

## **Water Training: the Voice of Experience**

*The following is blatant personal opinion based on my 20 plus years of experience working with Newfoundlands (and a few Leos!). It represents the way I train and incorporates many ideas from the many great trainers I've had the privilege to come in contact with. No one method works for every dog, and every dog is a unique personality. Please consider this only as a guideline and one of many possible starting points when training your own dog. - Lori Littleford*

### **"Begin with an End in Mind"**

*-Adapted from Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**

Decide what you want to work toward. If your goal is to have a dog that is a pleasure to be around at a lake or at the beach, get a picture in your head of what that behavior really looks like. Once you've got the picture, break it down into separate behaviors your dog needs to first understand, and then perform reliably, to be able to complete your picture. Once you've got the behavior list, break each behavior into "doable" incremental steps. Pick and stick with a specific training vocabulary. Pay particular attention to YOUR body posture and body language. Dogs get at least 90% of their cues from body language, only about 10% from verbal while they are learning. From the dog's point of view, the difficulty in performing of any behavior depends on the length of time you ask your dog to do the behavior, your physical distance from the dog as well as level of distractions available. A dog that cannot stay for 30 seconds with it's handler standing toe to toe with him in the quiet, familiar backyard cannot be expected to stay for three minutes with it's handler down the beach with a sand volleyball game going on in between! Vary one, and ONLY one, difficulty factor at a time. If your goal is a water title, get a copy of the rules and READ them (see resource lists). There are video tapes of many tests, and these provide a nice picture of correct (and some not so correct) performances. I break the behaviors needed to be successful at water tests into the following categories: (see inset) The bulk of the training happens at the junior level, and only the swimming requires water to teach. Everything else can, and should, be taught first on dry land, in a distraction-free environment. I teach each exercise in pieces. Once the pieces are 100 percent solid, I put them together, beginning at the end of the actual water test exercise.

### **The "3 FIBs" Method**

*-Adapted from *Super Puppy: How to raise the best dog you'll ever have**

This method does things in sets of three, enough to get the point across, but not enough to bore the dog. My modification is I always try to END on a good repetition so will occasionally stop at two or add a fourth to ensure this.

The "F" stands for fast feedback. This means, while we're teaching a behavior, we reinforce that behavior very quickly with praise, petting and food or toys, BEFORE our dog moves onto a less desirable behavior. It also means that, once the dog understands what we want, we correct quickly when needed (ideally in the split second between the

moment when the dog makes the decision not to comply but before he actually makes the mistake). A correction is the minimum verbal cue or physical reminder needed to remind the dog of what behavior we wanted. Praise and/or pet and/or treat immediately once the behavior happens. The more severe the correction, the more exuberant and sincere the praise!

The "I" stands for "incremental progress". I think of it as cheerleading. When a dog is first learning to sit, I praise at the very first sign that he's actually going to sit as well as all the way down. You can turn any command (firm tone of voice, ending in an !) into praise by adding the word "good" or "excellent" or "superb" in front and changing your tone of voice from firm to playful or delighted or ecstatic JJJ! Remember the dinner scene from "When Harry met Sally? I really am talking ecstatic, since dogs KNOW when you're faking it!

The "B" stands for "backward chaining", beginning at the end of an exercise. Start at the end of an agility tunnel, start a recall at one step, or tow a boat just a foot or so off shore. As your training progresses, praise any and all progress. Keep all the cues until they are doing it right. Help them when they need it. Take a step back if added distractions, time or distance makes the response less than 90%. I proof by praising the attempt and petting and treating perfect execution.

### **Swimming 101 or Water is Wet!**

Contrary to popular belief, not all dogs are thrilled about swimming at first introduction. I believe that the earlier in life the introduction is made, the better. However, puppy coat doesn't shed water so you must be careful that the puppy doesn't get cold. Pick a warm day, if possible, and be prepared with lots of towels. I also think it's best to avoid the known "fear" periods, typically 7-8 months and again at 14-15 months. Dogs can be successfully introduced to water at these ages but extra care should be taken to make the experience positive and to reinforce only the brave, exploratory behavior you want.

My favorite way of introducing a new dog is to bring along an experienced dog that LOVES the water and is under good voice control. The wannabe swimmer is on a long line attached to a buckle collar or to the dead ring of a choke chain or both rings of a prong collar. I concentrate on the experienced dog, giving lots of praise and cookies, and making a general fuss over what nice swimming and retrieving they are doing. The long line has knots about every 6 feet so I can step on it and stop the pup from leaving. Most puppies figure the whole thing out on their own within a half hour or so. The long line keeps them safe as I can step on it to stop them from fleeing as well as reel them in if they decide swimming is fun but haven't figured out how to turn.

My next favorite is to simply wade in with the dog. The handler that stays on the shore or grimaces because their toes dipped in yet tries to convince a dog the water is wonderful is sending MAJOR mixed messages. Remember, dogs believe ALL your body language. I use cookies, praise, favorite toys or even favorite people to encourage the dog to enter the water. I use the long line to prevent backward progress. Many puppies will test the water then run up onto the beach if let to their own devices. Chasing after them becomes a game, one which I choose not to play. Every dog has his own time schedule.

Patience and persistence will prevail. Many dogs stop at the walking swimming transition. With small puppies, I just pick them up, walk out a few steps then let them down to swim to shore. With older dogs, I'll use the owner as "bait" and have them armed with treats and calling the dog. I take the collar in one hand and place the other under the dog's tummy and boost them over the transition. Most dogs will continue to their owner. I recommend the "booster" be someone other than the owners as I want their dog to associate only positive things with the owner. Many dogs meet me first and the "mean booster lady" but most forgive me when they learn I have good cookies (the moist meaty flavorful kind!).

Many dogs also need a reminder to paddle with their back legs. Many are convinced they can tiptoe across the ocean and drop their back legs. This typically causes the front legs to break the surface and creates a froth that any cuisinart would envy. Simply slide a hand under the belly and show the pup the correct position. Some dogs also swim better with a stick or small bumper in their mouths. Many dogs will also decide that your shoulders are the nearest dry land and they are going to scale that mountain!

Getting scratched almost comes with the territory. A full wetsuit helps protect you. I DON'T use heel as the command for entering the water with me as it encourages the dog to be too close. I use "with me" or "swim" and hold onto the collar with my arm straight. I stay in shallow water where I can still walk but the dog can swim to give me control. I begin with the dog on my left, enter the water until the dog is swimming then make a right turn. This puts me between the shore and the dog and I use a treat or pat the water while praising the swim. At some point, I decide to return to shore and do another right turn, give the command "shore" and start praising swimming toward shore. As the dog progresses, I'll dip down into more of a "swimming" position. Then I might reverse the pattern, doing two left turns so the dog is on the inside. Then we just swim together, wherever I want to go.

A common mistake I see in training is to ask a dog that doesn't yet swim well to start doing actual work. First things first, please! Let him get his sea legs before you ask him to tow anything or even retrieve anything big. Swimming uses different muscles than walking or running so don't overdo. Another is the habit people get into of swimming away from shore with their dogs then having the dog tow them in. Most Newfs really aren't sure they want their people in the water anyway.

I have never met a Newf who would NOT tow a person to shore. I want my Newf to be relaxed and happy when I'm in the water. Towing me in will lead him to believe I really can't swim and am too stupid to know it! If you must convince yourself your Newf will tow you, limit it to maybe one time in ten or more repetitions. I always practice swim with handler as a "U" pattern, about 50 feet on each leg and sometimes throw in an about turn just for kicks. The straight out (20 feet) and back on the day of the test is a piece of cake. "Circle" is another really handy command. Teach it with a treat on land.

When you get to take a line, always have the dog circle behind the steward. For the controlled walking, recall and one minute down portion of the test, enroll in a good

obedience class. Don't forget to practice a little at the beginning of each session at the water. Dogs are situational learners. I typically get my dogs wet, then do a little heeling, a recall or two and a stay before doing any fun stuff at the water.

Remember when doing any correction, the correction must be on the level of the dog AND in the direction you want the behavior to proceed. The correction for breaking a down should be down, for laying down on a sit should be up. The correction for lagging should be forward, along the line of travel and a correction for heeling wide should be across your body, perpendicular to the dog, to have the desired effect. I don't correct a dog on the outside post.

Once the dog is taking the bumper willingly, I add "Hold" by gently holding the dogs muzzle for a couple of seconds. My favorite item for this is my index finger. Initially, the dogs think I'm nuts but the benefit of using your finger is the ability to get your dog accurate, fast feedback, when they actually clamp down. I also like the splunky three sided underwater retrieve toy. It's a bit of a trick as you can hook the toy over the dog's lower canine making it harder to "spit out". You want "hold" to really mean clamping down with pressure but this step seems to help some dogs. Once the dog is holding for 10 seconds or so, I change their position from a sit to a stand. Then I ask them to take a few steps. Some dogs decide "hold" means "freeze" and I want to disabuse them of this idea early. Many dogs cue on your hand coming back toward the bumper as an excuse to release the bumper so I vary this in training also.

I introduce give after the hold is fairly good, first just commenting on it (Take it! Hold It! GOOOOD Hold! Good Give.) then using hand position and gentle taps on the bumper as challenges to the hold. As with the take, when I start using "Give!" as a command, I say it once then make it happen. The walking, swimming boundary is challenging to a lot of dogs. Working in shallow water back and forth across this zone will get the concept across to some dogs. Another NCA member, Kathy Reed, recommends the following: "for teaching the "hold" command so the dog wont let go before it brings it to you, (especially out of the water) I use the word wait..... and start to walk backwards slowly and as the dog slows down and comes in more slowly the dog is concentrating on that and continues to "hold" the item until he/she has left the water.... this helps to prevent the dog from dropping the article in the water before it comes up on shore....". I just use "hold" in this instance as I use "wait" differently. Another option is to backward chain the behavior, starting one step in the water and gradually doing longer and longer retrieves. I recommend using several different bumpers as well as other articles while you're teaching retrieving. Dogs DO develop favorites but some can get really stubborn about it. Avoid the problem by letting your dog know earlier that variety is the spice of life. "Carry" and "Pull" are logical extension of the "Hold" command. For "Carry", I pattern the dog through the take a line exercise with the commands "Mark! Take it! Hold! Carry!". On the carry, we both walk toward the steward. I'll correct the hold if needed (because he KNOWS this one already and I did NOT say Give!) and praise the carry. I ALWAYS have the dog circle behind the steward before he's given a treat or praised or released. Once we can make the trek together without needing the hold reinforced, I get lazy and only go along with the dog part way.

When I'm no longer going with my dog, I add a long line and give it to the steward to remind the dog to stay on task, if needed. Make this a fun, high energy game back and forth between two or more people. "Pull" is also a behavior that many dogs naturally show. I don't worry about what direction they pull from as this can be modified later. I help them initially then gradually let them take more and more of the weight. Any object will do. I've done tow a two by four, tow a chair, anything that will put drag on the dogs mouth. Correct the hold if needed, then praise the pull. of a figure 8 or about-turns as it's counterproductive and tends to pull the dog off balance. I remind the dog to speed up after we finish the inside post and I correct for a lagging about turn after we've both completed the turn and are moving in the new direction. Check the angle of your leash corrections if you're getting sloppy sits.

### **Teaching Retrieving**

A reliable retrieve is absolutely fundamental to water work. If your dog love to play retrieve already, that's great. Begin using your commands in praising the behaviors you want so the words will be familiar. If you see Fido picking up the ball, you comment "Gooooood --Take it! What a smart dog!". Do the same with "hold", "carry", "pull" and "give". Be truly delighted when your dog exhibits these behaviors. If your dog will get a ball or toy when thrown a distance but then wants to be chased or play keep away, try "reverse retrieves".

Retrieves are fun for the dog because most dogs have considerable prey drive, those instincts which tell them if it moves, chase it. I throw the toy a short distance. When the dog gets to the toy, I run away in the opposite direction. I trade the toy for a treat if the dog is possessive. The dogs can have the toy back very quickly, either by having it thrown again or me just giving it back after they swallow their treat. If they drop the toy part way, I don't make a big deal about it. I shape delivery to hand behavior after the dog realizes that brings the toy back to me isn't the end of the game. A long line helps if the dog is really persistent at keep away. The first step in a retrieve is the "Mark" command. I put the dog on my left and hold the dog by the collar with my right hand. I lay my left forearm and hand at eye level along side the dogs head. What am I marking? His breakfast, his dinner, his favorite playmate, his favorite toy that I just threw while it's in the air! Anything that I'm 99% sure he'll go directly to when released. The concept you are teaching is that when I point to something, it really IS there whether you see it or not and whatever I'm pointing to towards is really, really interesting!

Whether your dog play retrieves or not, he must learn to retrieve on command. The method I find most successful is a modification of the old Kohler method. I sit the dog with its bottom in a corner for maximum control. I don't ear pinch but I DO use a collar correction. I start by teaching the word. I say "Take it", open the dogs mouth by hooking my finger behind the canine, and putting the item in the dogs mouth. The dog doesn't have to hold at this point, just has to get the item in its mouth. The next step, with the collar in control position (high on the neck, just under the ears), I put the item directly in front of the dogs mouth, give the command "Take It", and apply gentle pressure against the dogs lips. I'm also tightening the collar. The pressure on both the item and the collar

are released as soon as the dog opens its mouth. I know the dog is getting the idea when they start reaching forward slightly on the command. This is celebration time! I gradually move the item further in front of the dog and then closer to the ground. If the dog doesn't respond, I use the collar "reminder". I use lots of praise to keep the sessions light and fun. I do insist that the item goes into the dog's mouth one way or the other every single time I give the "Take it" command. I don't repeat myself, I don't get mad, I don't decide my Newf is the stupidest dog on the planet, I just matter-of-factly make it happen.