



## ASK THE PRO

### utilizing pressure in retriever training

By Tera Lanczak

RETRIEVER TRAINING is a complex web of actions and re-actions, causes and effects, and do's and don't's. When training a retriever for field work, we begin with what we hope is a willing dog, with an ample amount of desire to retrieve and the ability to swim. As we begin to train, we may learn that we do not have a retriever who carries these desired traits, so the question is: How does one reach their goals with the retriever they have? The answer: Learn how to properly utilize pressure in training your retriever for field work.

Before we can learn how to properly utilize pressure in our retriever training regiment, we must understand what pressure is, and its effects on our retrievers. Pressure, as it pertains to retriever training, comes in three basic categories; the first is mental pressure, the second is manual or physical pressure, and the third is electronic pressure. When one thinks of pressure in relation to retriever training, often there is a negative connotation associated with it.

Applying pressure during retriever training

has often been given a "bad rap," simply because its uses are widely misunderstood and its applications, when performed incorrectly, could be considered by some abusive. However, with the advancements made through the years in dog training, equipment, and methods, pressure can elicit a positive response from our retrievers.

In most cases, it is the trainer's goal to apply pressure to the retriever in order to ac-

complish a desired response, often changing its behavior for the better.

How a trainer arrives at their goals and the steps taken to reach these goals are vast. You can be certain that one thing remains constant with any successful method of retriever training, and that it is the proper utilization of pressure.

Have you ever witnessed a puppy being bribed with a treat to encourage the puppy

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Manual Pressure

## Positive Reinforcement



to walk at heel? Or, have you ever witnessed a professional retriever trainer recall a dog from a marked retrieve, only to re-send the retriever for the mark again? If so, you have been witnessing the utilization of mental pressure within a retriever training program. In the first scenario, the trainer is offering a treat to encourage the puppy to willingly walk at heel and follow the treat. The puppy only receives the treat if he/she walks in the heel position. As the lessons continue the puppy begins to make the association between walking at heel and receiving the treat. This is mentally stimulating for the puppy, providing an element of pressure as to what act will deliver the reward of the treat. This scenario would be referred to as mental pressure with positive reinforcement, or reward training. In the simplest manner, the puppy is encouraged to make choices right, wrong or indifferent, and at the same time the puppy is learning the consequences of his/her behavior. Ultimately, teaching the puppy that learning and working is and should be a positive experience for all.

In our second scenario given, the retriever who was recalled from a marked retrieve will be far more advanced in a retriever training program and most likely be well into their transition stage of retriever training before they ever experience this type of mental pressure. This demonstrates mental pressure at its most advanced stage. Here the trainer has recalled the retriever from a marked

retrieve, then re-sends the retriever to perform the mark again. It is the intention to put the responsibility on the retriever to mentally decipher what has gone wrong with the marked retrieve. The reasons for recalling a retriever can be endless; confusion, poor timing, improper line on a blind retrieve or a marked retrieve, returning to a place the retriever should not be, improper casting etc. In this scenario, the trainer does not offer any help by blowing the whistle, or casting the retriever, to teach or show the retriever the error of his/her ways. Rather, it is left up to the retriever to sort through his/her previous lessons, come up with a decision and perform the mark in a different manner than originally attempted. Pretty heady stuff! This scenario is extremely mentally strenuous for a retriever of a sensitive temperament. A dog who quickly reacts or is easily panicked may struggle with decision making after a recall, especially if their attention is diverted or the retriever is lacking focus during the exercise. This form of correction is a mental challenge to say the least and commonly referred to as a Total Recall.

It takes many training sessions of gradually applying mental pressure for a retriever to understand this concept of a total recall. The retriever must know they have made an error in judgment, not worry or over-react because of that decision and being recalled, then perform the task again with the same exuberance of the original attempt and on the second attempt, perform in a different manner that is correct for the test. For some types of retrievers, they never are able to positively process this type of correction or mental pressure. A sensitive tempered retriever may overthink the situation and put too much mental pressure on themselves, causing them to freeze-up and become non-reactive. In a sense, this retriever is afraid to make a decision for fear it will be the incorrect one. The second retriever may react quite differently than the first dog by over-thinking and over-reacting to the recall, which may cause them to flare the origin of their original attempt at the test.

Neither of the above retriever's reactions are desired behaviors one wants to see in retriever training, nor is it the purpose for a trainer to apply mental pressure. If only our retrievers could speak English and tell us what they are feeling, what they are thinking, and how we as trainers can make everyone's life easier, but they cannot. It is for the reasons mentioned above, that one should use caution when attempting to teach a retriever how to make choices, deal with the mental pressures of retriever training and at all costs,

try to present mental pressure in a positive manner until the basic premise of advanced retriever training lessons are understood by your retriever.

For other types of retrievers, such as the hard charging retrieving machine, a total recall on a marked retrieve may have little initial effect. This type of retriever may have no conscience about being recalled, and is likely to perform the task the exact same way on his/her second or third attempt, giving no thought as to why they are being asked to recall.

A dog of this nature can become so distracted by his/her desire to retrieve that they can lack the ability to comprehend what they are doing incorrectly. It is for this reason of overwhelming desire that this retriever needs to be taught how to multi-task and make good decisions in the field. This type of retriever may need multiple applications of pressure in the same scenario to change his/her behavior during training. It is also with this type of retriever that the effects of your recalling and mental pressure may not be seen for weeks and could ultimately manifest in other behavior issues such as vocalizing at the line or slipped whistles. One does not know the effects of the trainers reactions to our retriever's behaviors until some time has passed or we are able to create a similar scenario in training. It is up to the trainer to be proactive, recognize when their retriever is experiencing pressure and remember what works best for each type of retriever they have trained and learn from those past experiences.



Manual Pressure

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The second form of pressure utilized in a retriever training program is manual or physical pressure. These are defined by pressure applied to your retriever using a rope, flat collar, heeling stick, pinch collar, choke chain or any other form of correction elicited to your retriever in a physical manner. It is often utilized during a retriever's foundation training also known as "Basics." While teaching your retriever obedience commands such as heel, here and sit, most programs begin by showing your retriever how to turn off the manual form of pressure. The process, in which your retriever learns to shut off the pressure being applied, is accomplished through proper timing and rhythm of your delivery in conjunction with the commands being given. It is during this process that the trainer learns what level of manual pressure or correction one needs to apply in order to elicit a change in behavior; what level inspires a compliance of the command, the intelligence and temperament of the retriever they are training. If at any time in the process of delivering manual pressure, your retriever experiences a negative change in attitude toward their training regiment, you may want to re-evaluate the intensity level of pressure being used, the timing in which pressure is being delivered, and the retrievers understanding of the pressure being applied. If your retriever is yipping with every instance of correction or pressure, than the level may be too strong. Nevertheless, if the trainer delivers a correction in conjunction with a command and the retriever complies correctly with no ill effect, then the level of pressure was appropriate. It is the goal, while using pressure within a retriever training program, to deliver the least amount of pressure possible while still eliciting the desired, mentally solid, and correct response to the task commanded or presented to the retriever.

During the fundamental, basic stages of training your retriever, they may experience mental pressure as a result of learning how to turn off the manual pressure. In this instance, if the mental pressure becomes overwhelming for your retriever because of the application or frequency of manual pressure being applied, it is important to recognize and balance out your retriever's training regiment. One of the first signs that your retriever is feeling overwhelmed, is a lack of performance or lack of effort toward their work within a training day. This is a clear sign that your retriever is feeling stressed and as a result, your retriever's future training days need to be light-hearted and fun without any pressures involved. Backing off the advancement of your retriever because of reactions to the pressures of training can be remarkably beneficial within the "big picture" of your goals for your retriever. The duration, in which to keep your training days light-hearted and fun will vary, solely dependent upon the personality type of retriever you are training. There is no super top-secret formula to calculate when to advance – pushing forward your retriever's training – or when to back off. Each retriever reacts differently to each aspect of pressure, scenarios, and environments mentioned in this article. The only fail-safe rule to hold on to, is to be aware of your retriever's attitude and always ask the question "why did they do that?"

The third form of pressure utilized in a retriever training program is electronic or e-collar pressure. Electronic pressure is the most widely misunderstood and abused form of pressure used within a retriever's training program. The electronic collar's simplistic ability to use with a single press on a button lends itself to be over used for many commands in a single training scenario. In the early years, the electronic collar was taboo for many trainers because of its lack of variable intensity levels. Many dogs could not sort through the high intensity levels of the original electronic collars. Thanks to modern-day devel-



Collar Pressure Swim By

opments of variable intensity levels, longer range reaching antennas and the trainer's better understanding of electronic pressure, this form has become the most humane, and when properly utilized, easiest for your retriever to decipher.

The purpose of conditioning your retriever to other forms of pressure discussed in this retriever training program is to offer the trainer a wealth of options or tools to change behaviors and teach the desired responses. When one form of pressure is utilized and the desired response is not elicited, the trainer has the option to utilize another form of pressure, maybe in a more simplistic manner than the first.

In the beginning stages of conditioning commands to the electronic pressure, trainers should use both manual and electronic pressure simultaneously with the delivery of a given command. The utilization of the known form of pressure (manual) presented with the new form of pressure (electronic) in conjunction with a previously taught command (here) helps your retriever make the transition to respond appropriately to the new form of pressure, the electronic collar. Although this transition from manual to electronic pressure can initially go smoothly with basic obedience commands it can become quite complex as the trainer moves to reinforce the force fetch sequence.

During the transformation process to graduate from manual to electronic reinforcement of the force fetch sequence is when it becomes easy to skip steps. The retriever's enthusiasm to perform and retrieve can mimic their thorough understanding of the electronic pressure reinforcing the "Fetch" command. This completed conditioning of electronic reinforcement of the "Fetch" command is the foundation of a

blind retrieve and all other retrieving your retriever will be asked to perform. Many adverse reactions can be brought out through the process of electronic collar conditioning on the "Fetch" command which eventually become the "Back" command and the release on retriever's name for a marked retrieve.

It is in this electronic reinforcement stage of the "Fetch" command that previously discussed forms of pressure become incredibly beneficial in your training regiment tool box. While electronically reinforcing the "Fetch" your retriever may flare your side or an area, possibly not go on command, or refuse a retrieve. It is important to continue within the lesson, present the retriever with a simpler more conditioned form of pressure to solidify, and gain the desired response to the command. It is also helpful to utilize all forms of

pressure separately and in conjunction with one another in order to achieve a thoroughly conditioned retriever.

The trainers ability to offer a simplification of electronic pressure through the delivery of manual pressure when an adverse electronic reaction occurs, will aide in your retrievers understanding of this form of pressure. It will help your dog bridge the gap between responding to the command correctly and proper associations of the reinforcement of the command, which is the goal in transitioning from one form of pressure to another and completing the pressure conditioning process. All the while maintaining your retriever's positive attitude toward their training.

In closing, the objective to all successful retriever training programs is to thoroughly and appropriately condition a retriever's

responses to pressure. A retriever's response, when pressure has been utilized properly, should be positive, correct in association with the task or command and provoke a reliable change in behavior. ■

## Bay Blue Kennels Tera Lanczak

Tera is the Owner/Trainer of Bay Blue Kennels, wintering in Giddings, TX and summering in Au Gres, MI. Bay Blue is a retriever kennel focused on developing young, competitive retrievers for hunt tests and field trials. Bay Blue concentrates on providing your retriever with the tools and knowledge to be a big dog. Tera is a Lifetime Member of the PRTA. [www.baybluekennels.com](http://www.baybluekennels.com)

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