



The Retrieve

By John Johnson (England)



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John Johnson & Parvenu Yuri "Tinkerbelle" - SchH 3

I have found that the retrieve can create many problems with some dogs. The biggest problem is that some dogs find the dumbbell so rewarding that they do not want to bring it back or give it up. With this in mind, I try to teach them that the dumbbell creates rewards, rather than it being the reward itself. I achieve this by teaching the dumbbell at a very young age.

To begin with, I will take my puppy somewhere that he associates with learning and earning rewards. I will sit in a chair and show the puppy the dumbbell. Incidentally, this is done at a stage where the puppy is still into food treats. Most puppies are curious and will either touch or sniff the dumbbell. I will immediately click this action, something that my puppy will already be conditioned to, and reward. Sometimes it may be necessary to move the

dumbbell a little just to make it more interesting and get the puppy to notice it. Once my puppy understands that touching the dumbbell is what I want him to do, I will then withhold the click. The puppy will usually touch the dumbbell a few more times, getting more insistent on each touch, but I will still ignore. Frustration will then kick in and the puppy will then mouth the dumbbell, at which point I will click and reward. I will continue to progress along these lines, withholding the click until the puppy has improved his hold of the dumbbell each time. I will move this along as quickly as possible as I have found that if I stay at one stage for too long, then the puppy can become locked in that phase of the exercise. Just to clarify, I will quickly move along from the puppy paying attention to the dumbbell, then actually touching the dumbbell, progressing to mouthing the dumbbell, and finally holding the dumbbell calmly before he has his reward.

The one thing I am never in a rush to do is to try and take the dumbbell from the puppy. With some dogs this can make them possessive of the dumbbell, and then the fight for it can become more rewarding than the treat. So what I will do at each level is allow the puppy to drop the dumbbell once he has been clicked, give him the reward, and then calmly pick the dumbbell up myself, ready to progress with the exercise. Many people believe that doing this will encourage the dog to drop the dumbbell when they see fit, but I can assure you that if done properly, this will never happen.

All of this is done without giving the puppy any commands or cues. I never put a command to ANY exercise until I am confident that the puppy has a complete understanding of what he needs to do. This way, any mistakes can be rectified



Editor's Note: John mentioned when writing this article that he just had to try it with his veteran & sent this picture in with his article - Prince - pictured at 12 1/2 years old without messing up an actual command. It is only when I am confident that my puppy knows he has to hold the dumbbell that I will begin to cue the command with the word "hold" as I present the dumbbell.

When the puppy is holding the dumbbell calmly every time it is presented to him, I will continue by placing the dumbbell on the floor. I never throw the dumbbell at this stage as this could make it seem like a toy to the puppy, thus making it more rewarding than my treats. As he has been given a full understanding of what he needs to do to create a food reward, he will very quickly pick the dumbbell up off the floor. Sometimes I have had to go back a few steps by clicking a touch, followed by mouthing, followed by a hold. This is okay to do. Now we have a puppy that is consistently picking up a static dumbbell, and as it has been done this way, you will not get mouthing or playing with it, unless you have clicked this behaviour at any time.



Cornerpix Dixieland Rock "Dixie"

Once the puppy understands that picking up the dumbbell is rewarding, I will introduce the present. The way I do this is in the chair. I would have already conditioned the puppy to present whilst in the chair when I taught him the recall. Now I just add the dumbbell to the exercise. For those of you who have not read the recall article, the way I teach the recall is to throw a piece of food away from me, letting the puppy chase it. Once the puppy has caught and eaten it, I will recall the puppy using another piece of food in my hand and use it to lure the dog into position in between my legs, which are placed about the puppy's bum width apart. Once there, I will raise my hands slightly encouraging him into the sit, using the food as a lure/reward. When the puppy is confidently coming in between my legs and sitting without the lure, I am happy he knows the front present. I



Simon & Cornerpix Reddy Teddy "Nemo"



will place the dumbbell on the floor beside the chair and wait. As my puppy has a firm understanding of picking the dumbbell up off the floor and also presenting when my hands are held in front of me, he will pick up the dumbbell and bring it into the present. I am happy to go back to using a food lure to get the present if I think the puppy needs it. Once he has been doing this a few times, I will then slide the dumbbell about six or eight feet away and allow him to run out, pick up the dumbbell and present. This phase can sometimes bring out article guarding and unwillingness to bring the dumbbell back, so to prevent this from happening, I will click the puppy when he is halfway

towards the dumbbell and reward, reinforcing that it is not the dumbbell that is the reward. If the puppy does become protective over the dumbbell despite this training, then a piece of food is not going to be enough to prevent him from reaching what he perceives to be his prized possession. It is then time to click and reward with something of higher value, and that will depend on the individual puppy and what he perceives as a higher value item. Once he understands that the dumbbell creates rewards, then training with it becomes much easier. The next step is teaching the puppy to wait before he can go and retrieve the dumbbell. The way I teach this is by keeping him on a lead and telling him to wait. I will then drop a piece of food on the floor. Most of the time, the puppy will try to get it. I will use the lead only to block the puppy from getting the food; I will never correct using the lead. Clicker training conditions puppies to solve problems, and so, very quickly he will pay attention to me once he realises he cannot get to the food. As soon as I have eye contact, I will ask him to sit, if he is not sitting already. Once he is sitting, I will repeat the wait command and drop another piece of food, repeating the whole exercise again. This may take a few attempts, but the first time I have success and the puppy does not move, I will click and allow him to get the piece of food. I will do this a few times to make sure that the puppy has learned exactly what he has to do when told to wait. All of this is done without a dumbbell present.

It is now time to introduce the dumbbell with the wait and present. I will begin doing this in my chair, the same way as before except the puppy has to wait before he can go and get the dumbbell. Once this is successful and correct, I will progress by leaning against a wall to get the straight present. The way I do this is to stand up, throw the dumbbell, and

send the dog to retrieve it. Whilst the dog is running out to get the dumbbell, I will lean with my back against a wall or the side of my van with my feet extended in front of me about the dog's bum width apart. This is to help guide the dog into a straight present, using the same method I would use for the recall. I will give the puppy big rewards for getting this right, and as always, a big reward depends on what YOUR puppy sees as a big reward, I will throw the dumbbell left or right and with the help of my extended feet, I will help my puppy obtain a straight sit and will always reward for getting it right.

Next I will stand up straight, but I will still give the puppy some help to get it right. I will keep my feet the puppy's bum width apart and also keep my hands where I want my puppy to present the dumbbell, i.e., in front of me. Slowly over time I will drop off all of the help and signals, but if at any time it starts to go wrong, I will go back to where it was going right and start again.



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