

Motivational Retrieve

Best Paw Forward Inc., 1835 Oak Haven Plantation Rd., Osteen FL 32764-8872
bestpaw@bestpaw.com www.bestpaw.com 407-321-1006

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In the beginning, use only one object. An obedience dumbbell is a good choice since it has large handles on the side for you (called the bells) and the small bar in the center for the dog. Put it away out of sight and out of reach between training sessions.

Start with a hungry dog, a dumbbell, lots of yummy treat cut into tiny pieces and a quiet place to work. Add distractions as the dog learns the retrieving game.

Place the dumbbell on the floor right in front of the dog. If he glances at it or moves toward it in any way, click and treat. If he totally ignores it, tap it on the floor or toss it up and catch it a few times yourself, then put it down again.

Hold the dumbbell by the bell (the end piece), leaving the center unobstructed for the dog's inspection. Place it near his face. Click and drop the treat on the ground when he glances at the dumbbell.

You can also do this by laying the dumbbell on the floor, on a footstool, on your lap or on the sofa beside you for a toy breed. Click then treat every time he looks at the dumbbell until you can tell he is giving the dumbbell deliberate repeated attention.

Now he will get clicked then treated for moving toward the dumbbell or touching it with his nose if he has already learned the target stick game. If in frustration or inspiration, he grabs it at all for any reason, give him a jackpot.

Teaching the retrieve with back chaining, the first focus will be getting the dog to hold the dumbbell right in front of you, handing it to you, as he does at the end of the retrieve exercises in competition obedience or at your side as in field retrieves. Don't worry about the front position or sitting at this early stage.

Gradually make it harder to get to the dumbbell, like close to a table then under it.

If the dog is quick to touch the dumbbell with his nose but has not offered to put his mouth on it after a while, you may lure him with a treat behind the bar, or scent the dumbbell by holding your hand around it for a few moments. You might even choose to rub something yummy smelling on it, or actually smear a little baby food, Easy Cheese, peanut butter or almond butter on it. Some dogs are quite fond of soft toys but have not previously shown a desire to pick up hard items, so wrapping some strips of fake fur around the bar initially can give you a jump start on the retrieve work.

If the dog is loathe to hold on to the bar if you reach for the dumbbell, shape longer holds or try holding the dumbbell at your side at the dog's nose level. Spin slowly in a circle or walk slowly in a big circle encouraging him to catch you and grab it. Some dogs are reluctant to mouth something in your hands because we have so often corrected young pups for that behavior.

Standard learning principles apply, of course:

Reward every tiny step every time at first.

Slowly raise the criteria. This time he has to look at the dumbbell; next he has to move to it; then lick it or mouth it; then lift it in his mouth; then hold it 2 nanoseconds longer etc.

Limit training sessions to about 5 minutes each, and start the next session out a little easier than the previous one ended up. In other words, if you ended with a 2 second hold today, start with clicking a one-second hold as your first step tomorrow if you can get it right away.

The essential skill to teach is delivering the dumbbell to you, then the dog will want to find the dumbbell so he can deliver it to you because he knows it leads to rewards. Chasing a moving object can be used to motivate a cautious dog, but in the long run the dog must learn to pick up a stationary object for competition retrieves.

Soon in the process start to get the dog to reach out for the dumbbell in your hand, then lower it slightly, an inch or two toward the ground. Gradually lower it closer and closer to the ground, until one end of the dumbbell rests on the ground.

These next few steps can be critical in the learning process for some dogs: When you place both ends on the ground, make sure that your hand remains on one end of the dumbbell at first. Then hold your hand an inch or two away, then gradually farther away from the dumbbell on the ground. These steps can go *a lot* faster if you shaped the dog to pick up the stationary dumbbell first.

Place the dumbbell on the ground and let the dog step ahead of you to pick it up, rewarding him for turning back toward you now with his dumbbell and delivering it to you. Gradually move further from the stationary dumbbell. Reward for longer retrieves and longer holds.

Retrieving can also be taught with other objects and then easily transferred to a dumbbell, glove, scent article, field training bumper or anything else easy for the dog to hold.

Rolling a tennis ball past a dog will often elicit a look at the ball which can be clicked then treated. After a couple of times of being rewarded for watching the ball, withholding the click for the next criteria may well entice the dog into moving toward the ball this time. You can hold the ball and wait for a look or a touch, or just raise the stakes when you roll it past the dog.

During the next retrieve training session, try rolling the dumbbell in the same manner and in the same place you rolled the tennis ball.

When we raise pups or starting to work with older dogs that have joined the household, we are very careful to never scold the dogs for picking anything up. We just trade the found treasures for treats and put inappropriate things out of reach, just as our own mentors taught us more than 40 years ago.

Very early in retrieve training, we add in metal and leather scent articles, gloves, field bumpers, metal spoons etc.

If your dog is comfortable with having his mouth handled, also practice opening his mouth and popping in a yummy dog cookie. Then later, you may gently open the mouth and briefly place the dumbbell on his lower jaw.

When you first start the retrieve game, use a dumbbell or the same object every time and put it away out of the dog's reach when you are not training.