

## How About Some Tips On Getting Started on Backyard Training?

All pups and dogs need a foundation of basic obedience as they head into the fun parts of field training. Commands such as "Come," "Sit," "Stay," "Heel," can be learned in any obedience class or taught by you (if you've done this before with other dogs), however getting a young dog into a formal obedience class has the added bonus of socializing the dog and teaching him to focus on you instead of all the distractions he'll meet along the way. Later on, all those basic commands will be incorporated into your hunt training.

Meanwhile, if your dog or pup likes to carry a toy, dumbbell or dummy, go ahead and practice some retrieves. Some books suggest doing beginning retrieves in a hallway, so the dog has to come back to you rather than around. Having a long line on helps keeping him moving to you, rather than trying to lay down and chew on the toy. For starters, just keep this as a fun game, rather than requiring any formal deliveries. Quit before your dog gets bored with it.

As you start training in more open spaces such as a backyard or park, you'll have your dog working farther away from you on a long training line. Many field trainers incorporate whistle training into their plans as they go along. You'll use a dog whistle for this (not just whistling with your lips). Practices vary, here's one way to do it: One long whistle means WHOA (more on that below), three long whistles mean COME, two long whistles mean change direction, and one short beep is a release whistle (meaning OK or GO!).

Even if your dog likes retrieving, most trainers would want to start with some "force breaking sessions," even though some trainers don't even use the term "force" breaking anymore. It's more like proofing your dog, meaning that he'll pick up and hold any object, even if he doesn't feel like it. This will come in very handy when he's asked to pick up a smelly duck, or if he's used to pheasant and flushes a chukar. Or maybe he's just bored and doesn't want to do it anymore. Hunters insist that retrieving isn't an optional thing with their dogs.

Again, methods vary with this, but one time-tested method is ear-pinching. We'll outline the basic process here. If you're a beginner, you might be more comfortable seeking the guidance and supervision of a bird dog trainer with this step.

If a dog's ears are sensitive, you'll be using very light pressure until he forces the issue. There's a definite progression in method, and most bird dog trainers use a training bench, an elevated long table-thing, so that when a dog resists, his backing up or twisting is more confined and controlled, but it can be done without the bench. If you don't have a training bench and the dog wants to wiggle away, try sitting in a chair, with him leashed and sitting between your legs so that he can't scoot back or away from you. If you're right handed, hold the dog's left ear gently

with your left hand. You'll be on his right side, with your left arm reaching behind his neck so your hand has his ear. You aren't hurting him, and if he protests even this light touch, too bad. Insist that you have the right to hold his ear (just as you have the right to touch any part of him and cut his nails). You can rub his ear, talk to him, praise him, etc. Just don't allow him to pull his ear away from you. If he tries, use your thumb and index finger to press that ear. Keep pressing until he stops fighting you. Most dogs don't mind a light hand on their ear, but if your dog is a baby about anyone even touching his ear, he may need some time just getting used to the idea that it's going to happen. Take as many sessions as necessary to get him okay with you holding his ear.

Next step: With your right hand, put a dummy in his mouth (2" wide canvas dummy probably better than larger or harder dummies). Hold his mouth shut on the dummy by pushing the bottom of his chin up so he can't spit the dummy out. You should be using commands like "Take It!" or "Fetch", "Hold", and finally when you let him open his mouth to release the dummy, say "Out" or "Give." Ask him to hold for just a few seconds at first. Just do this a few times, praising each time, then go play elsewhere.

The ear pinching comes in when a dog decides to spit out the dummy or not open his mouth to take it. The pinch on his ear gets his attention, he opens his mouth to protest, and in goes the dummy. As you insist on holding his mouth shut on that dummy, he might twist his head away, buck back, etc..., and the pinching continues until he stops resisting. Some dogs don't resist much at all, other dogs (like some Chessies and Airedales) will fight it more vigorously. But hang on. Pretty soon the dog realizes that when he stops struggling and holds that dummy quietly, the pressure on the ear stops. So he figures out how to turn it off. Once you get to that point, your dog should be holding a dummy without chomping on it with your hand under his chin for support for a decent amount of time -- let's say 30 seconds.

Next lesson: taking the dummy from you and holding it without you holding his mouth shut. Do as above with your left hand gently holding his left ear, your right hand offering the dummy. When you say Take it (or Fetch), he should voluntarily open his mouth for you to put the dummy in. If not, pinch the ear till the mouth opens, then in goes the dummy. Repeat until he's willing to open up voluntarily on the Take It command. Next ease up on the pressure with your right hand, which has been under his chin so that he couldn't drop the dummy. Your goal is to have him keep his mouth closed around the dummy, so just take your hand away for a few seconds, and if he starts to drop it, correct him with a Hold it command, hand back under chin, and ear pinch until he clamps his jaws tight around the dummy. Timing is the tricky thing here, since if he succeeds in spitting out the dummy, he's won. So make sure you bump his jaw shut before he gets that dummy out. Gradually he'll get the idea that he has to hold that dummy even when you aren't holding his mouth shut. You end the exercise by asking him to GIVE or OUT, and taking it out of his mouth. Do this in short sessions, and always end when he's done a better job than the time before. Gradually increase the time he's holding the dummy on his own.

Next, steps involve him reaching forward to take the dummy from your hand when you hold your hand a couple feet in front of him. Then he'll learn to take the dummy from your hand when you're moving alongside of him. Then he'll learn to pick up the dummy from the ground on the Take It command. And he'll learn to carry it while he walks with you, and then when he's called to you.

For an excellent discussion with photos of this process check out the classic training book, "Hup! Training Flushing Spaniels the American Way", by James E. Spencer. Spencer says you do two sessions a day – this should take you 3 to 5 weeks.

Next step, the dog will be given a dead bird (small chukar is good) to hold. The dead chukar gets tossed instead of the bumper and the dog gets to retrieve the bird to your hand. Since you probably don't have access to dead chukar for training, this will also be done with the help of a local hunting dog trainer who can ease you into field work with birds, as well as fields where your dog can be trained off leash.

The next step some trainers like to do is to teach the "WHOA" command, which some trainers call "HUP!" That involves teaching the dog that isn't close to you to sit on a WHOA command, and alternately on one long whistle blast. Once a dog can do that, then you start throwing bumpers and making him WHOA (sit down) and wait till you release him before he retrieves them. This kind of training can start with the dog working at a distance from you on a long training line. Eventually, however, most trainers transition to an e-collar as the preferred training tool for reinforcing commands at a distance.

To digress a bit on training with e-collars: the e-collar's "nick" is adjustable so that you control how much stimulation your dog needs to choose to respond correctly to your command. You always start with a very low level, and only adjust upward if your dog is ignoring you. The e-collar should never be used to train an exercise. It should only be used when a dog clearly understands what he should be doing, and then he decides not to do it, so the collar "nick" is your long-distance tap on this shoulder to remind him he HAS to do it.

So for instance, your dog probably knows what "COME!" means, and he probably comes when he wants, and blows you off when there's something more interesting elsewhere. The e-collar will teach him that it's always in his best interest to come when called. You give the dog a chance to come when you call or whistle. If he doesn't respond, then call again simultaneously with a collar correction. If he still doesn't come, the collar gets turned up. This may only happen when your dog is out chasing around in the field and decides he'd rather hunt independently rather than stay within reasonable (gunshot) radius of you. The more stimulating the environment, the handier the e-collar gets. The instant the dog turns off his independent path and starts heading back to you,

you're done with the collar button until he starts to deviate again.

For a new dog who has no idea what "come" means, stick with traditional treats, lures, long line, and happy praise. So teach your basic obedience exercises first, before re-enforcing with the e-collar. After the basics are understood, e-collars are also very useful for fine-tuning. For instance, an e-collar reminder can be more immediate and effective than a leash jerk or food lure for reinforcing off-leash heeling for dogs that like to move off ahead of you. Or the e-collar tap provides a reminder to the dog that likes to break a Stay when he decides he's had enough. Many e-collars have a "vibrate" button that simply hums and reminds the dog to pay attention to you. Dogs soon learn that giving you the required response at the warning vibration avoids the stronger tap of the zap button.

Which takes us back to teach the WHOA command, that is getting your dog to sit on command when he's at some distance from you. This translates into the "Sit to Flush" exercise in the field, in which the dog flushes a bird, but has to sit and wait while the hunter shoots it before he's released to retrieve it. Learning this is a good safety measure for the dog as it immobilizes him down in case a second shot is required to bring down the bird. Dogs that sit and watch the fall of the bird use that observation time head them to where it landed.

Throwing a dead bird instead of a bumper sounds grisly, but the dog learns to see the tossed bird "fly" through the air; he has to WHOA till released, then he gets to retrieve the bird to your hand. At this point, you might use the e-collar if the dog "forgets" to sit before retrieving, but don't use the collar correction if the dog refuses to pick up the bird or to bring it back. Instead, go back to the lessons on Take It and Hold from force-breaking days, and use a long line to pull in a faster come back if the dog is fooling around instead of trotting right back.

Once the basics are done, then starts the introduction to the field. Having a trainer who has gadgets & birds to do this is very helpful, this is where your search for a local bird dog trainer pays off.

Many professional trainers start with homing pigeons in wire cages that can be released open with a remote control. The clueless dog goes into a field and hopefully catches scent of the pigeon and follows his nose. As the dog gets near the cage, the trainer triggers it open, the bird flies off, the dog is surprised, but he'll hear the long whistle and be told to WHOA. He is supposed to sit when the bird is "flushed" for him. All he has to do in these first lessons is find the bird with his nose and sit when the bird is released and flies off. Once the dog is released, he can try to chase the flying bird a little way if that gets him more excited about it. The e-collar to back up the COME command eventually is useful in bringing the dog back to you.

As the dog gets into this, he'll get the idea that there's birds out there and they're fun to find. At this point, the trainer puts out some planted chukar, and the dog gets to find and flush on his own. The next step is introducing shooting the bird. If you're pretty sure your dog isn't afraid of gunfire, the trainer will shoot a bird for your dog to retrieve. You'll be bursting with pride at this point.

If your dog has never heard gunfire, take the time to get him used to it gradually. One first step is to try the brown paper bag trick -- while he's playing or eating, have a helper stand fairly far away, blow up a lunch bag and pop it. That sounds rather like gunfire. If the dog ignores it, good. If he startles, you keep on playing or distracting him. Don't praise him for being scared (as in "it's all right, honey, you're a good boy"). Just pretend the sound isn't important. Some people use popper guns or starter pistols before exposing a dog to shotgun fire. Always begin making the sound effects from a considerable distance. Distant gunfire is far less intimidating than a gun going off right over a dog. Take some time making the transition from far-away loud bangs to those closer. Don't rush your pup right to a gun club or hunt test field where shotguns are banging away all over the place -- doing that can overwhelm a young dog who would normally be fine. Going slow and easy with gun noise acclimation can help you prevent a gun-shy dog later.

Once the dog does basic retrieves of a shot chukar, there's a world of added exercises and steps. Line drills with dummies, retrieving bigger pheasants, water retrieves of ducks downed in water, and retrieving doubles. You might not see yourself as being this ambitious now, but as your dog's enthusiasm drags you deeper and deeper into field work, you'll find your own answer to the question "Why in the world would anyone not want to hunt with an Airedale?".