



CANINE CORNER

A Dog Named %#\$*?

Off-season training

By CWA Life Member Trig Birkeland

Well, it's that time of the year again. The duck season opener seems impossibly far away. I find myself pondering what changes I would like to make for next season. I imagine more and better decoys. And then there's better blind cover, different calls, and to practice calling more. Inevitably my attention will come to focus on my re-

triever and what kind of season it has been as far as dog work.

I think any waterfowler spending the day in the field without a retriever is missing out on one of the true joys of duck hunting. Watching genetics, enthusiasm, and training come together in the trained retriever as your pal launches into the water to retrieve your prized game bird is incomparable. Besides, it's a lot of work to retrieve downed game.

It always amazes me, though, just how many times I see a hunter and his dog out in the pond – with the hunter assisting his dog in the retrieving of ducks and geese. I have to ask myself: “Why have a dog with me if I end up having to retrieve my ducks?”

Another thing that we have all experienced during a day in the field is hearing other hunters scream at their dogs from sunup 'til sundown. Now, I don't know about you, but hearing some guy yelling, “%#\$*!” at his dog all day is not my idea of a good time.

Of course, no dog is perfect, and we all have “off” days. My dog does make mistakes, but for the most part, I do the shooting and she does the retrieving. Ducks that are shot are retrieved, and Cally is usually back in the blind in less than a minute. She is under control in the field and quiet and still while in the blind.



The author and his dog, Cally. Though Cally is alert to everything around her, she is under control. For the author, off-season training is the key to a well-behaved dog.

Photos courtesy of the author



Training for field trials will help your dog in the blind. It's also a lot of fun and offers opportunities to compare notes and training techniques with other hunters.

Let's say you had a good season in all aspects – except that you were one of those hunters who, on every downed bird, had to leave the blind. Or you were continually shouting at your “best friend” either in the blind or en route to and from your hunting area. If you want that one aspect of your waterfowling experience to change, now is the time to begin training for next season. You might ask, “How do I go about doing that?”

First, you can visit one or more of the local American Kennel Club field trials or North American Hunting Retriever Association hunt tests in your area. There you will see how, with proper training and time, a trained retriever should act in a simulated hunting situation. You will meet other hunters who are also retriever enthusiasts. As soon as the waterfowl season is over, these enthusiasts begin to train for and participate in hunt tests. They are often more than willing to share information on training, and they may even invite you to come out and join the training group.

It is a real pleasure to hunt with a trained retriever. I know that my total waterfowling experience would not be com-

plete without my Labs Andy and Cally.

So try it – visit a hunt test and meet some hunters just like yourself. Get started, because next season really is just

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around the corner.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

Consistency

You can't expect your retriever to be obedient in the field and in the blind if you allow them to run wild at home. Just as there are no athletes, musicians, or skeet or trap shooters who reach a point and no longer have to train or practice, dog training has to be an everyday event.

It may be as simple as making your retriever heel beside you as you fill their dog dish and to not start eating until you release them. Or to have them sit while you open the back door to let them in the house, only coming in when you give them the command to do so. In our house, our retrievers are “invited” in. These lessons reinforce the fact that you're the alpha member of the family and that your

dog must pay attention to you.

Retriever training – especially the obedience part – has to be practiced consistently.

Fairness

Don't expect your retriever to excel at training if you are not fair with him. Whatever method you use (electronic collar, etc.), make sure that your dog has an absolute understanding of what it is you want them to do before using any correction. The electronic collar is a great training tool but must be used properly. All commands must be completely understood before you enforce them with the shock collar.

When the Hunt is Over

When we have a successful day in the duck blind, it is usually in miserable weather, for as we know, that's “when the ducks fly.” After spending all day out in the elements, I dry off and feed my dogs first thing back at the truck. Only when I

know that they are safely in their kennels do I begin to load my gear in the truck.

There is nothing macho about letting your dog run around in the parking lot with moving trucks and other loose dogs while you load your gear. It's dangerous for the dogs and annoying to others.

No matter how great a retriever your dog is, your day can be ruined if he whines and barks all day in the blind. If you're so frustrated that, at the end of the day, everyone in the field thinks that your dog is named “%#\$*!,” it might be time to try something different. Consider a hunt test for a fun way to train your dog in the off-season.

Good luck, and happy hunting.

Trig Birkeland lives in Redwood City with his wife and two Labrador retrievers. The American Kennel Club Web site is www.akc.org, and the North American Hunting Retriever Association's Web site is www.nahra.org.

