



ASK THE PRO

place training for hunting situations

By John and Beth Ann Amico

TRAINING A DOG TO “KENNEL” or get into a box may seem elementary; however, it is the root behavior for many advanced drills including force fetch, pile work, beginning lining drills and handling. As gun dog trainers, we also utilize the kennel drill to facilitate place training for hunting situations.

“Kennel,” a word for forward motion, is first taught through manipulation. Start by tossing tidbits of food into a kennel crate to entice the dog to enter. Help the dog by stepping forward with your heeling foot as you say the word “kennel.” When the dog comes out of the crate, use your tidbit to manipulate it to heel. Send it again when dog is looking at the crate and its backbone

becomes straight to the line. This set of motions establishes the pattern of forward work.

Gradually increase the distance to the crate with each repetition. Once you reach the point that your throwing accuracy has diminished, have a helper place the food in the crate where the dog can see it. Use a little leash restraint to hold the dog and send it on the word without moving. Be sure to have the dog straight and looking at the crate before sending it. If it seems confused, step towards the crate to help it. You are creating the comparison that looking at the crate and going forward has a positive outcome.

Next have your helper place the food in

the crate without the dog seeing him do it. Send the dog, moving if necessary to help it. Add distance from that point only when the dog will look towards the crate and go in it without the assistance of your movement.

As you build this positive comparison, you’ll find places along the line where the dog will and won’t understand to go. When a misunderstanding occurs, move back to the last spot where the dog was successful, then on the next repetition, split the difference between the go and the no-go spot. Keep working your line back and forth as needed. When the dog is going into the crate from a reasonable distance with no motion involved, say 10 yards, you have taught it the word.

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Begin the training phase by using continuous electrical stimulation as an overlay to this now known behavior. Set your remote trainer so that the dog feels just enough pressure to give it a comparison between on and off. Apply continuous pressure first, let the dog perceive it and then say the word “kennel.” Guide the dog with a leash, motion and tidbit to help it go in. The instant that the dog’s last foot enters the crate, terminate the pressure. The goal is for the dog to realize that responding to the word and moving forward into the crate turns off pressure. You might not see this realization occur in the initial training sessions, so don’t get in a hurry. Just be consistent with your repetitions and use proper timing to build the trained behavior.

We now train the dog to stay in the crate and go when released. Tell the dog to “kennel” and once it has entered the crate, step in front of it to block its exit. If the dog tries to step out of the crate, step on its toes and apply collar pressure until the dog moves its feet into the crate. When that’s understood, throw a bumper straight away from the crate, step aside and send the dog on its name. When the dog returns, tell it to “kennel” and allow it to keep the bumper. The dog will readily do this because it believes that the crate is a safe place to take its prey.

Gradually add distractions as the dog’s level of understanding grows. Throw a bumper from the working side of the crate and when the dog breaks, use pressure and the leash to guide it back inside. When you can control the dog with just the remote trainer, try standing a little further away from the crate and repeat. Add more difficulty using guns and birds with the handler at different locations until the dog is proficient.

Adding distance will clarify to the dog that it must go as sent. As you increase the distance, you will see many of the same avoidance responses to the crate that occur while teaching a dog to line. Somewhere along that line, some dogs will avoid looking at the crate; others might back up or bolt. These behaviors are commonly called “bugging.” To overcome a bug, you will need to change your pressure timing tactic. Pressure is applied when the dog starts to bug and released when the dog’s head straightens and it steps forward towards the crate. Correct any deviation from the line to the crate, such as a banana, the moment it occurs and release the pressure the instant the dog comes back on line. Again, if you make a correction at a certain distance, immediately return to the last spot where the dog went successfully so that you can give it a positive comparison – when it looks at the crate and goes, it receives no pressure. The dog continues to perceive that going as sent to the crate is a positive experience, not something to avoid.

It’s time to train to the dog to get on a platform and stay until sent. We make our platforms 2’ x 3’ x 3.” The dimensions of this new prop give the dog a clear comparison of where to go and stay until sent. Remove your crate from the training area and replace it with a platform. Put the dog on a leash and line it up straight a few feet away from the platform. Apply continuous pressure and lead the dog to the platform as you say the word “kennel.” Instantly release the pressure when all four feet are on the platform. If the dog’s feet come off, it causes pressure. You now have a way to steady the dog with this new understanding of place. Repeat the same procedure used in the kennel phase in different places with higher levels of distraction as the dog learns to cope with each one.

You now have two convenient steadying props to use in hunting scenarios. The crate transitions easily to a dog hunting blind. The platform similarly translates in duck hunting to a tree stand in flooded timber, the front end of a duck boat, or a decoy sack thrown on the ground by the bank. Now you can position your dog and have it stay in place regardless of where you are located. You can also use your platform goose hunting in a wheat field – simply set your dog on the platform in the middle of the decoys while you’re hidden in a hunting sack along the edge. The dog will become a live decoy and be able to mark all the birds while remaining steady, retrieve them and return to his place without the hunter having to move.

Faults such as creeping are easily fixed with a platform. The dog has learned where it’s supposed to be and if it comes off that place unless sent, it knows what will happen.

Teaching the dog to swing off the gun can also be achieved with a platform. Just point the gun in the dog’s line of sight to the mark. The dog knows it can’t come off and will readily understand that the swinging gun with a shot means the mark is down the gun barrel. If the dog swings to the mark off the gun barrel, send it. If it doesn’t, don’t send it and repeat the mark.

At field trials and hunting tests, judges will occasionally give you a mat to denote the point of origin. To your dog, that’s a ready-made steadying device. ■

Deep Fork Retrievers John and Beth Ann Amico

John and Beth Ann Amico have run Deep Fork Retrievers in Choctaw, Oklahoma, since 1980, specializing in hunting retrievers. They are both on Cabela’s national gun dog training pro staff and members of the Professional Retriever Trainers Association. John has conducted clinics and training demonstrations across the country and Beth Ann is an award-winning gun dog writer. For more information on their training programs, visit www.deepforkretrievers.com.