

Following Sassy...week 14

(Sassy is my 14 week old Labrador Retriever puppy. This article covers her early training in preparation to be a gun dog)

The next series of articles that I have planned will focus on the training and development of my new puppy, Breezy's daughter, also known as "Quinebaug's Sweet Scent of Sassafras." Sassy is now 14 weeks old, and I am completely overjoyed with her personality, temperament, drive and boldness. She possesses all the qualities that I strived to breed for, and now I am planning her training program so that she can accompany Breezy and me in the field this fall.

I began her training when she was six weeks old. This included walks through the field, swims in our pond, car rides, and beginning our special bond so that she would rely on me for food, safety, security, and loving attention. At home we began the all-important task of house training. I began by simply allowing Sassy to play in my kitchen (where I could watch her, and she could get into the least amount of trouble). I would take her outside every 20 minutes to begin with and give her the command "Hurry, Hurry!" to go to the bathroom. I gradually extended these times, and she quickly caught on that doing her business outside was the only option. Whenever I could not keep an eye on her, she spent time in her crate. A crate not only becomes a safe haven for pups to keep them out of trouble, it helps tremendously with housebreaking since pups will usually not mess where they sleep. It also enables them to learn more about bladder control. Crate training teaches pups self control in that they have to sit quietly and patiently until let out, and again this only aids for our future training.

From the time that Sassy was born, I have spent a lot of time with her working on gentling exercises. This includes holding her like a baby so she becomes comfortable and trusting being held. I touch her all over, including her paws and toes, and have even started trimming her nails. I also make her hold still while I look into her ears, eyes, and mouth. Later on if I need to medicate Sassy's ears or eyes, or flip her over to pull a tick off her belly, she will already be conditioned to this handling and I will be able to help her more safely and efficiently.

In addition, it is wise to begin working on manners with the pup. This includes correcting playful mouthing/biting and jumping since they will only escalate into problem behaviors down the line. To stop the biting and chewing on my hands, I correct her verbally – "No"- while at the same time I either use my hand to clamp her mouth shut or actually grasp my hand over

the top of her muzzle and wrap my four fingers on one side and my thumb on the other, thus wrapping her upper lips into her own canine teeth. This form of correction is extremely effective, however as with all training methods you must be consistent if you want to win in the end. As for jumping, it may seem cute when little Sassy jumps up on me, but this is a behavior that soon becomes obnoxious as she gets bigger. I simply command “Off” as I stomp my feet and quickly charge her. This intimidates her to quickly stop. As always, patience, persistence and repetition are the keys to raising and training a well-mannered pup.

Sassy is now 14 weeks old. She is through crate-training, house breaking, and biting and she is quite comfortable being held upside down. She is now going through a phase where she will not come to me. Instead she turns and runs, thinking that I will chase her. Wrong! This is the classic game of cat and mouse, and once you try to chase them, they learn that they can soon out-manuever you! Instead I pick up something interesting like one of her toys, drop to the ground, and show excitement- not frustration or anger (even though I may be annoyed). This almost always causes her to change her mind and come over to me to investigate. I praise her and play with her.

She also likes to play keep away with her puppy bumpers, but once again I never chase her or get angry because she is still too young, and I want her to have fun and be bold. I coax her to come by running away and again dropping to the ground. Usually she is so excited to come over to play that she drops the bumper. Not to worry, this is only a phase, and her attention span is so short at this age that she forgets about the bumper. As she progresses and matures each week, she becomes more focused on retrieving. In fact just today I threw six bumpers for her in a row, and she enthusiastically brought them back to me.

Another motivational drill that I work with Sassy is making her sit each time she goes in or out a door. My commands are: “Sit,” then “Okay Sassy,” if I am releasing her to go outside, and “Kennel,” if I want her to come inside. She has already learned the sit command quickly from this drill, and now I have even started asking her to sit before I throw a bumper. I also take advantage of my homing pigeon loft to work Sassy on birds. I show her a pigeon, tease her and flap its wings in her face, let her smell the bird, then release it right in front of her nose. As they fly off, I command her to “Mark,” and she watches them and usually chases them around. Then I will throw her a dead or locked-winged bird and simply allow her to play with it and parade it around. This drill really revs her up, and now she watches all birds, even the robins and sparrows flying around my yard.

Our final drill involves using two people. As I hold Sassy, I have a friend blow a duck call in full view about 20 yards from her. When she looks at my training partner, he tosses out a bumper and shoots a starter pistol. After the bumper hits the ground, I release her as I command her name "Sassy!" After she picks it up, I run the other way and drop to the ground while clapping my hands and calling her. She loves this game, and we repeat this drill about six to eight times, quitting before she gets bored or tired. These games incorporate manners and motivational training (she complies with my commands because something fun will follow) and begin the proper foundation for her future training.

Next month I will discuss Sassy's progress and explain more drills that we can practice. If you are following along with a new puppy of your own, good luck and keep it fun!