



## ASK THE PRO

### philosophical approaches

By Paul Knutson

RETRIEVER TRAINING philosophy has evolved over time and with technology. People still laugh about the old “shoot ‘em in the rear” methods. However, training methods and practices, even now, tend to be more a result of a person’s personal philosophy and how they first learned to train than a thought out compilation of what others have learned and improved upon over time.

There seems to be two primary perspectives in retriever training. In one, trainers view the dog’s actions as good or bad, right or wrong; in which case punitive actions are required to correct the errant thinking. Mistakes or poor performance are a result of a stubborn animal or a dog that flagrantly wishes to ignore the handler’s requests. When this occurs, the dog

must be shown that disobedience will not be tolerated and undesirable consequences will quickly result. In the other, the dogs are viewed in terms of how well they have been schooled in the performance requirements. Mistakes are not a dog choosing to do something poorly or intentionally carried out to make a handler angry; they are a result of the dog not clearly understanding expectations. This misunderstanding can be because the dog had not yet been thoroughly taught, or the dog just took longer than expected (or hoped) to grasp the necessary concepts. Whether a dog is slow to learn or the trainer is not paying enough attention to constantly check his own effectiveness, punishment of the dog is not going to improve one thing.

Punishment training is a simple approach. It does not require extensive thought or planning. When a dog doesn’t take the right cast, or does not maneuver obstacles as desired, it is punished. That way, to avoid the inevitable punishment, the dog will work to take the correct cast, or to get into the water when asked. At the end of a long blind or while negotiating technical water, the dog is given one chance. If the wrong choice is made, the dog is ‘corrected’ so it will learn to make the right choice first – the next time. I have yet to meet a dog that takes off on a mark or a blind, deciding it is going to do whatever it feels like after a certain point, knowing that unpleasant corrections will result. But to listen to many

trainers and handlers, evil appears to lurk in the hearts of many dogs.

A child in his or her first algebra class is far less likely to learn algebra or come to enjoy it if every time they get the wrong answer on a problem, they are met with punishment. People would complain about any school teacher who thumped her students any time they made a mistake. In that case, the teacher is expected to take whatever time is necessary to teach that student how to do math problems. Mistakes are usually viewed more as an inadequacy of the teacher or the student having a bad day, than they are as a measure of how rotten the kid is. We know humans learn at different rates; we know humans have bad days, headaches, and occasional difficulties with motivation. So do dogs. They have good days and bad days. They have days when everything flows and days when their knee hurts or they have a belly ache, except they can't always communicate that to their trainer.

Most folks love to hear about and talk about the more 'nice guy' approach of teach-teach-teach. If you never have to correct a dog or look for disobedience, training would

be a whole lot more fun. In fact, it is a much harder approach. Standards do not lower because you can't thump a dog every time it does something wrong. Training standards must remain at the highest possible level, given the ability of the trainer and the dog. Not punishing a dog for making a mistake every time does not mean the dog doesn't have to learn clearly what the right thing is. It takes more effort and thought to teach challenging concepts clearly. You have to know your dog well enough to know when you've reached the end of its ability to pay attention or learn; you have to know when your dog is not focusing and not making good effort. You have to discern the difference between lack of effort and end of attention span. You may have to take more time and break things down into simple components instead of running big setups and sophisticated concepts. You may have to focus entirely on your dog and not on the game you're going to that night.

I asked an ex-pro baseball player one time as he griped about his dog's stubbornness if he ever went out in baseball training camp and screwed up on purpose. He said he did not. I asked him if he ever wanted to anger

his coaches or ruin the play. Absolutely never, he said. I asked him if he ever messed up and made mistakes, sometimes big ones. Of course, he said, that was inevitable; they just got fewer as he got better. So then I asked him if he thought his dog was any different. The silence was long. He said he'd never thought about his dog that way before.

We could all benefit from putting ourselves in our dog's shoes. The overwhelming majority of us are doing our version of our best. Sometimes we need more help than others and we all love the person or coach who understands that about us. Retriever training isn't lion taming, it is more like Olympic training. Teaching fundamentals is always the key. ■

### Paul Knutson

Paul Knutson has been training retrievers since the early 80s, beginning by spending several years with Danny Farmer. Between Paul and his wife, Julie, they have accumulated hundreds of titled dogs in AKC Field Trials and Hunt Tests. They run their business out of Orchard, CO, through which they have published three books and numerous published articles on the owning, training and handling of retrievers. Visit Paul at [www.gunclub-labs.com](http://www.gunclub-labs.com)