  You DON'T click (however, you can say, "Good Boy!" or whatever.  You let the dog bring it to you.  You hold out your hand and place it on the dowel, you say "Thank you!" and you click and feed (big time!).  This all happens very quickly.  You don't want him to have to perform a long "hold" the first time he puts it all together.  Don't worry.  You can build extended holds by placing or throwing the dowel further from you, or by backing up once you hand it off to him.

Are you a doubting Thomas?  Let's examine this.  Your dog is not stupid.  You have systematically taught him what will work.
He has to hand it to you to get the pay-off right?  He has to be within touching distance to hand it to you, yes?  If he's not, then he has to come to you (with the dowel) to get the pay-off, right?  Placing yourself further and further away will require him to have to hold it for longer and longer periods without dropping it, correct?  Your dog now sees this as a trade-off.  He delivers this object to you, which has a cash value of one yummy snack, and you exchange it for him.  Earning treats has never been so easy!

Now, what about actually throwing or dropping the article on the floor?  For many dogs, it is a quantum leap to go from taking the dowel which the trainer is holding in his hand ON THE FLOOR, to actually picking up a dowel which is lying there on the floor all by itself.  SO, we have to wean these dogs off the "hand on the dowel" stage.  We will set the dowel on the floor, but continue to hold on to it with the thumb and index finger of one hand (cue, "take it," back up, let him present it to you, cue, "thank you," click and feed).  Then just touch the dowel with one index finger as it sits on the floor, and do the same.  Then set the dowel on the floor and take your finger 1/2 inch away.  Then one inch, then two inches, then three, until you can stand up straight and cue the dog to "Get it" up off the floor with none of your body parts anywhere near it.  Where many trainers go wrong is that they continue to click the pick-up. When the dog hears the click, the exercise is over, and he's ready to get his treat, so the dog will often just spit out the dowel at the point where you clicked him, and you are unable to get any further along with your training.  What you've done is to train the dog to spit out the dowel, rather than bring it to you.  It is important that when you combine the parts of the chain, that you only reward the last link in the series.

For other dogs, the no-handed floor pick up is not that much of a quantum leap, and when they see that dowel on the floor, it's like they've found a five dollar bill!  They leap on it, because they know if they hand it to you it has the cash value of one treat.  To trade it in, they first must pick it up, and now you have a complete retrieve.  When you give the cue, "Get it!" your dog should be thinking in his mind about delivering something to the palm of your hand.  When we think of "Get it," our focus is to go pick up something.  A dog doesn't think like we do.  If we want to be better dog trainers, we have to think like dogs do.  We can't expect them to think like we do.

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