



# ASK THE PRO

## puppy to master hunter

By Jack Morris

I'VE BEEN ASKED TO WRITE an article and I chose this topic because I assume everyone wants the best possible marking, retrieving, obedient companion dog can be. Understand that this goal, as well as how to get there, are my opinions. Others may have different opinions and I respect those. How that ends up, strongly depends on how it starts out. The start is very essential.

Choosing, socializing and early training of your puppy are first and foremost the roots to

be planted to achieve your goal of a Master Hunter and exceptional companion. When buying a puppy you need to research the parents (dam and sire.) You want a proven dam and sire who should be AKC titled MH, AFC, FC or higher. Parents should have acquired the Master Hunter title in a reasonable amount of passes, not after 15-20 attempts. Check the clearance on parents for hips and elbows. In addition, eyes, EIC and CNM tests that meet your approval are advised.

The puppy needs to be housebroken because dog training begins with different increments of pressure. When you take a 7-8 week old puppy, scoop it off the floor for peeing and take it outside, this is a form of pressure. The puppy's heart races and its mind turns as it has not felt this before. When you add the word "NO!" to the same sequence, the pressure is increased. As the puppy does things like chewing on furniture, carpet, shoes, etc. you raise your voice and correct

it with a “NO YOU DON’T!” – more pressure. When you do this, you need to give the puppy a toy or something that it is allowed to have. I do believe you should start teaching commands like “sit” in a positive way such as clicker training or treat training, etc. You can start this as young as eight weeks. This helps the puppy use and develops its brain. Things that go along simultaneously with the house-breaking stage are introduction to swimming, decoys, boats, birds, retrieving and bringing back to you.

At four months or so you should be introducing some basic obedience. Walking and sitting your puppy on a leash is a great start. Add remote or front finish sits, as well as sitting parallel to you. Once front finishes are in place, start sit circles where pup remains sitting and you walk around it in circles. After this, teach here, heel and sit. I am an advocate of left and right-sided dogs. Teach both sides. After basic obedience, the pup needs to be collar conditioned. Collar conditioning is where all the commands you have taught on leash by pulling up on the collar (pressure) are now replaced with little jolts of electricity (different pressure.) Now most of the corrections throughout the dog’s life will be collar corrections or vocal corrections.

The next step is to start force fetch. Teach the pup to hold first, then release (give, out, drop or whatever command you choose,) then fetch. Finish with walking electric/collar fetch. Once force fetch is completed the pup should be steady and can go on to marking concepts and learn to honor.

While the dog is doing marking setups it should be taught to sit in a holding blind facing you. I firmly believe having the dog facing you maintains the dog’s focus and under better control. This also gives the handler the opportunity to watch the dog and the test, simultaneously.

While you’re marking, setups are being developed. You should do its yard work such as three hand cast, force to pile, double tee, swim by, handling over obstacles (logs, brush piles, etc.) with introduction to poison birds, five legged drill, land pattern blinds with duck calls, poison and diversion birds. Then add walk-ups to the land pattern blinds. Finish yard work with water pattern blinds.

Hopefully your dog has completed yard work with a good attitude. Next comes transitioning the yard work to the field.

I like to start transitioning water marks after swim by is done. Do some cheating singles to progress the retriever on with its water marks. Once cheating singles are done and your dog can do 100 yard plus marks on dif-

ferent terrain and in various cover, it should be able to do Junior hunting tests.

In Junior, Senior and Master tests, marking and memory of birds are of primary importance. While dogs may be handled in all three levels of testing, this is undesirable in marking tests and should be utilized only as a last recourse to get a bird out of the field. Remember your dog may/will act different at tests because of the excitement from the surroundings. Also remember to use the correct blind sitting technique. This gives you and your dog the opportunity to calm down. DO NOT ALLOW THE DOG TO GET AWAY WITH BAD MANNERS that can turn into BAD HABITS, such as barking, whining, pulling on lead, cheating water, dropping birds, etc. This could carry over to next level.

This is also your opportunity to develop good handler habits. I put my whistle in my mouth when I leave the holding blind and keep it there until the last bird is delivered to hand, at all test levels. Junior Hunter dogs can be walked to the line on lead with a flat buckle collar and held while marks are thrown. Since you can use this to your advantage, use it. If I have a dog that is going to cheat water, I will not allow this – blow the whistle and handle.

As the trainer, you must know when it is going to be the right time to introduce cold blinds with marks. Example being, you may want to run your first blinds outside of your marks or you may come up to the line and run your blinds first before the marks. Both of which may and will be done at the Senior Hunter tests. Senior Hunter retrievers need to be doing cheating water marks as memory birds, therefore your dog needs to be doing cheating doubles in training. When running Senior Hunter, the dogs now must walk from the holding blind to the line off lead in an obedient manner. One of the series will have a walk up where the bird comes out while walking to the line, at which time, when the bird is in the air, you may tell your dog to sit or blow your whistle once, to command the sit. Senior dogs are allowed to have a controlled break in one of the series, so if you need it, use it. For example, if I have a dog that creeps I will say “sit” to stop the creep so the dog does not learn that creeping is acceptable. Do not allow the dog to continue to creep. The marking series are now doubles, land and water. Dogs are allowed to be handled on marks. You as the handler now must mark where the birds fall in case your retriever needs handling to the bird. Each series will include a blind outside of the marks, one will be a water blind and one will be a land blind or they could be done as a double blind in one of the series.

Diversion birds and diversion shots also occur. Remember diversion birds may appear on a blind either after the dog has been sent or when it is returning from the blind retrieve; however, diversion birds shall only appear on marks when the dog is returning from a retrieve. Be prepared to blow your whistle if needed. Diversion birds shall always be initiated in front of the working dog. The diversion bird is not a mark but constitutes a trainability situation. Dogs also need to be able to honor.

Being prepared for Master tests means I’ve continued the dog’s yard work to include a couple different steadying drills.

Master Hunter retrievers must exhibit the qualities of a truly finished and experienced hunting dog. They are required to do a minimum of three series (land, land-water combination and water.) In addition, dogs must be able to do a minimum of three birds for marks, but also be prepared for four marks (quads.) These Master dogs must do all the work that a Senior Hunter dog can do, plus in one series, there will be a double blind. The distance for marks and blinds is now 150 yards. Blinds are now run between and through marks. Judges may tell you the order to pick up a blind or blinds; known by some as a poison bird blinds. There are no controlled breaks allowed in Master. You are not allowed to talk to the dog once you have told the judges you are ready, have told the dog to sit or you have blown a whistle for the sit command, in a walk up situation, until the judges release you.

I recommend that you own and read the current edition of the AKC reg book; i.e., RHTRET (7/12.) *Regulations and Guidelines for AKC Hunt Test for Retrievers.*

You may get a copy online from the AKC website or order a copy. E-mail [orderdesk@akc.org](mailto:orderdesk@akc.org) or call AKC Operations Center: 919-233-9767. ■

## Stellar Retrievers, LLC Jack Morris

Jack Morris has almost 25 years experience as a professional and successful trainer for field trials and hunt tests at the local and national level. He supports retriever club members and professionals by offering his property and training expertise. He owns and operates Stellar Retrievers, LLC located near Giddings Texas. [www.Stellar-Retrievers.com](http://www.Stellar-Retrievers.com)

“Ask the Pro”  
is written by a  
member of the  
Professional  
Retriever Trainers  
Association. [www.prta.net](http://www.prta.net)

