



Photo by Mark Zepp

ASK THE PRO

correct flaring during force to pile

HOW DO YOU CORRECT FLARING during force to pile work?

I recommend basically three ways of dealing with flaring: moving up, forcing on the flare, and introducing physical parameters. But before describing these three approaches we should think about why we force to the pile in the first place and what causes flaring.

The purpose of force to the pile is to create a compulsion to go when sent, a willingness to face adversity, and a tool (forcing) for addressing future potential problems in the field. Through e-collar conditioning, your dog should learn the command-correction sequence, and consequently have a pretty good idea that corrections are not “place” related, but rather

stem from behavioral responses. Still, flaring often results from forcing, as the dog either associates the forcing nicks as either a consequence of running straight to the pile or as sort of emanating from the area en route to the pile.

Without getting in to the details of the program leading up to force-to-pile, or the exact implementation of force, suffice it to say that force to the pile is probably the least fair aspect of yard work. Think about it: the dog gets a correction while doing what you want; running to the pile. For this reason alone, I recommend forcing on very light nicks (in a “back”-nick-“back” sequence). Forcing is not only light, but is done primarily from a remote send, rather than from your side.

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The momentary mode on your collar is very effective for nicks while forcing.

Your first reaction to a flare should be to move closer to the pile. As the flare diminishes, gradually move away from the pile after each send. If the flare persists, you can call the dog back for very flagrant flares, move up, and send again.

If he flares again you might call back with a nick on “here.” If the flare persists and is not flagrant, you can actually force on the flare. In other words, give a “back”- nick-“back” at the time of flaring. This can increase the compulsion to go directly to the pile, and help the dog realize a slight flare does not result in avoidance of force.

Finally, as a last resort, you can place an obstacle, such as a lawn chair, at the site of the flare. Now the dog has a choice: take the line or run completely around the obstacle. If he runs around, you can definitely call back. The obstacle serves as an easily understood parameter, more than just a physical block. Once the line is straightened out, you remove the obstacle and continue. By the way, make sure the obstacle is not jumpable; you don’t want to train your dog to run around low barriers.

With all of these approaches it is essential that you have some episodes of force after you have fixed the flare. Don’t just smooth it over and hope for the best. You must force again and see that a flare does not come back. Why? Well, first of all the flare will come back to haunt you in subsequent steps if it hasn’t been exorcised. But more importantly, the ultimate goal of force to pile isn’t just to have your dog going with compulsion: rather it is to create an element of what I call the “send in the marines” attitude. They have to be willing to look at adversity, and tackle it with intelligence, grit, and determination. Pile work isn’t done until the dog accepts force and is not deterred by it. ■

(Portions of this answer are excerpted from Mike’s Retriever Journal article collections and from the upcoming 2nd edition of Total Retriever Training).

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