

Q. I need a tip and/or your perspective on Joan Bailey's method of the dog walking while the dummy is being held. Being a newbie trainer, I'm lacking confidence. My dog has taken a while to get to the point where he holds a soft puppy bumper with pheasant wings on it. The light bulb came on last week and he now holds all objects used for 60 seconds. Walking with a dummy/bumper in mouth is now happening but, like holding, he doesn't like it. I feel like he progressed too slowly with the "hold" lessons. I'm persistent and follow Joan's method to the tee. Sessions are short and broken up. Always end in fun. I see the pressure on his face, which I believe is expected as Joan mentions this is hard on a dog. How long should he take, at the longest, to walk around with the pheasant wing bumper in his mouth? Yes, I know all dogs are different, but I figure you have seen all types.

A. First off, I wouldn't be using a bumper with pheasant wings on it. Having wings on it might make him more apt to take it from you, but might make it less desirable for carrying. Also, he must learn retrieving isn't always fun - it's a job. I would be using either a paint roller or a canvas puppy bumper for most of his training at this stage. If he has a favorite stuffed toy or ball, you can incorporate that into this training as well, using it occasionally to make the training a bit more fun for him. Later, when you start working on picking things up or taking things from you, I'd use a variety of objects including wooden trainingbucks. These work well because the ends elevate the center section where the dog takes hold. You can also use a couple of bricks to elevate your training objects. I wouldn't, however, use anything with dead bird parts or bird scent on it.

As you know, the first step is "hold," followed by "hold and carry." At first, if he'll walk a couple of steps, even begrudgingly, that's enough. You might also simply have him sit or stand with the bumper in his mouth, depending upon how he starts out. The point is to get him to move with the bumper in his mouth. I haven't had very many dogs who will carry enthusiastically. I am putting a lot of pressure on the dog, forcing him/her to carry, so I don't expect happiness. All one can expect is compliance. There's absolutely no way for me to predict how long it will take for him to carry a distance without dropping. Generally the hold and hold/carry steps go pretty quickly. What can take a long time is getting the dog to pick something up off the ground. Usually that's what you'll spend the most time on. Most people get through all the forced retrieve training steps in 3-4 months if they work on it a little bit every day. The more cooperative a dog is, the more quickly he should decide to comply (stubborn dogs can seemingly take forever). This, of course, assumes he understands what is being asked of him. Always watch your dog for signs of confusion when you are training something new. It's critical you learn to read your dog or it will be impossible to train him. I've seen too many people mistake confusion for defiance and attempt to get compliance through negative reinforcement. They only make things worse. On the flipside, if you're sure your dog understands what he is supposed to do and he's refusing to do it, negative reinforcement is necessary.

Also, it's important you are using some form of Operant Conditioning along with your forced retrieve training. Why? Because you don't have any other way to give him positive reinforcement for taking the bumper into his mouth or walking with it. His mouth is full, so you can't give him a treat. You can only give him a treat after he gives the bumper to you, in which case he's only getting positive reinforcement for

“give” and nothing else. The most common form of Operant Conditioning is clicker training. Personally I don’t use a clicker. Instead, I use the word “nice” as my click.