



ASK THE PRO

all work and no play ...

By Cyndi Gunzer

SO YOU HAVE MADE THE BIG DECISION to get a puppy for Field Trials or Hunting Tests. You have done your homework and picked from a good pedigree and you are ready to give your puppy the best head start to play these very competitive games we play. It is an exciting time and I will offer some tips to get your puppy on the right track to success.

A puppy is not ready for formal Basic training until it is 5 or 6 months of age. In the meantime, though, there are many things you can do to give you puppy an advantage.

I believe that the two most important things that set the stage for the pup's future success is to teach the pup to enjoy the game, and life in general, and teaching the pup to learn to accept pressure.

When it comes to training, either informal puppy training or formal training for the older dog, there must be something in it for the dog. We must remember to keep the training upbeat, and fun is of the utmost importance, most especially for a puppy. This does not imply that it needs to be all happy bumpers all of the time, but it does mean that if our training starts to make the pup think it is all work and no fun, then it is up to us as trainers to increase the enjoyment factor. If your puppy's

informal training produces a negative attitude, then we either need to increase the fun factor or even consider stopping and doing something different with the puppy for a while. This could mean just taking walks around a pond on a warm day to letting the puppy splash around and explore his surroundings.

Teaching a puppy to accept pressure can start young. Instilling manners, such as not jumping up on people, is a way to teach the pup how to learn to accept pressure and react accordingly. It also instills respect – a nice trait to have! Pressure can come in many forms and it is a good idea to accustom your pup to different forms of pressure as it grows up. A little tap with a heeling stick when working on “sit” is another way for the pup to learn to accept pressure, but this is only after they understand the word “sit.” In this example, the puppy will learn to accept some type of correction, at a very low level, and it is not the end of the world to them.

Again, it is of primary importance that a pup, as it is growing, to learn to have fun and learn to accept some stress in his life.

Here are some tips for you in raising your pup to be a successful competitor.

OBEDIENCE

- If your time is limited, your focus should be on leash work with your puppy and marks. Obedience and retrieving is the foundation for all that we do.
- “Here” is an important command for your dog. All the puppies that I have raised love to come when I call them. I start teaching “here” with treats and a long line. To begin, I let them run around on a loose leash (no tugging) before I give the command. When I say “here”, I will only tug on the line if the puppy does not come. When the puppy reaches me I will give them a treat as a reward. Pretty soon you will have a puppy running to you before you can even get the word out! After a couple of weeks I will start to wean the puppy off the treats. *Note: When using treats, I prefer to use raw hot dog cut in small pieces. A treat for a small puppy should be one that the pup is able to swallow quickly and easily.*
- I also use treats to teach “sit” beginning when the pup is 8 weeks old. I start this command by holding the treat in front of their face and then moving my hand up above their head until the pup is forced to sit their bottom down to reach the treat. This usually only takes a day or two to teach, because puppies seem to love to learn to sit! Once they have an understanding of the word, I will increase the difficult, distraction and length of time as the puppy ages. Working on extended sits as the puppy gets older is your first introduction to steadying your dog.
- I generally wean out my treat work fairly quickly, but there is nothing wrong with sneaking in a treat or two to your growing pup as you work on your obedience. It keeps their attitude up and keeps them on their toes!



MARKS

- *Marks! Marks! Marks!* These puppies need marks. When I first start throwing for the pup I will find a long hallway in my house, so that the puppy cannot learn to play keep away from me. I like to throw objects that are shaped like bumpers, do not have a rope (so they don't develop the habit of dragging a bumper by the rope), is soft on their teeth and squeaks.
- When a pup has mastered the art of retrieving in the house, we can move outside. The pup should have a high level of success, so I use white bumpers on short grass. A puppy should be “pinning” most of his marks.
- I will introduce steadying to a young pup by making him sit and stay (with a leash on) while walking away 10-15 feet and throwing a bumper. In this situation, I will throw the bumper behind me so that if the puppy breaks from his sit, I can easily catch him and take him back to the place I told him to sit. I will release the puppy on his name and even though he might have forgotten where the bumper is at this point, if you keep repeating this exercise it won't be long until he will have an understanding of being steady.

In conclusion, anything you can do with your puppy will benefit him and increase your odds of success. Be sure to expose your puppy to different places and people, as they get older. Competitions can be quite daunting to a young dog if the only place that they know is their home.

Basics training is a major undertaking and being able to read a dog and knowing when to push or when to take it easy is a skill that is learned by working with many dogs. Your puppy will have the right skills to succeed in Basics with a solid foundation of obedience and retrieving. If your puppy has learned to love his job and is able to accept mild forms of pressure, then you have a head start on the path to success. ■

High Spirit Retrievers Cyndi and Karl Gunzer

High Spirit Retrievers was a full service Field Trial training business owned and operated by Karl and Cyndi Gunzer. In 2013, Karl went to work for Purina. Cyndi continues to train Basics and Transition dogs. HSR was accredited with High Point Derby kennels in 2007 and 2011 and trained the Co-High Point Derby dog in 2013. www.highspiritretrievers.com

*“Ask the Pro”
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