

PUPPY

T raining a dog is far more difficult than it appears. Most people are not prepared for the complexity and commitment involved, get in over their heads, and quit. A promising puppy will eventually become a mediocre old dog without continuing education. A dog's potential is relevant to inherent natural ability, intelligence, desire and the time and skill invested in his training.

It is the role of the breeder to provide the raw material and prepare your pup for a lifetime of learning. The breeder must match a sire and dam with proven traits that you want in your puppy. This is more than just OFA-certified hips and the ability to pick up a duck when asked. It certainly includes genetic qualifications (OFA hips, elbows, CERF, etc.) and a proven background based on objective standards. Field Trial or Hunt Test titles are usually considered to be good indicators that the dog possesses not only the basic talents and instincts to do well in hunting situations, but the cooperative attitude and willingness to learn for advanced training.

The breeder is responsible for the puppy's health, nutrition and introduction to learning. A competent breeder will socialize puppies and provide them with individual stimulation from the day they are born. The puppy should have daily lessons, learning to sit, walk on a leash, climb stairs, swim, hear duck calls and be introduced to boats, decoys and retrieving birds.

We all understand the importance of sequential education. We assign specific categories like Kindergarten, grades 1-12 and advanced education. The concept of basic progression is lost when dealing with our dogs. A good foundation is important for everything we do. You can't put a roof on a house if you don't have trusses. Likewise, you can't teach a dog to respond to hand and whistle signals at 100 yards if he doesn't sit by your side when asked.

The first six months of a pup's life are full of challenges and offer a limited window of opportunity for training. During this period of time, your puppy needs a delicate blend of developing natural ability and practicing learned behaviors.



STUFF

By Jack Jagoda



Obedience

“Sit” is usually the first command your dog will learn and should be introduced by the breeder, providing a head start for when you get the puppy home. I prefer a front sit because some of the other early training will be taught from this position.

If your puppy doesn't already understand the sit position, you must teach him. I like to kneel down with the puppy in front of me or stand him on a carpeted bench or table. Place your left hand under his chin and the right hand by his tail. Tell him to sit, then lift up under his chin, tilting him slightly toward the rear with one hand. At the same time, place your other hand at the puppy's tail and slide your hand behind the pup, gently folding his legs under him until he sits. Praise him when he is in position. Keep repeating this, prompting him with the word sit, until he gets the idea. Once he is responding, you can bribe him with some treats. Put a small collar and leash on him and place him in front of you. Apply gentle upward pressure on the leash while holding the treat a few inches above his head. Continue to extend the hand with the treat slowly past his head a few inches at a time until he leans back and lowers to a sit. Be sure to give him lots of praise for being such a smart puppy.

“Come” is the most important command a puppy will learn. He should come promptly when called and finish with a sit directly in front of you, not jumping on you, bouncing from side to side or circling you. The first few weeks, the puppy will naturally come to you. That will change as he becomes more independent. This is the first training that will challenge his will. Be prepared; you may have a battle on your hands.

I prefer to use a light rope about 20 feet long and a small flat collar. Put the collar on the dog, attach the lead and let him pull it around until he gets used to it. If he picks up the lead in his mouth, tug on it until he drops it. Every time he ranges 20 feet to the end of the lead, give him the command, “come.” If he comes, give lots of praise. If he refuses, give him a second “come” as you tug the leash.

He may resist and start to holler. Be patient and determined; he will finally give in. Squat down, give him eye contact, and put your hands out as your dog approaches you. With gentle hands, guide him into the sit position in front of you and praise him. Continue the process until he comes and sits reliably. A few repetitions in a short five- or 10-minute training session several times a day will work better than a marathon session when you both get tired and frustrated.

It is important to direct and instill proper behavior while he is young, before he learns he has options. Just be persistent, reel him in and give lots of praise. Remember, after the puppy comes to you, make him sit directly in front of you, and encourage eye contact.

As your puppy learns to come, he will normally stay closer to you. At that point, shorten the lead to about 10 feet in length. Walk with the dog, and often change your direction. If he doesn't go after you, tug the leash and keep walking. This exercise will teach your dog to follow you and anticipate your change in course. Do not go overboard. As a hunting companion, it will eventually be your dog's job to find game for you. He must be confident to leave you to search birdie objectives.

Once your dog is reliably performing an automatic front sit as he approaches, you may gradually introduce “sit” and “stay.” “Sit” is a stationary command and actually means stay in the sit position until released or redirected. I usually say “sit,” maintain gentle upward pressure on the leash while I step back from the puppy a foot or so, repeating “sit!” If he moves, put him back in the sit position and say “sit.” Gradually, you can increase the distance.

Hold him in place and work on “sit” as you place his food in front of him.



Sit means stay, and the skill will be enforced later when your puppy is more mature.

The proof of all training is being able to work through distractions. After your puppy is responding reliably to the basic commands, you may introduce distractions and continue to require that the pup respond quickly to these basic commands.

Basic Retrieving

Absolutely under no circumstance should your young puppy be perfectly steady (sit and stay) in conjunction with retrieving! Let me repeat that: Do not make your puppy sit and stay while retrieving. More puppies are ruined by steadying them too early than any other thing. You can teach them to sit and stay under a variety of non-retrieving circumstances, then gradually merge and enforce this skill later.

If your dog is not very enthusiastic about retrieving, you may want to wait a little longer. Each dog has a different amount of talent and desire. Be careful not to exceed your dog's capacity by being too demanding.

The basic retrieve and delivering to hand is relatively easy if you start early. I often use a small plush toy because it is easy to grip and carry. I make a trip to the dollar store and pick up a box of small squeaky toys and leave them lying around.

When your dog picks up a toy, praise him and let him follow you around with the toy in his mouth. As the response to the "come" command improves and he is automatically sitting, you will begin to see the puppy come to a sit in front of you and hold the object.

If your puppy likes to carry things around in his mouth, always praise him and thank him for delivering the object. If you don't want him picking up certain items, it is up to you to put them out of his reach. Do not expect him to know what is allowed and what is not allowed for him to have.

Many people believe that a dog should retrieve, then drop the object on the ground. This is not so. Your dog should retrieve to hand and gently release as you receive the object.



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Don't move toward him, or the pup will make a keep-away game of it. Have him come to you, get settled in the sit position, then receive the object. I usually say, "leave it," but whatever command that you decide to use is fine.

A few short retrieves in an uncluttered, distraction-free area that are successfully completed are the goal for each retrieving lesson. It is good if your pup is used to dragging his rope during this period. It will set the stage for that time when he wants to keep the object you are throwing for him and allow you to guide him gently back to you. It will also prepare him to swim confidently through decoy and anchor lines as he progresses.

It is good to include some hunting props in these basic lessons as his skills progress. I always have a few decoys out and things to climb over or go around as he is learning about come and heel. Soon they are part of the background, not the focus of his attention. You don't want to get to opening day before your pup ever sees a decoy, or he will think that they should be the object of his great retrieving skills!

Training is about teaching individual skills, one leading to another, until you reach a level of training that works for you. If you use the format I have described, your dog should be capable of making short retrieves, come to a front sit, and deliver to hand by the time he is six months old.

It's easier to instill proper behavior from the beginning than it is to correct unwanted behavior later. If you are unable to get all this accomplished in six months, there is still hope. Just be positive and keep working at it!

Be sure you keep your puppy lean. Obesity is a significant contributing factor for promoting crippling joint conditions in adult dogs. A good quality glucosamine supplement promotes healthy joint tissue development of puppies and protects adult dogs throughout their life. You can find my recommendations on our Web site.

I have the opportunity to work with many puppies each year, offering me a lot of on-the-job training. On the other side of the spectrum, I have trained and handled in excess of 100 dogs to Master Hunter titles. Maybe I'm just lucky, who knows. We have a saying in the competitive dog world: "I'd rather be lucky than good!" Anyway, my approach seems to work for me. Hopefully, it will work for you as well.



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I offer my knowledge and acquired skills with hope that all your puppies may attain basic talents to facilitate a solid foundation and structure for a promising future.

Deep Run Farm is a retriever training, breeding and boarding facility in Goldvein, Va. Jack and his partner, Phyllis Giroux, DVM, are living their lifetime dream. Visit them on the Web at DeepRunRetrievers.com and feel free to e-mail Jack at jmjagoda@aol.com with questions.