

THE TWO-DOG TANGO

Hunting with more than one retriever presents both challenges and advantages

Hunting with two retrievers is easy. Getting them to work with each other is often not so easy. The problems include the potential for a dogfight, perhaps one like trainer Ron Erickson experienced.

"The worst one I ever saw was with a dog owned by a friend of mine," Erickson recalls. "He told me his dog was pretty well trained, so we went out and sat in blinds roughly 20 to 30 feet apart. And when we shot a duck, he sent his dog, so I made mine sit there. A minute later, we shot another duck. I sent my dog out to get it, but his dog switched. We ended up with a bad dogfight in five feet of water. It made things kind of interesting because five feet was a little higher than my waders."

Erickson, who with his wife and fellow trainer Virginia owns Rosewood Retrievers in Grantsville, Utah, learned his lesson. These days, he makes sure that any dogs he hunts together have undergone a minimum level of training before he will pair them in the field.

"Dogs need to heel, be steady, and come when you call," Erickson says. These are commands that have been covered in this column many times before. What is more important than how the command is taught is how it is reinforced.

"The first technique we use before we go hunting is to put the dog on a short lead," Erickson says. "You need three people, because you'll be working two dogs at the same time. A guy up ahead throws, a duck (or bumper), and one of the handlers sends his dog. Your dog (the one on the short lead) is going to want to go, so you might want to tie him to a post to keep him from jerking your arm off. When the dog on the short lead breaks, you say, 'No! Heel!' Don't say 'sit,' say 'heel,' because if he's run out 10 feet he'll come back to you. If you say 'sit,' he'll sit where You've given him the command."

"After you get him to where he doesn't break, go to an electronic collar," Erickson continues. "Have your dog sit at your side and have another guy handling his dog 15 or 20 feet away. Your dog will see the bird fall, but he gets a correction if he goes after the bird without being given a command to do so. He's learning that sometimes the bird is another dog's retrieve. In the beginning, you want to keep the dogs spaced apart so they are less likely to break."

Later, when the dogs have progressed in their training, Erickson raises the bar. "I'll take as many as two or three dogs out and have them sitting right by each other," he says. "I'll throw a bumper out 20 feet and call the name of just one dog to go out and make the retrieve. If the others break, they get reprimanded."

DUCK BLIND DIPLOMACY

What should you do if your dog is honoring nicely but your hunting partner's dog keeps breaking? "if my buddy's dog breaks and goes for the bird, I would do everything I could to stop my dog, even if I'd already sent him," Erickson Says. "I don't want a dogfight."

After that, I'd ask my hunting partner to hold his dog next time we shoot a duck because I want my dog to have a retrieve, too. I'd suggest chaining his dog to a tree if that's what it took. We'd turn a hunting situation into a training situation. You have two dogs out there, and both need to work."

Building a dog's resistance to breaking is a process measured in weeks or months, not days, and all the preliminary work is done in the training yard.

"I would say that probably 80 percent or more of a dog's training time is spent in the yard on basic commands," Erickson says. "Yard work is really important for a young dog. Later, the finishing work in the field is almost like playtime to them. They already know the commands."

YELLOW STREAK

Although the earliest known examples of Labrador retrievers were black, the year 1899 marked the birth of Hyde, the first recorded Yellow Lab.

If you have been training your retrievers with bumpers, now is also the time to introduce them to the real thing. "Birds are essential," Erickson says. "I would say that after six months of training to honor (teaching the dog to remain steady while another dog makes the retrieve) at least half the dog's training should involve live birds. By then, you're in a transition period- you're getting ready to take your dogs into the field on an actual hunt."

Once there, Erickson says, it is critical that you reinforce what you taught in the training yard. "If you're out hunting, it's only fair that the dogs alternate retrieves," he says. "There's less temptation to break that way. I also like to hunt in a spot that's secluded, where you're not going to have many people around to distract the dogs. And I'll put electronic collars on both of them. If you have to reprimand either dog, now you have a way to do it."

Erickson may choose to forego e-collars later, as he gains control over his dogs. But his dogs' autonomy comes only when they prove to him that they will honor another dog's retrieve no matter how tempted they may be to break. The upshot is a dog that behaves as well when it is hunting with another dog as it does when it hunts alone. □

By Dave Carty

PERFECT TEAMWORK

Seamless teamwork is an attainable goal. And in some situations, hunting with two retrievers offers distinct advantages. "If there are a couple of hunters who can shoot well, there are usually several birds on the water after a flock comes in," Erickson Says. "Let's say we've knocked down four ducks. Two are dead. Two are crippled – one is swimming and the other has climbed up into the tules. You can send one dog for the swimming cripple and the other for the bird in the tules. You're not going to lose either bird. A well-trained dog will pass up a dead bird that is lying in the water four feet away if you want him to." Training dogs to that level doesn't happen overnight, but is a goal worth shoot for.

This article provided courtesy of Dave Carty