

Teaching Steadiness

by Judy Teskey

I love field training with my Flat-coats! I also enjoy helping friends train their retrievers... especially Flat-coats! Recently several friends asked for suggestions to help steady their dogs...thanks to Helen, Catherine, Carol, Wendy and Haideh for the idea for this article!

Having a reliably steady dog is important for many reasons: safety, success in field events and as a foundation for advanced field training concepts. Hunting with a steady dog is a much safer and successful endeavour! A dog that breaks as birds are being shot could endanger itself or cause the hunter to miss the shot in an effort not to shoot the breaking dog. Shooting with a dog on a leash is a very unsafe and unwise practise! A steady dog can watch the bird fall and can more accurately mark the bird's fall location. Mid and upper level hunt and working tests and field trials require dogs to be steady as marks are thrown, plus tests require a dog to honour another dog as marks are thrown for that dog. A dog that is steady has the proper foundation to progress to more advanced skills such as being steady to shot and flush when upland hunting and learning about diversion birds, bull-frogs or poison birds.

An added benefit to having steady dogs is that you can control multiple dogs when exercising them! I don't allow competition between dogs when I throw a fun bumper or mark. Normally I take a bumper for each dog; I have them all sit, then throw one bumper at a time. After a bumper is thrown I send one dog, releasing it by name. Then I throw a second bumper and release a second dog by name. Each dog retrieves the bumper thrown for him/her. This teaches dogs that not every bumper thrown is for him/her, they learn to honour other dogs, plus they learn about diversion birds and bull-frogs.

As with most retriever training, there are diverse ideas and methods to achieve the same outcome: a dog that sits calmly while watching marks being thrown and waits for the handler's command before it leaves to retrieve.

I've used the following process to successfully teach my dogs to be steady. To me this process is logical, effective, easy, doesn't dampen the dog's enthusiasm for retrieving and doesn't damage my relationship with my dogs. This method rewards correct behaviour and withholds rewards for incorrect behaviour. A calm, quiet puppy is released so it can get what it wants – to retrieve the prize! A puppy that fights and flails

isn't rewarded... it is gently restrained until the moment it relaxes or calms... then it gets to retrieve the prize. It's surprising how quickly puppies make the connection: "To get what I want (the retrieve), I have to sit calmly. When I struggle, fight and flail, I don't get what I want."

I start teaching steadiness when my puppy is young... 3 months or so. Up to that point we've done lots of fun, motivating puppy retrieves with toys in areas with few distractions. To start, crouch on both knees; hold the puppy in front of you with a hand on each shoulder.



Helen crouches over Max, holding him firmly on both shoulders.

A helper stands several meters in front, calls to get the puppy's attention, waves a toy, fuzzy paint roller or puppy sized fabric bumper, then gently tosses the article in an area of very low cover/grass.





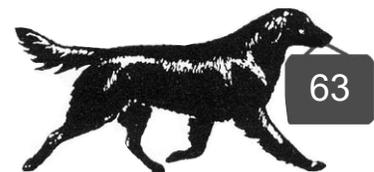
Judy calls and waves the bumper to get Max's attention.

Meanwhile, hold the puppy gently, but firmly. Remain calm and matter of fact..... don't get angry! The instant you feel the puppy relax, release the puppy and let it get the article. Try hard not to let the puppy wiggle or struggle out of your grip... but also be careful not to hurt the wiggling critter! Try to release the puppy when it is looking at the thrown article. If the puppy happens to struggle out of your grip have the helper quickly pick up the article, tuck it under their arm, turn away from the puppy and make no eye contact. Prevent the puppy from getting the article / being rewarded for poor behaviour! After the puppy gets the article encourage him or her to come back to you and tell it how wonderful it is. You may need to entice the puppy back to you by teasing it with another toy or bumper. Don't pay any attention to the article the puppy is holding... focus on the puppy – lots of pats, lots of praise.



Max arrives back to Helen with the bird; she pays no attention to the bird but pets and tell him how wonderful he is. (And he really is wonderful!!!)

Doing this will prevent your puppy from playing the game “keep away” where they bring the bumper back to you, but just out of arm's reach.



You want the puppy to experience success (calm = reward) and failure (struggling = no reward). If the dog continues to struggle and doesn't become calm, even for an instant, you need to reduce the attraction by having the helper not call the puppy, not wave the article and perhaps by exchanging a high value article (favourite toy, etc) for a lower value article (paint roller?).

This method is successful and effective when the handler is consistent – the puppy must be calm before it is released to get the reward. If the puppy learns that fighting and struggling will result in success (get what the puppy wants), achieving the outcome you want will take much, much longer!

As you progress through this process, slowly increase the length of time you require the puppy to be calm, before you release it to retrieve the article. Also slowly increase the length of the marks, but still throw to short cover. I quickly incorporate the field vocabulary I plan on using during my dog's field career: "mark" when the helper is getting the puppy's attention; "yes, that's it" when the puppy is focused on the helper; "sit" when the puppy is sitting calmly; "puppy's name" when I release puppy for the retrieve, "here" when the puppy is returning with the article, and a series of short blasts on the whistle when the puppy is returning. And lots of praise and pats for success! I want my puppy to enjoy training with me, to learn how to learn and to want to please me.

Over time slowly reduce the amount of restraint you have on the puppy. Try holding your hands a tiny bit away from the puppy's shoulders (not touching) to see if the puppy is taking responsibility to sit calmly. If this is successful you can move to holding the puppy's collar, then a light hold on the collar, then you can move your body position so you're kneeling beside the puppy, rather than crouching behind the puppy. Eventually you will stand beside your puppy, with one hand on the collar.



Helen lightly holds Max's collar.

As the puppy learns about steadiness you can increase the attraction to the article by having the helper make more noise (a loud "Hey! Hey!", duck call, gunshot, etc.), by increasing the attraction to the thrown article (waving the article before it's thrown, using a bumper with ribbon tail, pigeon, duck, or live flapping pigeon, etc), and by making more noise at the line (duck call, gun shot, etc.).

Be consistent – send the puppy for the retrieve only when it has sat calmly. Withhold the reward (that is, do not send the dog for the retrieve) when the dog moves, shuffles or creeps (forward movement towards the mark). If the puppy breaks and runs to get the article, your helper must quickly pick up the article, before the puppy does. Get the puppy back to the line and re-throw. For a more experienced, older puppy consider taking the puppy off the line, go back into the holding blind after unacceptable behaviour (breaking, creeping, etc.). Then bring it back to the line and try again. If you experience several failures in a row, reduce the attraction (no duck call, no gunshot, a small throw, etc.) so the puppy can be successful.

As the puppy matures and becomes more and more steady, slowly make your training situation as similar to a hunt test as possible – throw ducks, use holding blinds, spend more time waiting in a holding blind, have other people and dogs in the area, go to new locations, make more noise (gunshots, someone calling "Dog to line!"), etc.

Eventually, there you are – standing beside your steady puppy... albeit a larger, more mature puppy than when you started!

This method and these principles can also be used to teach an older dog to be steady. Remember, the dog needs comparisons between success (calm, sitting behaviour equals reward) and failure (moving or creeping equals no reward). A dog with a long history of breaking or creeping may need a retrieving situation where numerous triggers that cause the dog to break are removed. Consider having your helper quietly drop a bumper, rather than throwing it in a big arc. If the dog does break, work hard to ensure the dog does not get the bumper. Call the dog back to you using "Here!" or "Come!" Do not use the dog's name to try to stop it from creeping or breaking! We only use the dog's name to send it for the retrieve. If your dog does break, your helper needs to quickly run and pick up the bird or bumper.

Our Flat-coats are intelligent and they love to retrieve; teaching steadiness following this method utilizes both of these attributes. Consistent training will get results!

Good luck.... I hope you enjoy the journey with your Flat-coat!

Judy Teskey
FCRSC Field Representative Ladysmith BC

Thanks to Helen Lachore, Max (Itzawhat's Maxed Out) and Wendy Tisdall for the fun training day and fine photos for this article!