

Enjoying the Journey by Andy Attar

Starting the Yard Program: Keeping The End In Mind

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Up to this point, we have had a pup that is very light hearted about training. And surely by now we know where we stand with the pup. We have socialized the pup correctly, spent many hours in the field, encouraged her desire for birds, and hopefully somewhat explained the need for a little teamwork in all of this. Now we will be channeling her energy and begin to introduce some basic rules that will never be broken.

This is not all done at once and, through the basics program or yard work, the pup will learn to deal with pressure (aversives), retrieve on command (force fetch), and really sharpen up on her obedience. Lastly, the pup will eventually learn (in a rudimentary fashion), how to go reasonably straight to a bird and to, in a basic way, take a cast or change direction. In essence when we finish, she will have the tools necessary to run blinds and handle on marks when the need arises. These will be the methods that we will use to teach them to fight factors such as wind, water, core, etc., on their way to their marks and blinds.

The Importance of Balance In Training

An example of a lack of balance in a pup's life is when a pup is kept in a kennel all day, away from the family. Most pups that are not socialized correctly turn into slow learners, at best. Keep the whole picture in mind. Dogs, like us, thrive on balance.

Look at the accompanying flow chart. Herein lies the chronology of the next three to six months. The chart is split into two sections. The left side signifies the particular drill work, and the right side denotes the approximate stage of field work in which the dog should be involved. It is very important to note that the strength of this program revolves around the two separate areas of training paralleling each other.

Getting through the yard work chart before the pup has had much field experience does you very little good. In fact, it can be rather dangerous. We must do the best we can to keep training balanced. We occasionally get pups in from an ambitious owner who has done all the yard work and, due to the owner's schedule, marks were sacrificed. Let's face it, marks require us to go to the field with other people to get anything accomplished. Sometimes life's demands just do not let us get away as often as we should. These pups many times have a "lack of balance" exemplified with a real lack of experience in the field.

This "lack of experience" causes all kinds of problems, including poor momentum towards the marks. And when the pups start their blinds, many times their "negotiating skills" in the field are so poor that they struggle to understand the concepts of momentum on blinds.

Negotiating skills affect the way the pup deals with factors. For example, if a pup has never swam across a channel before and she is asked to do so on a mark, she may handle the situation poorly by trying to go around it and the end result could be she forgets where the mark is located. Another example is heavy cover that many times encourages pups to hunt instead of driving through to get the mark.

Through experience, pups learn negotiating skills. To emphasize the point further, perhaps a dog is being asked to run a blind through heavy cover with a strong cross wind. If this dog has not had the experience on marks to deal with these factors, the chances of a successful outcome are slim.

The word "momentum" implies energy and focus to get to a particular area. Dogs develop momentum with positive field experiences.

- Dogs develop momentum by keeping their head up and making good use of their brains and eyes while marking.
- Dogs develop momentum when they have an intense burning desire to find the birds.
- Dogs develop momentum from balanced training and secure, focused minds.
- Dogs develop momentum by having a ton of marks thrown for them.

Some dogs show signs of this right away. Other dogs develop later. And unfortunately, some dogs never develop momentum. Momentum, in general, is a trait that is inherent in a dog and must be nurtured and brought out. Through a philosophy called "Destination Training," we can help develop momentum in a way that keeps attitudes up and learning rates very high.

Destination Training

Let's take a moment and talk specifically about this philosophy, which must be understood in order to fully enhance the use of the yard program and maintain a strong attitude in the yard and the field. Again, learning rates in retrievers are maximized when their attitudes are strong!

An example of destination training is to keep the fall area clear of cover so the pup can "lock in" on the bird. Another example would be while doing pile work always making sure the white bumpers are totally visible and there is no cover to inhibit the sight of the pile. Or later on while training on cheating singles, making sure you repeat the mark if you have a problem which demands you call the pup

back to the line. As a final example, when starting blinds, make sure pattern blinds are done thoroughly and instilling enough “sight blinds” before you run cold blinds.

Destination training permeates through all-age training as well. When dogs get confused and have problems on marks, the trainer must decipher bad lines versus bad marks and train accordingly. We will tackle this later, but it is important to note that the destination training philosophy is important through the whole training process. The struggle in training is between teaching dogs how to “line” versus “mark”.

Deciding at what age the pup is responsible for taking straight lines is another way of describing our dilemma. Fighting the factors is a key to a straight line. We will be teaching dogs to line through destination training and handling and not simply taking a straight line for the sake of taking a straight line. Most dogs do not understand “straight line” training... and it is very hard on their attitudes. Straight line training – as we refer to it here – involves calling the dog back when it does not take a straight line and sending her until she does. When training like this occurs, the dogs may get very nervous and anxious about their retrieving and begin to worry less about their end goal or their “destination”.

Remember, at this point in our pup's training we are not worried about straight, perfect lines. We want tons of success; we are not calling pups back to get better lines! Success, success, Success!

The Flow Chart

Let's begin with a 6 – 8 month old pup. If we have followed the earlier training discussions, we have this pup doing successful 50 – 100 yard singles on land and water. These singles may not be very challenging, but the “marking game” is now understood by the pup.

The pup comes to the line (on lead or just being helped), looks out at the white-coated gunner and knows a mark will be thrown. Perhaps we have introduced multiple guns in the field, and the pup can be directed to the gun that will be throwing. She is not necessarily steady, but through lots of training she understands she has to wait until released. She gets the bird and brings it back to us, or at least near us.

Let's now concentrate on the beginning of the flow chart.

Pre Yard Work

We have already been dabbling in the pre yard area of the flow chart where we have done some simple obedience on a lead including remote sits, heel on both sides, and some “here-sit” drills. Now we will begin to get more serious with these procedures and begin to demand more precision, and will be using some aversive training techniques to shape these behaviors. An example of this would be using a choke chain or pinch collar to enforce here and heel, and using the heeling stick to enforce sit. These training implements cannot be thrown at the pup all at once.

In most cases we have used the chain and the heeling stick to correct some behaviors, but at this stage we are beginning to ask the pup to be more precise and will correct behaviors more often if warranted. A very important training principle to keep in mind is that the use of aversive tools is not a teaching technique, but an enforcement technique.

We do not use the implements of force to teach the dogs, we use them to enforce what has already been taught. (This all important training axiom was first made popular by Rex Carr, the founder of electronic collar training.) Keeping this in mind throughout the dog's training life is extremely important. This stage of training initiates a very important relationship between you and the pup. Be very careful to create appropriate responses at this stage. These responses will carry through to the rest of the pup's life. For example, many pups react initially to a pull of a pinch or choke collar by pulling the opposite way. If we treat this pull as an act of disobedience and pull harder, we may be creating some unwanted and unwarranted resistance. Read the pup's effort level. The same can be true when introducing the heeling stick. Many dogs shy away from the stick. An attempt to correct a pup for sit with the heeling stick can result in a “Flare” away from the stick or perhaps a lay down posture. Again, treating this behavior as an act of disobedience and increasing the heeling stick pressure can result in a recipe for disaster. Do not let the heeling stick or the pinch/choke collar create mistrust between pup and you. Used properly, these training tools will actually make solid your role as teacher and taskmaster. Notice that we have not mentioned anything about the electronic collar. Some training techniques may have the collar involved by now, but not here. The electronic collar will come in at the appropriate time.

Basically, the pre yard section deals with formal obedience: remote sit, heel (both sides), here and sit together, and a series of productive games (casting, doubles, etc.) that will enable the next sections to become easier. Next time we will begin with some step-by-step instruction. Please keep the ideas in mind that were discussed in the last few articles when going through the yard work process. They are very important to the success of the program. These philosophies are the “glue” which adheres us to the right course of enjoying our journey throughout the training process. Enjoy the whole journey!

