



ASK THE PRO

wool gathering in texas

By Bobby George

THE BIG slick-headed British-speaking guy with a tribal tattoo peeking out of his short sleeved shirt, waited for the little Labrador bitch to move. She was crouched, staring intently at a small wire cage containing a pound of Ammonium Nitrate. The cage lay on the bottom shelf of a dusty, grimy bookcase... tucked toward the back. The dog had found the cage a few minutes prior and had stared, then scratched at the cage, then backed away, sat, advanced and scratched again, finally she had crouched, focused intently.

The big Brit (actually Zimbabwe is where he calls home), Jay Crafter, lately of Seven Lakes, NC, by way of the British Army and Lackland Air Force Base, stared at her as intently as she stared at the explosive. He had not offered any commands or direction during the process.

Her tail wagged slowly, then stopped. She sat, still crouching, never losing focus on the cage. Finally, as if to get a closer look, she lay down – the response that Crafter was waiting for. As soon as her elbows hit the floor, he tossed a tennis ball over her head and it caromed off the wire cage. The dog was immediately on it, and returned quickly to the British

dog man where she received lavish praise.

He called this exercise in patience “self discovery.” Basically, the dog learns a behavior through trial and error. The dog keeps trying different behaviors until he finds one that works, a behavior that earns his reward. In the case of a high-drive Labrador retriever, that reward would be a bumper, a tennis ball, a kong or, in the case of one dog ... a rubber chicken.

After watching several dogs go through this process, it occurred to me that I have seen “self discovery” employed with field trial dogs several times over the years. For example:

Short Retired Guns

I have worked with Bill Eckett at Blackwater Retrievers for a long time (I’m too old to worry about numbers) and we had a good little female, Snappy, that was having a rough time

with short retired guns. I can remember driving by Bill’s marking set up one afternoon and he was crouched on one knee, transmitter in hand, watching a dog hunt everywhere a gun, or bird, wasn’t.

“What’s going on?” I said.

“Oh, I’m waiting to see if Snappy runs out of gas or actually finds that short bird out there. I’m not handling, not gonna help ... nothing. It’s on her.”

“Looks like you might be here awhile.”

“Already have been.”

This went on for a few days and finally Snappy started finding the short birds. She was still putting in way too much effort, but in a couple of weeks she started hitting them better and finally “Voila!” She started to do short bird set ups like an all-age dog. All the while Bill maintained a kind of normal training standard. She had to stay out of old falls

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and she couldn't come home without a bird.

Bill had the patience and persistence to let it happen. Don't misunderstand, he had tried conventional training methods (that would involve a literary work along the lines of "War and Peace") and had seen little progress. He put the responsibility on the dog and let her natural drive and desire to retrieve sort out the problem. "Self discovery" paid off with FC-AFC titles and several nationals along the way.

Secondary Selection:

A few years back, I dealt with a similar situation. I was training a little female named Lucy – an amazing marker. She racked up 49 Derby points and you couldn't throw a punch bird that she couldn't get. I'm not sure I've ever worked with another dog that could pick out an impossible-to-see long gun like her.

But secondary selection – getting that short bird before you punch to the horizon – was not on her menu. I tried shackled birds, buckets, multiple throws ... you name it. If there was a long bird, she was getting it.

I finally quit beating my head against the wall and one day I said, "Okay, Lucy, girl, you go get that long bird second and let's see what happens."

Well, it wasn't good. She went long and then longer and finally back into an old fall. I called her back and showed her the short gun and she finished the test.

I persisted, letting her take the birds however she wanted and after a couple of weeks, she started to get the short bird third in a triple. Not second, not the way I wanted the birds ... but there was improvement. As soon as that happened, it was hardly anytime before I started to get the short bird second in a triple. Let me rephrase ... she ALLOWED me to select the short bird second.

Sit, Ubu, Sit:

My most recent experience with "self discovery" involved Ray, a two-year-old male,

who runs like everything is a shot flyer. The first whistle on a blind is usually answered with a quick stop and a crouch. Not a "sit". Because I am a little obsessive compulsive (okay, okay maybe more than just a little), this bugged me. "Sit" means "sit," right?

So on the next blind, I blew when he was about 20 yards away and he did his sliding-stop-and-starting-blocks routine and I did ... nothing. I waited. He crouched there for, well, it seemed like forever. Finally, he looked over his shoulder, back at me, then he stood up, still looking at me. I obviously wasn't going to do anything. He looked around like he had forgotten why we were out there and then he sat down. As soon as his butt hit the ground I whooped it up and threw him a bumper.

He came back and we started again. This time I sent and he did his usual routine, crouching, looking at me. Only this time it took half the time for him to relax and sit. Now, if he crouches, I just relax my posture, put my hands at my side – a little body language cue – and he realizes nothing is going to happen until he sits.

And he figured this out on his own.

One More Discovery:

Okay, try this one the next time a dog gets a little possessive of a bird. Instead of the usual correction, get a lawn chair, sit down and grab a wing tip, the bumper rope or whatever. And don't do anything. Just wait. Do not pull. Just hold. See what happens. Watch the dog's eyes and ears, his body language. You are trying to figure out what he is thinking. Once you start on this, you've got to stay for the long haul.

When the dog drops the bird, bumper or whatever, what do you do?

Throw it for him again.

And, again, you will have to wait, although the wait will get shorter when the dog realizes the bird is going to be thrown again.

(WHAT? THIS IS TAKING FOREVER.)

Well, it takes a while, and whacking and

burning will get you the bird quicker today but it also may become part of the delivery process tomorrow and if you can't whack or burn – like at a field trial – you may not get the bird when you need to get it.

The dog needs to realize that the game isn't over when he gives up the bird. Try letting him figure this out and then vary the repeat throws. A lot of times he gets a repeat throw, but not all the time.

Superior Intelligence:

There is an old dog training adage, I'm not sure who owns it, definitely not me, but it sounds like this: "Make sure the dog improves because of your training and not in spite of it."

We are supposed to be the part of the human/dog team with the superior intelligence. So step back now and then when confronted with a problem and think about it from the dog's side. So much of field trial training involves control, but the best dog, or maybe my favorite dog, is the one that thinks independently, the dog that falls for the trap on a mark and still manages to get the bird and get back to the next series.

A dog never learns to think on his own if he isn't given a little room – a little room for "self discovery." ■

Blackwater Retrievers Bobby George

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