



## ASK THE PRO

### building great foundations

By Paul Botelho

#### Building a Great Foundation for Puppies and Young Dogs

The first thing to get started is picking the right puppy. First and foremost, if at all possible, start with a good bloodline, one that is bred for servitude, that has working lines, such as FC, AFC, or Master hunting lines because nothing worse than starting out with a puppy that does not have “bottom” – sagaciousness. But, conformation line puppies can be trained – although differently and with a lot more patience. Attrition is a key factor with puppies and young dogs, do not grind it and over train and always try to end a training session on a positive note. Repetition is a key factor in building a solid foundation.

When picking a puppy, choose one that has loads of play drive that will pick up a small bumper or a pigeon. The puppy should be able to look you in the eyes, not be shy, it should be healthy and have some energy - you can channel this energy towards his/her working ability. The puppy should also be calm at times – similar to a light switch, turning on and off. The recommended age to bring a puppy home is forty-nine days old; this is the best time to start bonding with your puppy. I use a crate to crate train and to assist in housebreaking our puppy. Putting the crate in an area with a lot of activity is crucial to getting the puppy acclimated to different sounds and different activities within your house. This will help your puppy when you take him/her training – the pup will feel comfortable

and at ease in a crate. It will also help in the housebreaking process and when you eventually finish a series or training, the puppy will go back to his crate and absorb what he/she has just learned.

I wait until the puppy has its second set of shots before I bring him/her to any training grounds. Prior to that I only train in my yard or known areas where other dogs do not frequent. I try to use 80% bumpers, 20% birds because puppies should like the bumpers almost as much as feathers. I only do three to four retrieves a series with two series' per day – quality versus quantity – all the while remembering not to over work a young puppy due to their developing bones and small attention spans at this time.

I introduce a puppy to guns while using a reward method: I have the thrower use a blank pistol and a duck call, first call, then shoot, then reward. Always use birds when introducing the gun. Keep it simple, no cover, and keep approximately fifty yards away. You can vary the lengths later, but always use the reward system when introducing the gun.

When I do land marks with puppies we initially use no cover and flat terrain. I get on my knees while holding a 12-week-old puppy under its front legs, lifting its upper body up, keeping its back feet on the ground while saying the words “mark.” The thrower will quack on a call, shoot and then a flat throw with the bird. The handler watches the pups head, makes sure the pup sees it and the bird hits the ground before he sends the puppy. Gently release the puppy and let him roll out of your hands. When the puppy retrieves the bird, do not immediately take the bird from the puppy, pet the pup first and then roll the bird down out of his mouth while giving the release command (use a long line if necessary on recall). After two to three retrieves (the last retrieve should be a “fun retrieve”) don't steady the puppy, just throw and let him go retrieve. We want to build a “go get'em” attitude with loads of desire while also keeping it fun. We do not steady a young pup until after we do force hold and force fetch - we are building the puppy's drive and attitude. Attitude equates to effort and intention; the intention is doing the desired task – in this case the puppy retrieving.

Some things I like to include while training

puppies is the use of a “dummy” electronic collar so the puppy will never associate the collar with something negative. Also holding blinds should be used every training session on line so the pup can get use to being in a confined area and not being afraid. Later on, when the blinds are out in the field they will not be afraid of them while training or hunting.

Another drill I use is a decoy drill where I put a dozen decoys on the grass (no cover) while doing basic obedience with the puppy (heel, sit, stay, come) throughout the spread. I let the puppy commit to putting his/her nose on the decoy while using a choke chain collar (six foot lead) and using the correction “no – leave it” as we continue our heeling throughout the decoy spread. We go back to the marks (using bumpers) holding the pup up, throwing bumpers before, middle and beyond the decoy spread. We do this drill so puppies will retrieve the bumpers and not touch the decoys. During this drill you can incorporate your three angles of throwing marks – angle in, flat, and angle back so the puppy will get accustomed to hunting in those three areas. When it is time for you to move forward (reach) and only when the puppy is ready, you can incorporate these types of angles to the training field when throwing marks. You're actually teaching the puppy to hunt the area of the fall and to check back when needed.

Another drill I like to use with young dogs is a depth perception drill. In this drill we throw a short mark about forty yards. When the puppy retrieves and is on his way back the thrower moves back about 100 yards uses a flat throw with the same line. Here, the puppy is learning to go by the “old” fall. When the dog retrieves the 100 yard mark and is on his way back, the thrower moves to the middle position (about 60-70 yards) with a flat throw and a white bumper. If the pup stops short or runs long, the thrower should give a “hey hey” to get the puppy's attention back to the correct fall. Be sure to mix it up – long, short, medium, short, long, etc. Use attrition to teach this drill and always end with success and on a positive note with a fun bumper.

When running water marks for puppies, use a gradual entry with no steep drop offs or running water and do not steady the puppy until after force hold and force fetch. For water marks, I like to use a 180° water entry

so that the pup will go in straight and not learn to cheat. During these marks do not use decoys in the water until the puppy understands not to pick up the decoys on land. Once the puppy is doing well with water retrieves and the decoy drill on land, then you can introduce decoys in the water using the command “no leave it” if he tries to pick up a decoy. This decoy drill is important for two important reasons: safety for the dog so he does not get entangled in the decoys and during competition, it is an immediate disqualification if a dog picks up a decoy.

When throwing marks for young puppies allow the pup to hunt if he does not mark the fall. Allowing the hunt will build perseverance and allow the puppy an attitude to “stay with it” and not quit. Help only when necessary with a “hey, hey,” stop, and let him/her find the bird (get down wind). When all else fails, say “hey, hey,” and when he/she is looking throw another bumper in the same area of the fall and repeat the same mark. When marking with young puppies do not be afraid to throw more than one bumper if the pup falters or drops off half way to the mark. Use white streamers on bumpers so puppies can mark better and be aware of your backdrop. Use white bumpers with a dark backdrop and dark bumpers with a light backdrop. This will help to teach the puppy to use his eyes, not his nose.

In closing, this is a science and a sport, therefore working dogs are like any other athlete, they must be trained and maintained properly. This is a sport that requires the dedication and puppy training at a young age to achieve a fine working retriever, not just a wonderfully bred puppy. I equate training a puppy to lighting a campfire - create the foundation with small pieces of wood, add fuel and oxygen, ignite and watch it grow, all the while adding bigger pieces of wood.

~ *Enjoy and success always, Paul Botelho* ■

## Gunning Island Retrievers Paul Botelho

Since 1983, Paul and Pauline Botelho along with their daughter, Kristen, have operated Gunning Island Retrievers in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, specializing in gun dogs and AKC hunting tests. Paul has trained forty AKC Master Hunters, while focusing on a limited number of dogs with quality training. He has a Bachelor's Degree in Education and has successfully trained and certified a Labrador in the K-9 Accelerant Detection Program (play reward) at the New York State Academy of Fire Science. <http://www.gunningisland.com>