

Q. I'm following Joan Bailey's instructions for beginning forced retrieve training, except I've been using a bumper with wings instead of a bird pelt. He complies and holds it 60 seconds. I started with soft and hard bumpers, then the winged bumper. That took weeks of daily training. He's not happy about carrying the winged bumper, so I feel I need to ask for help, because I'm afraid I'm too easy on him and the training is taking too long. I felt Joan's method of using a pelt might make it an easier transition to shot birds later. Still, he will only take 2 or 3 steps, at best, before wanting to drop it. The goal is to carry it and jump, etc. I like Joan's method of using a prong collar for negative pressure, because it is easier on me. How is your process different? Maybe I have to ear pinch (which I was hoping to avoid)?

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A. Although Joan recommends using a bird pelt in her book, I don't know anyone who uses anything with bird feathers or scent near the beginning of their forced retrieve training. Closest thing they might use is a Dokken, but even that's down the way a bit in the training. Obviously I don't follow that portion of Joan's book to the letter. I do have a bumper that's covered in feathers, but I only use that toward the end of the training. As far as transitioning, I have yet to see a bird dog trained with forced retrieve that won't retrieve a bird. For one thing, it's part of the training. You get to a point where you use frozen birds that you've thawed (ALWAYS thaw your birds% before using them for training). In reality, it might not matter either way.

The ear pinch and toe hitch are used to get the dog to take the bumper from you. You're not at that portion of the training yet. Personally I no longer use an ear pinch after making Anna hand shy. I much prefer Joan's method of using a prong collar. It takes longer, but you don't have to worry about it backfiring on you. If I had a dog that absolutely wouldn't transition to taking the bumper from me, I'd use the e-collar before I'd use an ear pinch again. I don't like the idea of me putting my hands on my dog in a painful way. Our breed tends to be too sensitive for that.

I vary with Joan's method with the 60-second hold. Usually I probably only make the dog hold for half that amount of time. Sometimes even less. Having the dog hold for longer or shorter periods of time, so it's not always the same, is a good idea. Make sure you're positive reinforcing (operant conditioning) while he is holding, regardless of how long it is. I do find it a bit odd that it took weeks for you to get him to hold a bumper in his mouth for a short period of time. Is he up on a training table while you are doing this training? If not, you should probably rig something up so he's off the ground. Dogs are far more compliant when you get them out of their element. That way too, when they first hold and carry, you are just going to the other end of the table and it's pretty easy to hold on to the dog and the bumper so it stays in his mouth.

It's hard for me to know if you're being too soft on him and whether or not that's why the training is taking so long. You never have to be mean. But you have to be firm and in control. For those 10 minutes you should expect his complete attention. And you have to praise a lot when he does things correctly.

The other thing that's critical is coming up with the proper reward/motivator for him. Not all dogs are food motivated. You have to find the one thing that totally trips his trigger and use that for motivation. For a lot of dogs it's a particular food - usually meat. But for other dogs it's a special toy they only get to play with after training. Or playing fetch with a ball. Or going for a run or a swim. For Anna it was licking me in the face. For Tess and Bella it was going for a run to the pond. For KD it was hot dogs. You need to find something he likes so much that he'll gladly do the work for 10 minutes in order to get it.