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The **10-** **Minute** **Retriever**



How to Make an Obedient and
Enthusiastic Gun Dog in
10 Minutes a Day

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CHAPTER 1

PRINCIPLES & EQUIPMENT

WE WOULD FIRST LIKE TO MAKE IT CLEAR that our intention is not to convey the idea that a retriever can be trained in ten minutes flat. Of course, that is obvious. We hope that anybody undertaking the task of producing a well-trained working retriever will be endowed with sufficient patience and energy to see the job through to a satisfactory level. Further, we hope that an aspiring retriever trainer will enter this project in a spirit of love for dogs, and will desire to continue training and improving upon the dog's performance throughout his life.

This book is not written for the lazy person. It is written for all of you who face limitations of time due to the necessity of providing for yourselves and your families, and who would like to achieve the remarkable result of a trained hunting or competition retriever. The dedicated but busy trainer can do this in short, approximately 10-minute, work sessions.

The figure of ten minutes is not arbitrary. Our experience indicates that a dog's interest level, and associated learning gains, begins to fall off sharply somewhere in the five- to ten-minute range. Professional trainers typically train from 15 to 25 dogs at

a time. At the upper limit, it is possible to give 25 dogs a good workout twice a day and keep their level of proficiency improving. We allow, of course, for the fact that dogs, like people, have their ups and downs.

But how is it possible for a professional retriever trainer to give 25 dogs adequate training in an 8-hour day to keep them competitive in retrieving's toughest sport — field trials? Generally, once a test (or lesson) is set up, it is possible to train six dogs an hour. This schedule makes for a total of 24 dogs in the first four hours, and the same for the second four. Our point is not to argue that a pro can do a good job with a truck and trailer load of dogs, but to illustrate that the most skillful and proficient retrievers in the country are trained largely on a schedule of 10-minute sessions.

In most cases, during the first few months of training, much of the time spent will be in the convenience of your back yard. It does not take much space to teach basic obedience, force fetching, and the other rudiments; in fact, much of it can be done in your living room or kitchen. You can schedule ten-minute lessons at your convenience.

As your dog advances and you do more work in the field, your time investment will increase to encompass transportation, test setup, etc. You may join a training group in which you take your turn at throwing dummies or birds in order to get others to throw for your dog. While the actual training allotment may be approximately ten minutes, time taken getting equipment together, shooting the breeze with training partners and so forth, can run the training session into considerably more time.

How many of these ten-minute sessions per day or week are required? At least one per day with the possible exception of one day off per week. This is minimal. Your dog will probably not progress very well if he is not given at least this much attention.

How many of these sessions per day would optimize your training efforts?

We suggest that one morning and one evening session is close to ideal, with some periods of socialization, exercise, and other amenities in between. Some trainers really go at it tooth and nail with as many as four training sessions per day. Some of these individuals have accomplished remarkable things in a very short period of their dog's life, such as making FC or AFC titles before two years of age, or making Master Hunters at 12 or 13 months. These accomplishments are a testimony to the dog training expertise as well as the dedication of these trainers, and to the inherent excellence of their dogs.

In the case of average dogs, which most of us have, striving for extraordinary achievement is not advisable. Naturally, do not hold a great student back, but the more common pitfall with novice trainers is pushing too hard. Failing to cover the groundwork thoroughly, or worse, souring the dog toward work, commonly results.

Training dogs over a period of years has revealed that they have both short-term and long-term memories. Short-term learning may be accomplished in a few sessions, perhaps even one. The dog may come back the next day demonstrating that he remembers what he was taught the day before. However, if the training procedure is not repeated for a period of days or longer, he will probably demonstrate that he has forgotten that lesson. Most lessons, from obedience through force fetching on up, take several weeks to "set" in a dog's long-term memory.

We cannot over emphasize that these lessons should be limited to ten minutes, or even five, as a dog's attention, and his willingness to accept the pressure of training, will begin to flag at about that time. Training in excess of this will generally reverse the learning process, causing a dog to backslide and become reluctant and unenthusiastic.

The fine professional trainer Charlie Kostrewski said, "Never try to accomplish too much in one day — get a little done, apply a little pressure if you have to, and come back for more tomorrow. Don't rough the dog up too much, quit while he still has enthusiasm — and feel for the dog." We think this is still good advice.

The best modern trainers seem to subscribe to this thinking. In most cases, if a dog has difficulty with a test, particularly a marking test, these trainers will see him through as best they can by simplifying (as described in the text). After the correction, the dog is generally put up without repeating the test. The next day, the principle of that test is repeated in another location, looking for improvement.

We have found that repeating a principle over and over in various settings until that idea is well learned is preferable to "jumping around" by challenging your dog with a dizzying potpourri of tests. For example, if you want to teach an especially difficult triple mark, you may do it by running the three marks as singles on Monday and Tuesday, throwing the triple with dummies on Wednesday, doing the same test with dead birds on Thursday, and with two dead birds and a shot flier on Friday. Then you might be ready to run that difficult test in the Master Hunter or a devastating triple in the Amateur All-Age on Saturday.

Finally, we note that 10-minute sessions are good for the trainer's motivation as well as the dog's. Consistency of work (daily or twice-daily sessions) is critical to a dog's progress. Even procrastinators and people under time pressure can usually manage a ten-minute break with their dog once a day. The combination of surprisingly rapid progress with brief outings is reward enough for most beginners to become consistent, enthusiastic trainers. Just keep on training at least once every day — if you can't spare ten minutes, work for five, or review yesterday's lesson for one minute if that is all the time you have.

Principles

We have written this book for the purpose of helping you train your retriever humanely, effectively, and in a manner that is enjoyable to both of you. You will benefit most, however, if you recognize its inherent limitations by virtue of being a book.

One of the most important keys to humane and rapid training is the ability to “read” your dog; that is, to evaluate her responses to a training procedure. If the dog did what you expected, she may understand or she may have just been lucky. If she does something else, or nothing at all, she may be confused, recalcitrant, or you may have inadvertently taught her to do the wrong thing. Experience is the greatest aid in interpreting these responses and deciding how to proceed. That is exactly what we cannot put into a book. If we attempted to catalog all the possible responses to each training procedure, this book would be inordinately long. In places, we have described a few common responses, but you can expect your dog to do something completely different at some point.

It is easier to learn from a person than from a book, and one way to fill in the gaps is to seek help from an experienced trainer. Many pros will give lessons for a reasonable fee, and many amateur trainers will be more than willing to help if you throw some birds for their dogs. This solution has its pitfalls, though. Those most ready to offer advice may be least qualified to give it. Look for someone who obtains good results with a minimum of correction in the field, and avoid those who preach that it isn't a good training session unless the dog gets “burned” with the electric collar. Someone whose dogs are stylish and eager, but also under control, is likely to have the ability to help you interpret your dog's behavior.

If you choose to train on your own, we offer some simple guidelines for making training decisions. If your dog performs an exercise correctly, practice it a few times to give her the reward of

competence. If your dog is nearly perfect in these repetitions, move on. Build on that exercise or introduce a new one. If failure at the new level shows your dog didn't really understand, no harm has been done. Simply fall back and review the previous exercise. On the other hand, holding a dog back may adversely affect her ability to learn.

If your dog does not perform as intended, you will almost never go wrong treating the problem as a lack of understanding. In basic obedience, a correction may be justified if your dog has previously demonstrated that she understands the exercise. In most other situations, the fastest and easiest solution is to simplify what you ask of her. If you back up to an exercise your dog knows well, you are justified in correcting a failure or refusal. Then progress to the current problem in a series of smaller steps. This may require one training session, or several.

In summary, any time you find yourself asking WHY a dog is doing something wrong, it is a good idea to assume that it is because the dog has not been thoroughly taught how to do it right. Plan some sessions to teach correct behavior step by step instead of resorting to a correction which your dog may not understand.

Training Methods

There are many ways to train dogs. We do not train any two dogs exactly the same. In this book, we present an approach that has been successful for a wide variety of dogs. Our techniques are based on methods developed by some of the nation's best retriever trainers over decades of training and competition, plus a few of our own invention. They have been tested time and again, in competition and hunting, and they work.

More important than the precise method, however, is the progression of training. Build upon earlier exercises and make

sure the fundamentals of *sit*, *here*, *heel*, and *fetch* are solid before attempting advanced work, and always consider how a day's lesson will affect your dog's attitude. We caution you to make sure all of your training is presented to your dog in a consistent fashion. Mixing fundamentally different approaches may be confusing to your dog, and rob her of confidence. Following our method throughout, while not the only way to train a dog, is a good way to avoid confusion.

Training Principles: Behavior and Behaviorism

Any action performed by a dog is *behavior*, from scratching itself to executing a complicated retrieve. *Behaviorism*, the scientific study of behavior founded by B. F. Skinner, has elucidated principles as to how behavior is influenced and controlled. While these principles do not rely on thought or conscious learning, it is worth noting that they do not necessarily imply the absence of a thinking process. In fact, the principles of behaviorism may be applied productively to human subjects as well as to dogs. Although our training techniques were developed by experimentation and trial and error, they constitute a highly-effective application of the principles of behaviorism.

We include this section not in an attempt to invent a new training method starting from the principles of behaviorism — we don't believe we could surpass the methods developed by trial-and-error over several decades — but to provide a structured basis for some of our recommendations. The need for consistency in training, the futility of punishment, the importance of developing a puppy's love of retrieving to the highest order possible, and other important training practices, can all be explained in terms of the principles of behaviorism.

Reinforcement, i.e. Reward

Psychologists tell us that animals and humans learn faster, and

retain lessons better, when correct responses are rewarded or “positively” reinforced, than when learning is motivated only through punishment. In retriever training, most of the rewards are built into the work. Most retriever trainers do not characterize their work in terms of rewards, yet today’s highly-refined training methods manipulate reinforcement very effectively.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the principal reward in retriever training is the *act of retrieving*. Therefore, puppy training needs to emphasize the development of a dog’s love of retrieving in order to make that reinforcement as strong as possible to support later training. Other rewards dogs quickly learn to like are praise (discussed in Chapter 4) and the satisfaction of completing an exercise that has been learned (making repetition a useful motivator). Most dogs also seem to enjoy movement: walking briskly, running, jumping, etc.

Correction

Some behaviors, such as chewing, digging, and running away while being chased, are inherently rewarding to most retrievers. These are called *self-reinforcing behaviors*. The more a dog is allowed to indulge in them, the greater its motivation to repeat them. Chasing a moving object and carrying something in the mouth (the behaviors we modify into retrieving) are self-reinforcing to most retrievers.

Other behaviors are likely to be “accidentally” reinforced in the normal course of events if we do not interfere. Jumping up on people is reinforced by closeness to the person’s face, and often by attention. “Cheating” (taking a roundabout route on a retrieve) may be rewarded by speedy completion of the retrieve. We address these unwanted activities, whether they are spontaneous or occur in training, by preventing reinforcement. With little puppies, we simply prevent opportunities for the behavior.

The *10-Minute Retriever* reflects the authors' belief that daily ten-minute training sessions best suit a retriever's attention span and lead to rapid learning. This book is easy to use for the absolute beginner and yet deeply informative for the serious student of retriever training. The text has the information most needed by the owner of a pet retriever: how to make it reliably obedient and well-mannered. It has the information aspiring retriever trainers need: how to force fetch, how to set up tests in the field, and how to use an electric collar humanely and effectively. The emphasis of this training method is on obtaining necessary control and good manners while maximizing the dog's enthusiasm by establishing training situations where the dog desires to cooperate. Primary importance is placed on developing and enhancing the desire to retrieve, from early puppyhood onward. The method presented provides a solid foundation to the dog and owner continuing to advance retrieve training (blind retrieves and competition).

JOHN AND AMY DAHL have over 30 years of retriever training experience between them. They have won numerous field-trials, five State Gun Dog Championships, handled six dogs to Field Championships, and trained owner-handled dogs to their titles, including two Chesapeakes and two Dual Champions. They are regular and popular contributors to *The Retriever Journal* magazine.

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