

# Ask the Obedience Experts

## Retrieving & Attention Work

By Elaine Hamill and Amy D. Stephens



As most of you know, we here in the Northeast have been officially snowed in as of late, courtesy of a blizzard. So, it is with a happy forward looking heart that we are writing a column that will be published in the SUMMER! With thoughts of warmer temps and GRASS in mind, we felt we should address some training questions. And, since most of us prefer to train outdoors, we are envisioning sunny skies and cooling breezes!

**Q.** How do you start teaching the retrieve? Collar twist, ear press, something else?

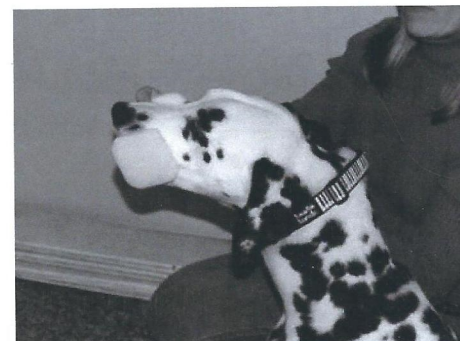
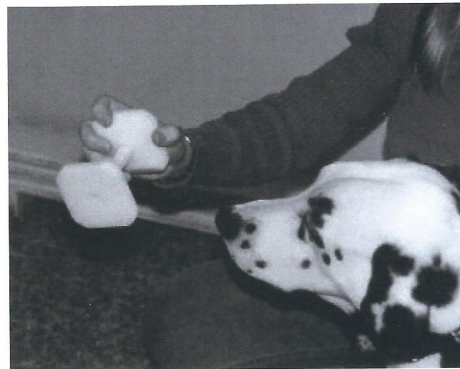
First of all, we do not “teach” the retrieve with any of the force methods. We do, however, use collar twist to reaffirm a retrieve once we have a puppy interested and play retrieving. The difference here is that the collar twist/ear pinch, etc. methods are not introductory methods, but rather follow-ups for solid retrieving.

Introducing a puppy to the dumbbell is done very early, around 2 to 3 months of age, in an enclosed space like a hallway. We are capitalizing on the puppy’s natural desire to chase and play. We immediately start using our retrieve command at this point so the pup associates that command with going for the dumbbell.

Before beginning, it is important to note that this is a learning process. Just like anything else, it may start out great, but you will have some bumps along the way. Puppies need to learn to work

through these bumps, and handlers need to understand that it is all part of the learning process. Also, one needs to factor in their age. At this stage puppies are teething, and that can and will affect their desire and ability to retrieve. Be aware of the changes in your puppy so you will better understand what is happening with their learning curves.

Since I am doing this very early, I tend to be forgiving of distractibility, or indirect sending. It is not until a puppy is



*Retrieving step two – getting Tuxedo to reach and “take it.”*

pup reaches for the dumbbell. We quickly release the pup once he has the dumbbell in his mouth. If I have played well in the past with the pup and the dumbbell, he will reach readily for it. I start this close so that there is no room for error. As the pup more and more readily reaches for the dumbbell, I will increase the distance away from his nose so he has to actually move forward for it. Little by little we reach the point of having the dumbbell with one end on the ground, the other in my hand, and then eventually completely on the ground. During all of this I am still playing with the pup and the dumbbell, but I am not simply throwing it. Once the pup really

about 5 months of age that I begin introducing “required retrieving.” At that point it is a step by step process up close, gradually increasing distances, using a combination of playing and collar twist retrieving. I start out with the pup in heel position, and me down at his level (usually kneeling). With my left hand in his collar on the right side of his neck (flat collar properly positioned under his jaw line area) and my palm facing out toward me, I hold the collar with no force of any kind. I then take the dumbbell in my right hand (holding it by one end only) and hold it directly in front of the pup’s nose and I say “take it” (retrieve command). I then gently turn my left hand in the collar toward the dumbbell (twist) as



*Amy and Tux demonstrate the proper positioning of her hand in his collar at the beginning of a collar twist retrieve. Photos by Jim Stephens.*

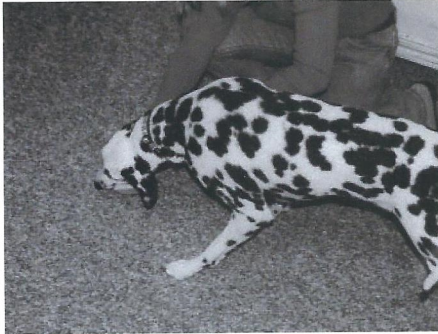
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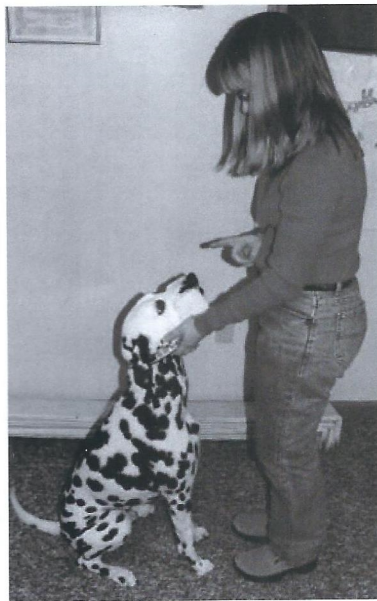
understands the retrieve, then, anytime he chooses not to retrieve I must respond by "making" him do so with a collar twist.

Note: A collar twist correction for retrieving is done on a flat collar. The purpose is simply to eliminate the option of not retrieving by directing the dog to the dumbbell.



**Q. Attention/starting heeling – Do you start with stationary attention then add**

**distractions? Do you then move to head-up walking? Straight lines or large circles and why?**



This is kind of a loaded question for both of us. Neither of us teaches our dogs "focused attention" heeling with their heads up and eyes glued to us. We prefer to focus on teaching the dog proper heel position and allow them to adapt to the head position most comfortable for them. We do, however, work very hard at teaching the dog to pay attention to our every move and be responsible for maintaining that position during all heeling.

*Retrieving step three – picking the dumbbell up off the floor and returning it to Amy.*

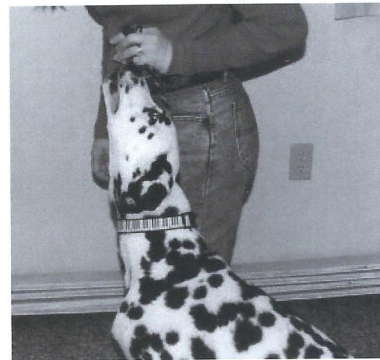
Again, we start with the puppy. We introduce them to wanting to follow us closely on the left side by using some food to show them the fun spot to be in. It is in this position that they will be rewarded, and no other position. The food is used purely as a lure for the first couple of showings of the position, then it disappears and comes back solely in a reward fashion. We do not continuously lure our dogs because that only teaches them to follow food, not WHY to be in that spot. On VERY young puppies (12 weeks or so), we tend to do most of this off lead, but we use the leash occasionally so they are used to having it there.

When on leash, we use the leash at a very short length so that they cannot be wrong and get out of position. There is no leash popping nor correcting at this stage, the leash simply limits their range of motion beyond proper heel position. Again, this is all done on a flat collar.

*Amy* – One thing I like to do in using the food is try to maintain my own body posture even when working with a puppy. This

eliminates the possibility of my bending or twisting too much, and skewing the perspective of position for the pup. So, I tend to use a wooden spoon with some peanut butter on the handle end of it. I hold this in my left hand, and have the handle just above the puppy's nose when standing. This is my basic lure, which will be cinched up little by little, until the pup learns to focus on my left hand. As the puppy grows, and gets a bit taller, I move my left hand to mid-body heel position (see AKC Rules for clarification), and the puppy learns to focus on the left side/leg of my body. We prefer to teach our dogs to heel with the handler's left hand on her waist. Since most Dals will mature at "hand swinging height," heeling this way eliminates the moving hand/dog head conflict and is a legal second command to heel.

*Elaine* – I do spend a long time heeling bent over, especially on about turns and right turns, to lure my pup along physically as well as with food. I usually make silly noises, too. Remember, a dog's body follows where his head is pointed. Keep his head where you want it and the rest falls into place. I fade all of these extra cues gradually until I am heeling upright silently. And at least half of this work is done off lead, right from the beginning. Get rid of that crutch before you are dependent on it. Today's tip: DON'T wait for your Dal on about turns. He has 4 legs; he can keep up with you! To do an about turn properly, he has to speed up as you maintain your pace (high school physics here) so you need to keep going without any hesitation and keep it exciting!



*Tux and Amy practice heel position work.*

As for straight lines or large circles – we use them all! Don't forget spirals in both directions, 360 degree turns (as tight as possible) in both directions, and heeling backward, especially at a slow pace. We want this to be active learning, and it is best for the puppy to be challenged as he grows and learns. We even introduce the automatic sit right away in heel position. It will always be required, so we ask for it first.

That's all for now. Please send us your questions so we can help. Email either [otchdal@comcast.net](mailto:otchdal@comcast.net) or [dalcollie@comcast.net](mailto:dalcollie@comcast.net). Happy Training!