

(Question)

His basic commands are coming along pretty well and he does like to fetch tennis balls and bumpers. He is enthusiastic, but not quite as obsessive about fetching as a retriever.

I do have one training question at the moment. We taught our lab to sit steady until he was told to fetch--and he did this with balls, bumpers, and when out hunting. With a pointer, I can foresee this causing problems with "whoa" training a little further on. So, if we are just playing fetch in a field do you recommend just letting him run as soon as a ball is thrown, or try to have him stay steady (sitting or standing) or start using this as preliminary whoa training?

(Answer)

Great questions. You will have a learning curve going from a retriever to a versatile dog, so ask me anything you're unsure of. Although it's possible to undo practically all mistakes and dogs are very forgiving for our training blunders, it makes the whole process a lot easier if you can avoid some pitfalls. If I end up telling you things you already know, just ignore me.

You will definitely not want to combine any type of steadiness with fetching at this juncture. It is easy to put a versatile puppy off on retrieving, so when you have a natural retriever like Django, you want to keep him well-motivated.

You could just totally do away with the "Sit" command, although I believe every dog should know how to Sit and should always Sit for a treat. Therefore, I think a balanced approach is best. The reason for this, is a dog who is constantly made to Sit will habitually go into a Sit when "pressure" (negative reinforcement) is applied, which can be frustrating if you want your dog to remain standing when whoa'd or steady on point. Personally, I don't care what the dog does (sits, stands, lays down) when I command Whoa or Wait, so long as the dog doesn't move. But many people are very particular about wanting their dog to remain standing, so overdoing the Sit command can cause problems.

You can begin working on the below commands as early as age 3 months - slowly and gently. His first year needs to be filled with a variety off-lead adventures - and not much more. Hopefully you will soon receive the book I recommended, "How to Help Gun Dogs Train Themselves." This is my "bible" for training versatile gun dogs under 1 year of age. Follow the book's instructions and you will have a great hunting dog. Of course, you also need to socialize him with dogs and people, and he has to have good manners so you can stand to live with him. But formal training, for the most part, can and should wait.

A word of caution... one of the biggest problems I have with my puppy buyers is getting them to relax and enjoy the first year and lay off the obedience drills. We are right now "fixing" Tucker, who is the second of my puppies that didn't learn how to be a hunting dog during that all-important first year. These puppies are so smart and cooperative that it's really easy to teach them obedience commands. The problem is, they become too dependent on their owners for direction. A versatile hunting dog needs to be self-confident and bold, and he needs to be able to think for himself. You'll always be able to reign him in later. Like they say, "A dog is a lot like a rope and you can't push a rope, but you can always reel it in."

REWARDS:

Big smiles, clapping, petting (long strokes, not patting), verbal praise, and treats are all appropriate at his age. No tug of war, ever. Young dogs are particularly well-motivated by treating and you should use this to your advantage while you can.

You will wean him off treats over time. Don't worry, you'll never have to bring treats hunting :-). It's extremely important for you to treat within seconds of the behavior you want to reinforce. This means you need to have treats with you or close at hand at all times. I put treats in little containers all over the house and every morning I fill my pocket with treats so I am ready for the day with my puppy. Treats need to be worthwhile and special for a dog to want them enough to be effective. Kibble is **not** a treat. Look for something small, soft and meaty for treats. Dingo's training treats are a favorite for my dogs. The same thing, but less expensive, are Walmart's Old Roy Jerky Sticks. Downside is you have to break them into pieces yourself.

COMMANDS:

(1) "Come" - This is the most important command and the only command he must know in order to go hunting with you. At 5 months, he is at the age where he'll get distracted and not come when called. You need to have him start wearing the e-collar every time he goes outside so he learns to associate wearing the e-collar with freedom (and off-lead outing). After about 2 weeks of doing this, you can start training the "come" command using the low stimulation method. Do not cut corners with this training and make sure you setup plenty of distractions while training. This training could save his life.

(2) "Bring it here!" - It's important you don't use the Fetch command at this time. It's too soon to use "pressure" (negative reinforcement) in his training. Since you cannot physically (and nicely) force compliance, you don't want to use the Fetch command, else you may inadvertently teach him he doesn't have to obey the command. For now, bringing you things should be a fun game for which he is rewarded. Never scold nor reprimand. Big smiles, lots of praise and treats are what's needed. (A) When you throw something and he brings it back, do not take it from him right away (use your forearm if necessary to keep it in his mouth) and pet/praise him for holding it. Then command, "give" (or "out" or "drop") and take it from him, giving him a treat (or 5) in return. It's crucial you stop throwing before he decides to quit. Stop while he's still wanting to play. He should never be the one to end the game. (B) Whenever he picks something up on his own, try to get him to come to you (or walk over to him). Do not take it right away, but pet/praise him for holding it. Then command "give" and trade him for a treat. Give it right back to him, if it's something he can have. Lots of times he'll be carrying something he prizes (may be edible) and you want him to enjoy giving it to you. Thus the trade. If you do this enough, you won't ever have to deal with having him run away from you with a bird in his mouth. It's fairly common to see dogs play "keep away" with a bird. Your treat needs to be better than the bird, however. Hot dogs often work great when you need to trade for some critter he's caught. When you start training with birds, it's a good idea to have a hot dog or two in your pocket as insurance for being able to get the bird without a game of keep-away.

(3) "Whoa" - This command means to "stop and remain until commanded otherwise." The steps outlined in NAVHDA's "green" book (Training Versatile Hunting Dogs) for training whoa are very good. Don't start formal whoa training until he's at least 9 months old AND has been through a hunting season. For now, simply teach him what the word means. Walk on the leash, say "whoa" and both of you stop. Praise, treat. When he comes in the door, say "whoa" and stop him to wipe off his feet. Treat. Simply add this word into his daily routine when and where it's easy to do so. Use only when you can totally control the situation so he cannot make a mistake. You only want to praise and reward him at this time. No reprimands.

(4) "Wait" - This command differs from "whoa" in that the dog is already stopped.

For instance, he is standing at the door to go outside. You command him to "wait," which means to "remain until commanded otherwise." Just teach him what the word means. Use this like you do "whoa" as part of his daily routine. Only positive reinforcement. No reprimands for now.

(5) "Stay" - You'll rarely use this command, because it's implied in other commands such as sit, down, whoa and wait. The only time I use "stay" is when I'm leaving the house, yard, or truck and I don't want the dog to come with me.

Starting now:

You should never allow him to jump on people. This can be difficult to enforce when you have kids and neighbors who love dogs, but it may prevent him from unintentionally hurting someone. The best methods to use are to combine Operant Conditioning with Avoidance Conditioning to stop the jumping. Use Operant Conditioning to teach him to sit whenever he's approached by (or he approaches) a person. This takes lots of treats and incremental steps toward developing the behavior. You want him to understand it pays (lot of treats) to sit quietly when he's around people and there's zero reward for doing otherwise. You do not speak to the dog while doing this conditioning. It's all non-verbal communication. He should already have been taught to sit for a treat without command. You simply be taking that a step further. Do not command him to sit, do not reprimand him (verbally or otherwise) if he doesn't, do not touch him in any way unless he jumps on someone, in which case you will use Avoidance Conditioning. If he jumps, you want to use your feet/legs to make this very uncomfortable/unpleasant for him, everyone cross your arms across your chest (dogs want your hands on them) and turn your back on him. Then quickly offer treats so he will sit.

You should also not allow him to drag you to meet/greet other people and/or dogs. Greeting others should always be on your terms. This may keep him from being hurt by another dog.

Versatile dogs are not quite as easy-going and docile as most Labs tend to be. He will probably be a confident dog, even though he now rolls onto his back in a submissive gesture when meeting an older, larger dog. As he gets older and his confidence starts to show, you should verbally reprimand him for growling at another dog and remove him from the other dog's presence. Generally, you should have two dogs meet for the first time off-lead and away from either dogs' home, crate, kennel, vehicle or other dogs they live with. (Neither dog should have anything nearby to defend.) When they are leashed, they feel trapped. It is unusual for dogs to fight to the point of serious injury. One dog usually backs down before that happens. If he gets into a fight with another dog, do not shock him with the e-collar or allow the other dog's owner to shock his dog. This is absolutely the worst thing one can do, because the dog being shocked thinks the opposing dog is causing the pain and it will escalate the fight to the point where a dog may be severely injured or even killed. You must get in between the dogs and physically break it up. I suggest using legs and feet (kick them if you have to) so you don't get your hands, arms and face bitten.