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More Problem-Solving Using the "First Action"

By Jim & Phyllis Dobbs and Alice Woodyard

In our last article we covered some problem solving that relies on the dog's understanding of the "first action," which is **coming toward the handler**. We'll now discuss using the collar in the retrieve exercises to eliminate loops after a pick up.

Preventing loops

The remote trainer is an effective way to change the style of dogs that like to loop wide on their return from a retrieve. A wide, looping return can cost you points, and can also make it much more difficult for the dog to give you a straight front. In the Utility glove exercise, a loop after a pick-up can put the returning dog on top of a second glove to grab(!), or put him over a jump by mistake on his way back with the glove. In short, the looping return is a habit to get rid of in the obedience dog.

Remember, using a collar properly requires that you build the dog's understanding step by step. The recall and the "momentum" exercises, described in the May and June, 1995, issues of *Front & Finish*, should have already been taught to the dog before you begin using the collar to eliminate looping returns.

Also, it is important that your dog have an *enforceable retrieve command* before incorporating a correction to modify the dog's retrieving style. This holds true regardless of the technique or equipment used for the correction. You need an enforceable retrieve command because dogs will try various options after a correction, and one of those options could be not retrieving at all. Your dog must know that this option is unacceptable.

The corridor method. This method gives the dog a series of comparisons until he learns how to return straight back to you with the dumbbell, thereby avoiding a correction. It uses the dog's knowledge of turning off low level stimulation by responding to your recall command. The purpose of the "imaginary corridor," described below, is to make your corrections consistent. It is not necessary or desirable to imagine a tighter corridor than the one recommended. The comparison technique will result in the dog's return route being tighter than the corridor is.

After you've thrown the dumbbell, picture it lying near the end of an imaginary corridor. The corridor should be the right size for your dog -- for example, an Aussie would have an imaginary corridor about four feet wide. The corridor

extends about two feet past where the dumbbell landed.

As soon as your dog steps outside the imaginary corridor *after* picking up the dumbbell, cheerfully give him your recall command *combined with brief, mild stimulation*. Release the button right away. Praise him after he returns to you as though he'd done nothing wrong.

The comparison of a "better way." Now give the dog a comparison, and show him how to avoid stimulation. Throw the dumbbell *somewhere else* in your training area. This time, just as the dog's mouth closes on the dumbbell, give him a quick recall command *without stimulation*. This timing, plus the recently reinforced recall command, will cause him to turn around quickly and return to you without a loop. Of course, you help him achieve the quick recall, but in the process he realizes that when he spins around and comes directly back, there's no stimulation.

Now repeat the sequence. Throw your dumbbell to a new place, and imagine your corridor again -- four feet wide, dumbbell two feet from the end. Send the dog, and say nothing as he picks up the dumbbell, thus offering him a chance to give you another looped return. If he steps outside your imaginary corridor again, give him your recall command combined with brief, mild stimulation.

Then repeat the "better way" comparison: a quick recall command just as the dog's mouth closes on the dumbbell. Then repeat again, giving him another chance to decide on his own what return route he'd like to use. Use the collar again if he returns outside the corridor. After a very few repetitions, you'll see your dog decide to come straight back and not loop. Repeat the exercise in later sessions in different training areas.

Quick turn but delayed loop. Some dogs turn around quickly after a pick-up, but then loop out of the imaginary corridor on their way back to you. Usually dogs do this to parade with their retrieve object and procrastinate delivery, thus keeping the "prize" a little longer for themselves.

Correct these dogs with your recall command combined with brief, mild stimulation when they're outside the "corridor." Then immediately give the dog the "straight recall" comparison described below. Use this comparison technique before repeating another retrieve.

The "straight recall" comparison. Right after a correction, show the dog where the correct return route is by doing a straight recall. This will show the dog how to stay in the corridor on the way back and thereby avoid the reinforced recall command.

Leave the dog in the center of the corridor, just in front of where the dumbbell was. Stand about halfway between the dog and the place from where you originally sent him to retrieve. Now call him straight to you. Calling him from halfway will keep him from arcing the other way.

Don't use stimulation (unless he doesn't come at all), and make it fun for the dog to come. Give him lots of praise when he arrives, and release him right away. If you do have to use stimulation for any reason during this recall, don't re-use this "corridor," but move to a new spot in the training area, and begin again.

Remember, dogs do regress. Whenever practicing any retrieve exercise with a "looper," be ready to press the button and call him anytime he's outside that imaginary corridor.

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