

The Force Fetch

Part 1

Shouldn't retrieving come naturally to a well-bred retriever? Is it necessary to teach even if your dog loves to retrieve? Will it spoil his desire and enthusiasm to retrieve? These are questions that I have come across often, so I would like to discuss the purpose and benefits of the forced retrieve, also known as the forced fetch or conditioned retrieve. The forced retrieve involves applying pressure to a dog when an object (bumper) is not in their mouth and the subsequent immediate release of pressure when the dog accepts the bumper in his mouth. Pressure is usually applied by an ear pinch, a toe hitch (a line around the leg and hitched down around a toe to apply nerve pressure), or by using an electric collar. This pressure must be applied with precise timing to convince the dog that it is more desirable to comply with the fetch command and hold the bumper until a release command is given. Through patience, persistence, and repetition, dogs will soon gladly lunge for any object you command them to fetch, and firmly but gently hold that object until you take it from them.

In my training program, I put all my flushers and retrievers through the force training process. No matter how wild they are to carry things around in their mouths, sooner or later they decide to refuse a retrieve, drop a crippled bird to pursue another one, or refuse a memory (a second or blind) bird. The forced retrieve allows you to go beyond simple one bird retrieves; enabling further training exercises and advances including diversion or distraction birds, multiple marks, and blind or unmarked retrieves. Most importantly, it ensures a completed delivery to hand. Now just because you may have read about this training procedure or maybe watched videos to learn the step-by-step methods, I strongly suggest that you seek the help of a professional dog trainer if you are not committed to patiently follow all of the tedious steps it requires to properly teach your dog this skill. By applying too much pressure to your dog, incorrect timing, or not enough repetition, you certainly can cause your dog to refuse retrieves all together. Anybody who has learned the forced fetch from me is happily surprised to see their dogs have such a positive and motivated attitude. In fact, the dogs eagerly launch up onto my force training bench with a wagging tail and a 'ready for work' demeanor. But how do you know when it's the right time to begin force training? First, the dog should be at least 6 months old so all of his adult teeth have come in. Second, I like the pup to boldly and enthusiastically chase bumpers and birds on its own. As long as he enjoys

retrieving and brings the bumpers back to you, I would let him be a puppy and have fun. However, I usually begin force training when pup starts dropping the bumper consistently, baulks or refuses retrieves, or when I am ready to advance his training to multiple birds.

The proper tools used for the forced fetch make it both easier for the handler as well as the dog. This includes an elevated training bench with an overhead cable pulley system, a hitching/hobbling post, a bumper, and a wooden dowel (1 inch diameter). The training bench is elevated to not only bring the dogs up off the ground and out of their comfort zone; it allows the trainer to work with the dog at a convenient outstretched arms height. My training bench is two foot high, two foot wide, and eighteen feet long. It has an overhead cable with a connected pulley and an adjustable chain hanging down to attach to the dog's collar. At one end is a post with a vertically adjustable eyehook that can be set to the dog's height when sitting, as well as an eyehook set down by the front paws in the event I may need to hobble the occasional belligerent dog who tries to use his paws to fight my efforts.

I begin this training process by first teaching the dogs to "hop up" onto the bench themselves and only jump down when I command them "ok" as I point to the ground. Next, I clip them onto the pulley system and allow the dog to run freely up and down the bench. As long as they are clipped to the pulley, they cannot jump off the bench. Then I can clip them onto the post so that they are restrained from moving or lying down and I can now begin the "fetch", "hold", "leave" commands. Before I even begin to apply any pressure, I want the dogs to understand these three commands. I like to spend about two days doing this. I prefer to keep the sessions on the bench to 15 or 20 minutes at a time, and I will do several of these short sessions throughout the day. When it comes time to apply pressure (discomfort) to enforce the fetch, hold, leave commands I prefer using the ear pinch method for a number of reason. First, the ear is conveniently already attached to the dog and therefore always there for me to instantly apply pressure. The electric collar (although applied later to enforce fetch at a distance) and the toe hitch string are accessories that must be put on before you can enforce pressure, and by then you could have lost that instant correction. By using my thumb nail and index finger, I know exactly how much pressure I am applying and I can increase or decrease as needed. I slide my left hand under the dog's flat buckle collar into my palm and hold the ear between my two fingers. Starting ear pressure, I simultaneously command the dogs to fetch as I offer the dowel to the dog with my right hand. As I push the dowel into the dog's jaws, I instantly release pressure. Dogs are usually quick to spit out this intrusion and I consistently repeat this drill until the

dog begins to understand that the pressure is relieved when he fetches and holds the dowel, but if he spits it out on his own account ear pressure immediately resumes. Timing is so very important. Ear pressure must be applied and released instantly as the dog complies. Using verbal fetch, hold, and leave commands teaches a verbal cue so that later on no pressure will be required. Immediately after the dog had fetched the dowel, I check to make sure that he is not clamping down on his own lips. I also soothe and praise him while he is nicely holding the object as well as make sure that he is comfortable with my hands petting him for reward instead of viewing my approaching hands as a cue to spit the bumper into them. Upon the "leave" command, I gently roll the bumper back down towards his throat as I withdraw it. Again, through patience, persistence, and repetition I keep the dog tethered to the post until he has completely understood and mastered the fetching to relieve or completely avoid ear pressure. He cooperatively holds the bumper firmly but gently while I can pet him all over, step backwards and away from him, and allows me to tap either end of the bumper to prove he is actually holding it with authority and not simply balancing it on his lower jaw. When I am able to actually hold one end of the bumper and only have him open his jaws to release when I command leave, are we ready to begin using the length of the bench so he can walk and hold at the same time. This task usually takes me about 1 week; however that can vary depending on the dog's attitude and willingness.

In the next articles I will discuss how to use the force fetch to get your dog to reach out for the bumper and then have him actually fetch it up from the bench. Later this forced fetch can be applied on the ground and out in the field where we can go through a variety of drills that will soon enable you to work diversion birds, multiple marks, and even unmarked (blind) birds. Keep in mind that the force fetch does not have to be an agonizing miserable task in your dog's training program. Instead you will clearly see it as an invaluable skill to be accomplished, and it will only serve to improve your dog's performance in the future.