



ASK THE PRO

the purpose of a fun bumper

By Pat Nolan

WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF A FUN BUMPER? Some people use them in every drill; others hardly at all. Do fun bumpers have a place in professional training programs? What about them may be negative?

Field work has built in rewards. Every set up involves the excitement of novel sights, smells, and sounds. The dog gets to see the throws, hear shots, and carry birds. Most retrievers enjoy the challenges of running, swimming, and hunting for their marks.

Contrast this with a yard drill. The drill takes place in one small area, often the same yard day after day. Most drills require lots of repetition and present little physical challenge. The initial obedience and force fetch work offer no intrinsic reward for most field dogs. When we do get to drills that include retrieves most involve retrieving placed bumpers — not thrown birds. It's easy to see how some dogs can get a flat attitude toward drill work.

If you mix in fun bumpers during drill work as a reward for good effort you can reduce stress and help maintain the dog's interest and enthusiasm. When you throw a fun bumper, allow your dog to break and chase the throw, but do require delivery to hand.

To get greater benefit from the fun bumper, add a verbal cue or "marker" that is only used to mean a fun bumper, or other reward, is coming. One word cues work best; I use "Okay." Choose another word if you already use this for something else. If you always throw the fun bumper after giving the cue and always give the cue before throwing a fun bumper this cue becomes a bit of a reward itself (a conditioned reinforcer). More importantly, the cue serves as a bridge for the dog to connect his actions to the fun bumper.

Once the dog knows the marker means a fun bumper is coming you can use it to reward any action such as heel, sit, or stay. For example, if

you are introducing sit on the whistle to your dog in heel position, wait until he gives a quick clean sit in response to the whistle, say "Okay," reach for your bumper, wind up and throw. Your dog believes his sit made the fun bumper happen.

Be sure to give the cue "Okay" before you reach for the bumper. If you reach for the bumper then give the cue, the dog begins to watch your hands and is rewarded for following your hands and breaking to chase the bumper rather than for the act you are trying to reward.

Do not fall into a pattern of rewarding on a schedule. For, example, if you throw a fun bumper after every third repetition of a command your dog will quickly pick up on this pattern. He will not try as hard on the first two commands because he knows the third is the one that initiates the reward. The fun bumper is more effective if your dog is never sure when to expect it. This mystery is a powerful motivator.

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Your dog will work harder, hoping that the next task will result in the big payoff.

When the dog begins to make the connection between his action and the fun bumper they really begin to apply themselves to the tasks that "make fun bumpers happen." The dog is now working in a retrieve drive. He is working and responding to obedience commands in pursuit of the fun bumper. Schutzhund sport trainers call this training "in drive."

While he didn't call it "training in drive," author B. Waters in his book *Fetch and Carry — A Treatise on Retrieving*, published in 1894, gives as good a description of this as any I have read:

"Much that is demanded of the dog in servitude (read yard work) is contrary to his nature and inclination. He will work with endless enthusiasm and effort when in pursuit of prey. On the contrary, while he dearly likes man's companionship, he detests menial servitude (read yard work—not all dogs but to some degree this is true of all dogs) *Only by making work accessory to the pursuit of game, and so blending the two that he cannot discern where either begins or ends, can his best effort be engaged...*" Italics added for emphasis

For the wild out of control retrievers use fun bumpers sparingly and use them to reward static commands too, sit (stay) and heel. The wilder dog needs the calming effect of the increased concentration that results from methodically working through drills.

Dogs love fun bumpers. But, fun bumpers are like seasoning in cooking — used properly, they enhance the flavor and essence of a drill; applied too liberally, they overpower it.

Many dogs will benefit from learning new commands without the high excitement level of working in drive. Once they know the command begin to reward good effort with the fun bumper.

One last thought, throw fun bumpers during drills, don't throw a wild fun bumper party at the end of each training session. When you do, you teach your dog by contrast that he just had a bad time and he should celebrate the end of training. ■

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