

BEGINNER RETRIEVER TRAINING

A Rookie's Journey

by Susan Seeber

One of the joys of owning purebred dogs is watching your animal take to the task for which it was bred. Having lure coursed my sighthounds, I knew I wanted to try field work with my first Labrador. Here's a brief account of our introduction to field training.

Reading the syllabus before class is good preparation, but it doesn't necessarily give you the full picture.

"Dogs will be introduced to dead birds..." How, you ask? It's the handler's job to do it, though the finer points are not self-evident. I approach the bird carousel where a dozen or so mallards are hanging by their necks like socks on laundry day. I brace myself for the grasp. This is a momentous time. I have never held a dead duck and very shortly will. Presumably, I am here in this remote field on a Tuesday evening with nine other teams and our unflappable instructor, Rainer Fuchs, because I want to insure a future of holding dead ducks. Right? How to pick up a duck? I consider the two-fingered beak grab but immediately discard it because a supposedly tough woman with a ballsy hunting dog is not squeamish. Do I grab it by the neck? This would leave the head lolling around and that's a bit undignified. I settle on the joint where the neck meets the head. My hand hesitates....go! It is done! I am holding the duck and my dog, Boris, is going bananas.

The teams move off, each to their own patch of ground to test if our Labradors like dead ducks. (Evidently, some do not.) In no time, I am tossing and bowling this blessed little mallard from here to there and heaping praise on my dog when he not only noses it but also picks it up and proudly trots back to me. These are thrilling first steps!

When Rainer is satisfied that our dogs are committed, we move on to the duck blind and begin training. Helpers in the field have duck calls, popper guns, a bag of ducks, and catapults. Rather Monty Python-esque, the ducks are flung and our eager Labradors sort through various distillations of instinct to get the job done. You can see their brains realign on the spot. *"I was a house dog, but now I'm a hunting dog! I totally get this! I. Am. Retriever!"*

At the end of class, we are each given a duck to take home (think: party favor). We are taught the best method for freezer wrapping, whether to practice with a frozen or thawed duck (dog's preference), time needed to thaw bird (eight hours), useful shelf life and best eventual disposal method.

By the following week, all duck-body squeamishness is gone. After our gun safety lesson, we set up class in a long narrow field surrounded by forest to retrieve over a modest stream featuring a wide, unpleasant stretch of standing water. Two local gals out for an evening hike stumble upon our class. Alarmed, they yell, "Are you **hunting**?" *We're training dogs. "Is that a **shotgun**?" Not exactly. Each team has a go and, according to the dog's individual personality, retrieves either through the muck or around the muck. One naughty dog, mine, stops in the middle of this deep mud to have a cooling lie down before completing his task. Afterwards, to vary the marks and introduce the teams to something new, we move on to open water and bumpers. Again, all are keen. Note to self: Unless you have a full change of dry clothes in the car, release the dog before he rockets into the water.*

Next, our introduction to canoe etiquette is touch and go. Not everyone loves a wobbly platform. A Milk-bone on my fourth try gets Boris into the boat and sitting reliably well. The trick of this water exercise is for the dog to exit the canoe, swim past the decoys, and retrieve the duck, which Boris does well. On his return, within inches of my eager hands, he, instead, shoots down the shoreline bearing the mallard as a love token for Rainer's bitch, Amy, who sits in the high grass.

There is no denying it, this class is hard work for both dog and handler. There is a range of interest, too. Some have been hunting for years or plan to compete in field trials, and others, like me, just want to see what their first Labrador can do. Our teacher said, in all candor, he was impressed that our teams did so well, that he would have expected about 50% of the dogs to do what 100% did. We beamed under his praise.

The final class of the series is to simulate an AKC Junior Hunt test. We are instructed on basic rules: how to line up, when you may talk to or encourage your dog, proper leash set-up, etc. We are also given pointers on the correct sartorial deportment for the field. I am to leave my pink and yellow at home. Camouflage is *de rigueur*. *On our own, we set up the blinds, gun stands, ear protection, decoys, feed sacks full of ducks, and the ornery chucker which seemed far trickier to operate than any gun.*

It is a beautiful Spring evening at Delaney field, clear skies, slight breeze, few black flies. The call. The shot. The duck sailing overhead. Our dogs are keen, keen, keen to work, to bolt and bound over the wide scrubby plain, to dive into open water. There is nothing so beautiful as a Labrador in full gallop lit by the late-day sun who wants *that duck*. *It is a stirring sight. He returns with ears flapping, tail wagging, eyes on fire, and that big soft mouth holding the bird. "Can we go again?"*

Do these shoes make
me look fat?

