



ASK THE PRO

steadying your retriever

By Trey Lawrence

IT ALL BEGAN YEARS AGO when I saw a frustrated handler come off the line. “Twelve in a row,” he said. You could see the blood boiling in his veins. The twelve in a row, he explained, was how many times his dog had broken on the line. He told me he wanted to sell him right then and there. Always being a sucker for a good challenge, I bought him on the spot. After many months of hard work and several entry fees later, he passed 18 Master tests in a row and won the second Qualifying he had ever entered. After this experience I realized that it was much easier on me and the dog to start them right instead of fighting a battle later.

Many try to rush the process of steadying their retriever and create “holes” or lack of

understanding of what you are asking of them. It is a long, slow process, but if done correctly, it can give you a respectful dog on the line, not to mention a happier dog later. This is because they understand what is being asked of them. It can be broken down into six different steps, which are as follows: 1.) the “Sit” command 2.) holding your pup 3.) holding the collar beside your pup 4.) holding the tab and standing on pup’s tail 5.) holding tab and stroking with heeling stick, and 6.) using collar corrections on line.

The steadying process begins with a firm understanding of the “sit” command. This command should be introduced as soon as the puppy stage and reinforced in your basics. This is when your standard should be

established. Deciding if your pup is ready for field retrieves is also important at this time. It is different for each individual. Some are ready at two months of age, where it may take others until six months or older. The most important thing is to be sure not to rush them. They need to have tons of desire for the retrieve.

Once your pup is learning and you have determined that he or she is ready for retrieves in the field, your patience will surely be tested. To start the field retrieves, hold your pup up behind the front legs, supporting their chest as they are watching the mark. Distance is not the concern at this time, but your standard is. Your pup must be respectful. This means no lunging, biting or vocalizing in order to be released.

Until your pup has met your standards, he should not be allowed a retrieve. Think of it as the act of the retrieve is a reward for good behavior. If the behavior is not of the standard that has been set; then there is no reward.

Once your pup has mastered you holding him, then it's time to advance to sitting beside you. This is done with you kneeling beside him or her. The same standard that was set early should always be of the utmost importance. We should not expect the pup to sit still on his own yet, so encourage understanding by holding pup's collar and the loose skin at his hips.

Once your pup fully understands that bottom on the ground equals retrieve in the field, you are ready to move on to the next step. This is standing beside him, and instead of holding his collar in hand, you hold a short tab attached to the collar and place your foot on his tail. They may find this distracting at first, but with a little patience, they soon overcome it. Take your time, keep your standard and show them their reward in the field. This will carry you to the next step, which is step number five, stroking them with a heeling stick.

Moving from stepping on their tail to stroking their back with a heeling stick and holding straight up with the tab should be a smooth transition. Just as previously stated, they do not get their reward until they have met your standards beside you. If they resist in any way, put them up and do not allow the retrieve. After a brief "time out" they are allowed to come back and try again.

Before moving on to the last step, you must be sure your pup understands collar corrections. He must be fully collar conditioned, which means a complete understanding of proper response to

stimulation. You are sure he has graduated from using the tab and is somewhat steady with use of the stick as well. Also at this point, we are encouraging longer wait times and waiting for a hand down (or not, whichever you choose) before being released. And just because you have graduated from using the tab, does not mean that you no longer attach it to the collar. The same can be said about all of the other tools used earlier. They should be available at any time they are needed.

If all the previous steps have been successfully completed and you are sure your pup understands what is being asked of him; then only slight collar corrections should be needed and/or used. This is the final step in a long, tedious process. And once all of the desired responses are displayed on singles, you are ready to move on to multiple marks.

Because sometimes it seems that we are dragging our feet and not making great progress, many seem to want to rush these steps and go straight to the formal corrections with the heeling stick or collar. But in doing this, we are in fact often times creating confusion in the animal. This, in turn, encourages forward movement on the line – the opposite response we were going for. The whole process can take anywhere from two to six months for your retriever to properly understand what is being asked of him. With minor maintenance you should be able to correct any problems that may arise in the future. ■

Tall Oak Retrievers

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Tall Oak Retrievers was founded by Trey Lawrence and is operated by himself and Dana Young in Paducah, KY. Although he specializes in young dogs from puppy head start through transition, he also has had success in the All-Age stake. Their winters are spent in Alabama. www.talloakretrievers.com