



ASK THE PRO

building confidence

By Matt Johnson

CONFIDENCE: “A state of being certain either that a hypothesis or prediction is correct or that a chosen course of action is the best or most effective.”

I don't believe our retrievers know what a hypothesis or prediction is or even know what confidence is all together. Though I do believe they have the power to make smart, positive decisions. Of course there are plenty of well-bred, high powered retrievers out there that seem to have all the confidence in the world, but don't let the style points fool you. Even these dogs need to be led down the path of well balanced training.

It all starts at puppyhood with good

socialization and lots of interaction with the outside world. As I like to say, “Training begins at 8 weeks, not 8 months.”

The first goal is showing the pup that we are going to be the leader in the relationship. Taking charge early will take the pressure off of the dog to act as the pack leader. Being the pack leader is not an easy job. We already ask our retrievers to do amazing tasks so why ask them to also be the ring leader? Of course some dogs (male and female) tend to be more dominant than others, so learn to read your dogs and look for the signs. Nipping this in the bud early will save you from trouble down the road.

Now that we have a sound confident member of the pack, let's carry that over to our basic training. One of my favorite tools has become the holding blind. I like to teach my puppies to be confident in a holding blind right from the get go. A holding blind can be a place of great anxiety on game day for both handler and dog so why not make it a part of your daily training so it becomes second nature to sit in and around a holding blind.

Once your retriever is having success with walking singles you can start to prepare them for multiple gunners in the field by adding chairs with white coats or gunners

sitting short of your marks. This will begin to give the dog confidence to run past those short gunners to the longer marks. Always make sure your bird throwers are ready to help when needed.

When starting to teach confident double retrieves, you need to have all the tools in your toolbox ready for use. Advancing from hand thrown doubles in the yard to larger doubles in the field with multiple gunners can be a big step. Starting out in a short cut field with few technical factors can help.

Make sure the gunner throwing the memory mark is prepared with a game plan for helping the dog and a walkie-talkie for communication with the handler.

Some examples of teaching the memory mark of a double are:

- Running the memory bird of a double as a single first. Then run the marks as a double with that first single being the memory bird.
- Having the memory bird gunner stand up when the dog returns from the go bird and or throwing another bird at that time if needed. Sometimes just having

the gunner act like they are throwing another bird sometimes works.

- Throwing another bird while the dog is en route to the memory bird may keep the dog from breaking down.
- Sometimes having your memory bird be the shorter of the two marks can work well and also begin teaching that concept.
- When first teaching doubles always keep the marks well spread out so there is no confusion for the dog.

You may find yourself having to use more than one of these methods to find what works for your dog.

Teaching blind retrieves can also be a big step for most folks. Once you have started your pattern blinds and your dog is lining them confidently you will start to add in your chairs or gunners just like you did in the field with your walking singles. This usually creates opportunities for stopping and handling your dog around these obstacles. At this point in training your dog does not know how to change direction and attrition tends to work better than the use

of the collar; an example is wanting a right angle back and the dog turns and goes left. You want to stop the dog and recall them to the point of the mistake, stop again and recast.

Repeat in this order until the correct cast is given. This may take a lot of patience with a young dog so do not get frustrated. This method almost always works and you can keep that transmitter in your back pocket.

Once you get the correct cast, let the dog ride it out a good distance before stopping again. That change of direction is more important than the line to the blind at this point in training.

A confident dog makes a confident handler. And a little confidence can go a long way on game day. Happy training!! ■

Duckwater Retrievers Matt Johnson

Matt began training gundogs in 1998 and quickly got hooked on the field trial and hunt test events. In 2007 Duckwater Kennels became Duckwater Retrievers based in Howard Lake, MN. Matt specializes in the training and handling of retrievers 8 weeks to 3 years of age.