

**Foundations for Excellence
in Gun Dog Training**



**Retrieving
for All
Occasions**

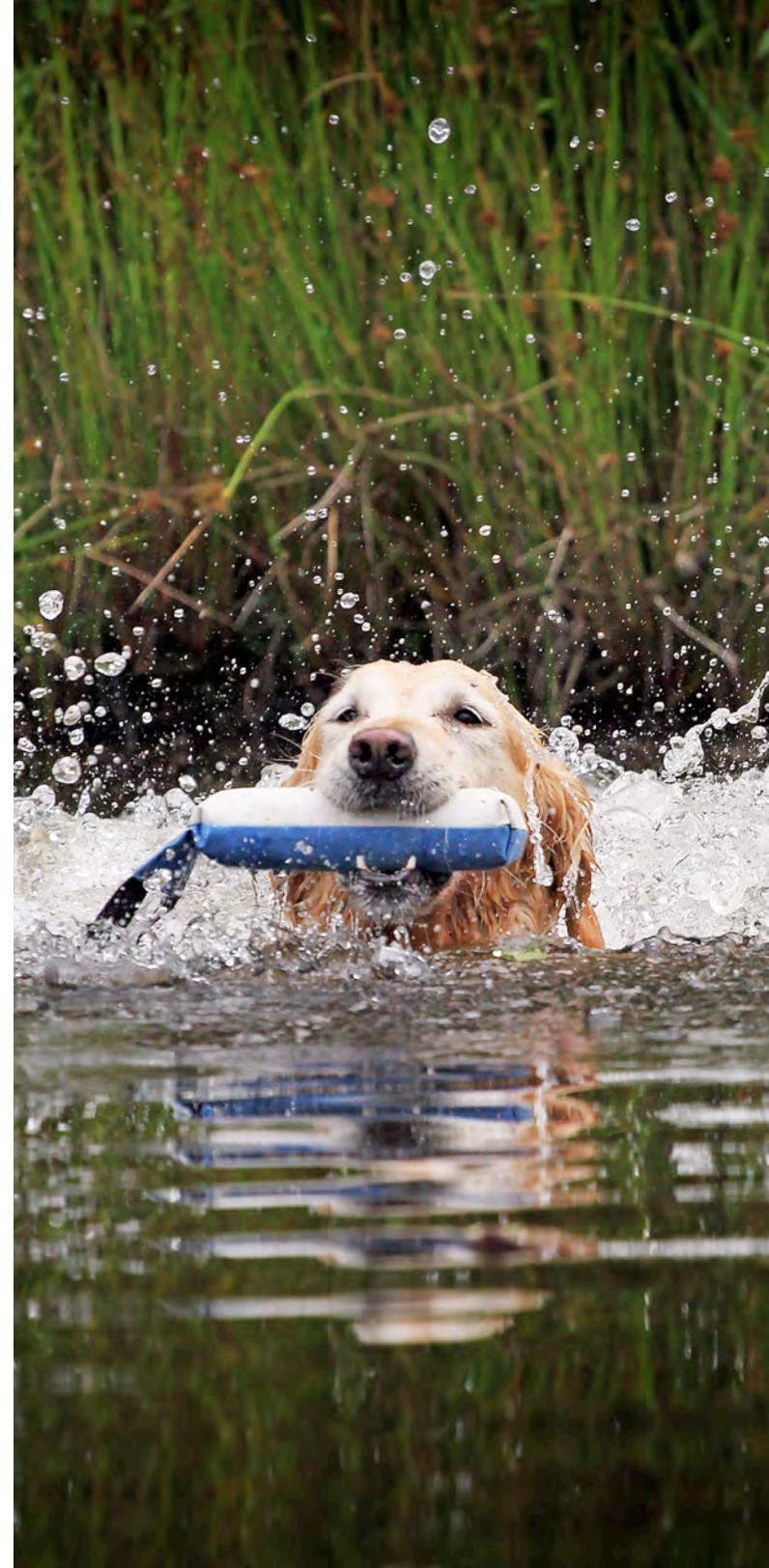


**Elsa Blomster
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Retrieving for All Occasions

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Foreword

I am often asked if I have written a book that details my positive training methods, and sadly the answer is no. I am also often asked if there is a book I could recommend that follows the approach and again sadly I had to give the same answer, until now.

I deeply respect the amount of knowledge and time that has gone into making this book so informative and easy-to-follow. You just know as you are reading it that these are tried and tested methods by people who have an in depth understanding of how dogs learn and respond.

Each exercise is carefully explained but without going into to so much detail that you get bogged down. Exercises are mapped out in short, easy stages that demonstrate an intrinsic understanding of the training process, which is further shown through explanations of the "what ifs" when training might not go according to plan.

This book is long overdue in gundog training and I only wish I had written it. I take my hat off to Elsa and Lena for making gundog trainers' lives easier by writing this, because without this book people might not understand the way forward with their dogs, would not have the same pleasure and fun with their dogs, and might not succeed with their dogs.

December 2014

Philippa Williams

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Rewarding and Fun Dog Training!

We have written this book because we love dogs and dog training. We also really enjoy field trial training and we couldn't find a book of this kind when we started our own field trial training. We wanted a book that could help us train our retrieving and flushing gun dogs, an accessible book in which we could find concrete suggestions for exercises that would also provide an understanding of where our training would lead. Much to our surprise, we discovered that there was no such up to date book available!

You see, we had an additional requirement: that all training would use positive reinforcement methods, without physical or verbal corrections. Traditionally, correction based training is considered a necessity, but we know there are alternatives. Our training is reward based and we've seen that the dogs learn very quickly and that it's easy to "re-teach" them if something goes wrong.

Above all, our dogs are highly valued members of our families. For us, spending time together is the best thing in the world. There's nothing better than the feeling of being in a partnership with our dogs, following their signals and learning their language. And it's hard to beat the wonderful feeling of when our dogs – happy, engaged, and confident – respond to our smallest signals when we go out together.

We own spaniels and retrievers, and we see it as our duty to allow the dogs to do what they are genetically programmed to do. In the simplest terms, you might say that we can only hone and direct their innate character.

We started using reward based training because it was effective and because it didn't cause any discomfort to our dogs. Training should be fun and enjoyable for both handler and dog. We like to think of our training as a form of exercise where the participant is allowed to reflect on things. We find it exciting and challenging to look at what we do from multiple viewpoints and question the status quo – is what we regard as "correct" really correct? Yes, this means that we even question our own training methods. We do not believe that there is a single way and are immediately suspicious if someone claims that there is a universal solution. So we are always on the lookout for ways to improve.

We hope you will find some new ideas in this book. For example, there are examples of basic training exercises for your gun dog from completing a first retrieve to how to begin organizing marked retrieves, to completing finding and retrieving exercises. But you can also read about the training method itself – what does it actually mean to incorporate a reward based philosophy into your training? What are the building blocks? Why do we do what we do? What are the results?

With that said, we want to emphasize that we are not the slightest bit interested in polarizing the issue. There is a lot of knowledge out there about field trial training. We are more than happy to listen to other points of view and we do pick up tidbits here and there and apply them to our own training. It's our hope that you will read this book in much the same way and pick out the bits that suit you best.

We want you and your dog to get started on training as soon as possible! This is why we have chosen to organize our book according to a combination of thematic chapters with practical exercises (in blue), and theoretical chapters (in pink). There is also a glossary at the end of the book.¹

The book is written for you who want to enjoy daily training with your gun dog, and for you who want to take part in your first field trial. We talk about retriever training but we also outline where spaniel training and retriever training differ. Most of what you teach a retriever is also useful when training a flushing or pointing dog, especially with regard to retrieving. However, when it comes to finding and retrieving, spaniels and retrievers need to be trained differently. As indicated by its title, this book focuses on retrieving during field trials, but we will briefly touch upon

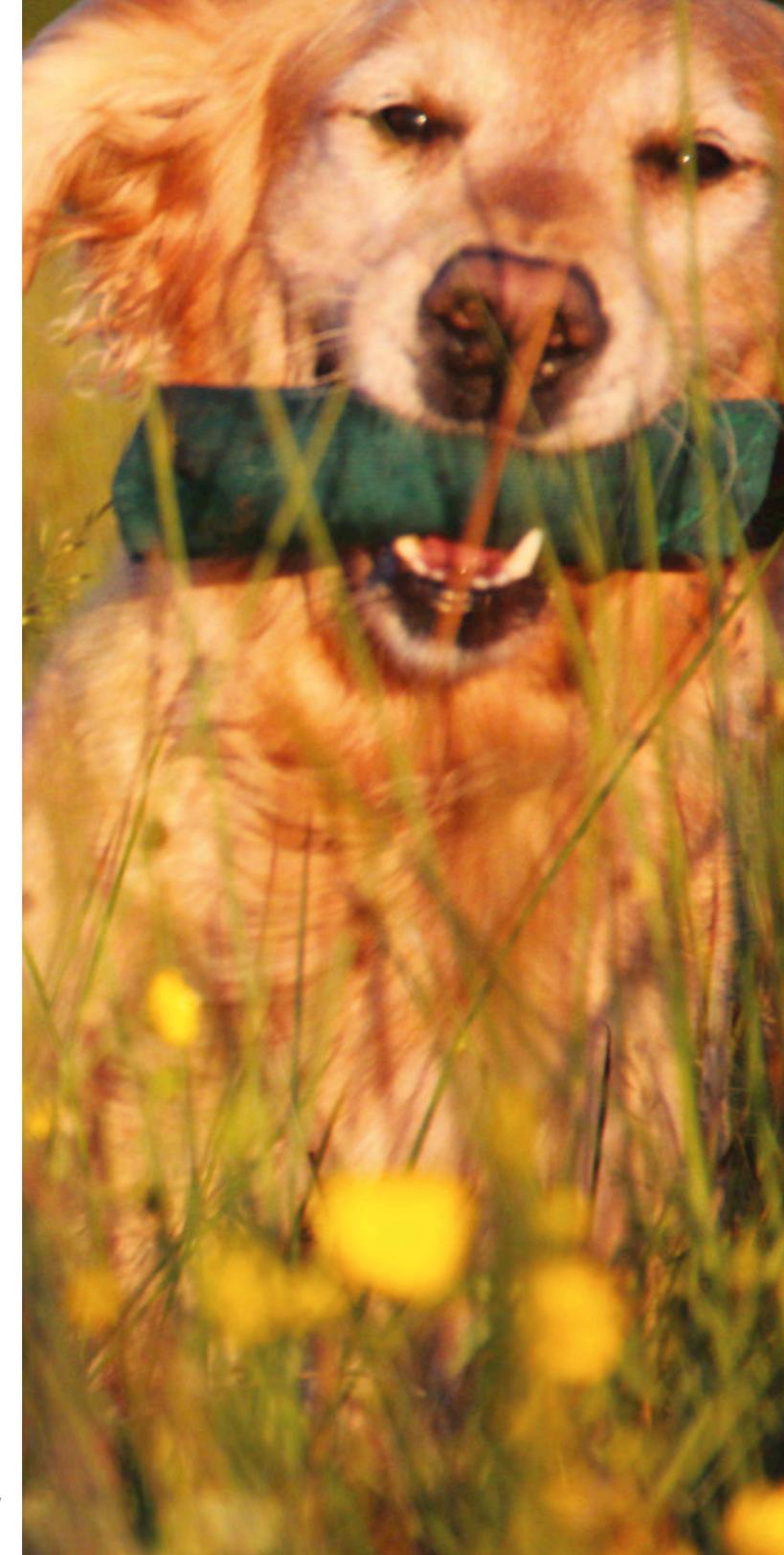
what a spaniel does prior to the shot. We will not, however, discuss what pointers and setters do prior to the shot.

You now have it in your hands – the book we wish we had when we first started field trial training. The title of the book means exactly what it says – it is intended for both daily use and for special occasions. This book has been written for you and your dog. It's for beginners in the world of field trials, and for those who might not be familiar with reward based training. Or perhaps you already know some of the basics and just want to further your training? This book is for you too. We have also included several advanced exercises for those who want to know what to expect in more advanced classes. Our hope is that you will read this book with an open mind and be willing to take on a fun and challenging training method.

Good luck!

*Elsa Blomster &
Lena Gunnarsson*

¹ On our webpage, www.retrievingforalloccasions.com, you can find even more resources





Taking and Holding

We want quick and accurate deliveries, which is why we must teach our dogs the correct way to pick up an object. After picking up the dummy, we want the dog to return to us at lightning speed. This means we have to teach the dog to get a firm but gentle hold on the retrieved object from the beginning so she doesn't have to set it down to get a better hold.



Sam has learned to follow his handler with a toy in his mouth to keep the game going.

A lot of spaniels and retrievers have a loose grip despite the fact that they love to carry things. So, we need to teach them to keep a firm hold on the dummy at all times.

Play to Inspire Taking and Holding

We begin teaching our dogs how to take an object with the help of playful exercises. Start with a long, soft toy, such as a braided rope.

1. Start playing with the dog and back away from her so she follows you with the toy in her mouth. Hold the toy and keep playing with the dog while you continue to back up.
2. Release the toy a little bit (keep backing up) and if the dog maintains a strong grip, grab the toy again and continue playing. In the beginning, seconds matter, so be quick to start pulling at the toy again.
3. In the end, you should be able to let go of the toy entirely and grab hold of it again without the dog changing or loosening her grip. We want the dog to come after us with the toy because she wants to continue playing with us.

4. When the dog has a good grip and puts her weight into pulling the toy, we reward this by allowing the dog to win the toy. Sometimes we tease the dog a little when she wins, and sometimes we step back directly so that she comes after us with the toy in her mouth, and we can start playing all over again.

If the dog stops playing and starts shaking the toy, or if she lays down and chews on it, carefully take the toy and start again, that is, get the dog riled up with play until she gets a good grip on the toy again. In the next round, make it a little easier by not letting go of the object entirely, but rather, keep a loose hold on it, and back even further away from the dog so that she follows you. It will be harder for the dog to lie down if she keeps moving. Several successful repetitions in a row will teach the dog that we want her to hold the toy firmly. The next step is making the task more difficult by standing still. Teaching the dog to hold an object while being close to us is the basis of all gun dog training. By using play to inspire taking and holding, we are also teaching the dog the basics of delivery to hand and the recall.

Shaping the Pick Up

The majority of spaniels and retrievers love to have things in their mouths. However, if you have a dog that doesn't want to hold things, you can click and reward the dog with a treat when she shows interest in the retrieve object, for opening her mouth and finally picking up the object. However, these exercises are a bit more demanding of your technical abilities as a trainer. In the worst case scenario, you might click when the dog releases or spits out the object instead of when she holds it. Clicking for interest in and holding on to dummies works well too, but we believe that teaching through play encourages a better and more stable hold. Therefore, we

Molly clicks while Nike holds the dummy.



always start with play before we experiment with clicking and giving the dog treats. Play also helps to spark the dog's interest in the object so she actually enjoys holding it. First, we get the dog going with play so she takes the toy and holds it. Then we try this with a dummy. We present the dummy to the dog in a calm manner so she doesn't start playing with it immediately. But if the dog is entirely disinterested in the dummy we might have to start playing a little to make her take the object. If the dog runs away with the dummy, starts shaking it or chewing on it, we return to working with toys first and then calmly introduce the dummy again, and teach the dog to follow us with the dummy in her mouth.

Release at the Click

When we use the clicker to train the taking and holding exercises, we want the dog to release the object quickly when she hears the click. This way, we avoid reinforcing unwanted behaviors between the click and the reward, such as the dog running away with the object or starting to chew on it. To teach the dog to release an object at the sound of a click: Start with an object that she's not particularly interested in keeping. Give her the object, click and wait for her to release the object spontaneously, after which you offer ample rewards. If your dog doesn't release the object while you wait, try using the "Let's play together!" exercise (described in the chapter "Play –the Ultimate Reward") and click at the exact moment when she releases the object to pick up the other toy. In the beginning, we click just as the dog lets go of the object, and later on we click just before she lets go of it. Eventually the dog will learn that the click means, "release".

Holding Different Objects

Different objects require different techniques for holding and carrying. Remember to train with as many objects as possible – small, large, hard and soft dummies – and also other objects such as branches, forks, shoes and plastic lids. Anything you can think of that can help boost the dog's understanding of holding and carrying.

Some dogs are not fond of objects that smell of other dogs. During field trials, your dog has to hold game and dummies that don't have your scent on it, so borrow objects that others have used and teach your dog to hold them as well.

Taking in the Middle of the Object

When the dog takes the dummy, we want her to pick it up in the middle. She shouldn't take the dummy as if it was a cigar since she might drop it. If your dog immediately takes the dummy in the middle, you don't need to spend extra time working on this. Just pay attention if your dog starts holding it sloppily, in which case you will need to go back and work on the pick-up again.

The types of game used in US field trials depend on the state laws. Various species of upland game birds such as woodcock, grouse and quail, are usually hunted.

In some countries there are field trials using cold game, i.e. game that has been shot prior to the trial, whereas in some countries only warm game, i.e. game that is shot during the field trial, is used. Check the field trial rules in your country to see what you need to focus your training on.

Game is best preserved in the freezer. You can use it both frozen and thawed. The advantage of using frozen game is that it keeps longer. Take out the game, practice taking it and then put it back in the freezer. Make sure to practice with thawed game too because the smell differs from frozen game, and it's also a little different to carry. You can usually thaw and refreeze game a few times before it spoils. Roll the game in newspaper so it dries out a little. Don't forget to tell your family which shelves in the freezer they should avoid taking meat from for Sunday dinner!

Coach Says

Avoid giving the dog a "hold" cue. Instead, teach her to hold the object until you say "thank you". If you say, "hold" during a trial, you're telling the judge that your dog usually drops the game ...

Undesirable Game Handling

If the dog starts chewing on the game, bites too hard or starts rolling on it, remove the game and start to practice having the dog take the game again with more control, as described earlier in this chapter. This will increase the value of picking up the game, so the dog is no longer interested in rolling on or chewing it. If you have practiced taking the game and want to allow the dog to pick the game off the ground but

are not entirely sure she will be successful, you can always put the dog on a leash. This way, you can either prevent the dog from rolling on the game by carefully holding on to the leash or by calmly reining her in. Then take the game and try the holding exercise again. Naturally, you remain silent when you interrupt the dog. Sometimes dogs roll because they may find wild game appealing to rub on, so you might want to try with different kinds of game. Once the dog is able to take different kinds game, you can reintroduce the more appealing game.

Bitches can behave differently when they are in heat. They might start doing things with the game that they've never done before. In such cases, it might be a good idea to take a break from training with game for a few weeks. In some countries bitches in heat are not allowed to compete at field trials, whereas in others they are allowed to. In the US they are run last, but check the regulations of your country to see what applies to you and your dog.

Challenge

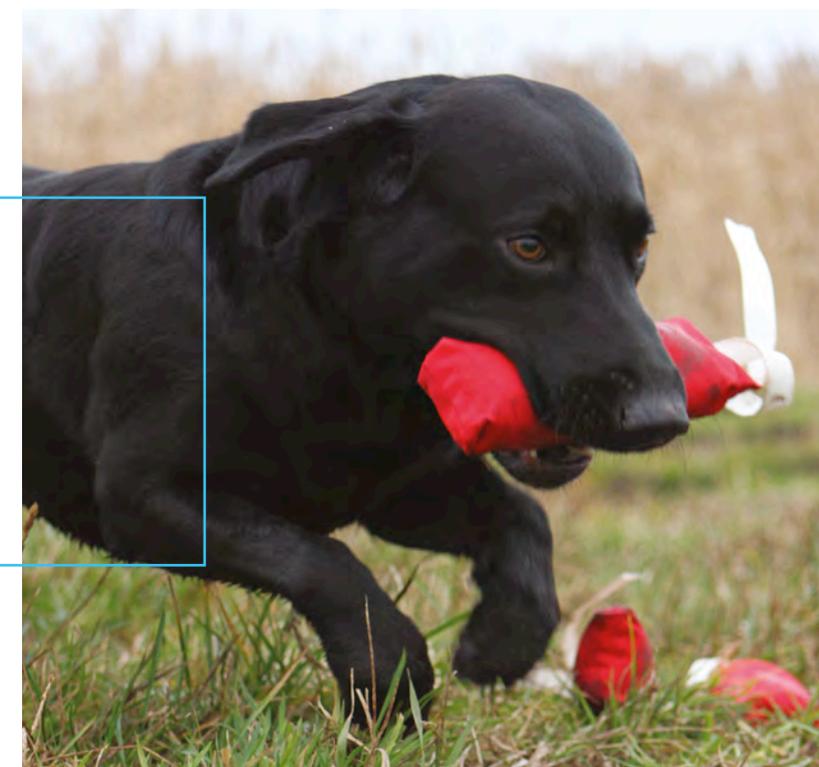
Can your dog hold the dummy and turn to you when:

- A helper claps her hands?
- There is another dummy on the ground?
- A helper holds out a piece of ham?
- There is a hamburger on the ground?

Sub-goals – Taking and Holding	Completed
Take an object from your hand	
Pick up an object from the ground	
Hold an object when sitting beside you and in front of you	
Hold an object when you bend down, put your hand under the object, and poke at the object	
Hold an object while moving	
Hold an object while sitting	
Hold different kinds of objects	
Hold an object despite distractions (for example, treats in the vicinity, several objects to choose between or other people in the area)	

Summary

- Teach the dog to hold the object and turn towards you despite distractions.
- Teach the dog to carry various kinds of game and objects by your side – both on and off leash.
- Teach the dog to keep the object in her mouth, despite distractions, until you say "Thank you".



Love



Controlling the Madness

Most people who start with clicker training are immediately delighted with it. They are amazed at how quickly they can teach new behaviors as well as how much fun both dog and handler are having along the way. Initially though, when you first start training, you may experience a period of confusion. You will have questions, such as how do I do that, what do the various signals mean, and what rules are needed to optimize the training?

Sometimes clicker training might seem a little boundless, but we want to emphasize that it's more about how the individual trainer puts this way of training into practice. Our training is based on a foundation of rules and frameworks, a basic training system, which makes training effective and fun. It allows us to maintain control of the madness.²⁰

Most people find a training system that works for them, but several years later they might discover that they did something inconsistently. Remarkably, the dog has still understood. One set of rules might work amazingly well with one dog but not with another, and that's when things need to be reconsidered.

Our training system is based on rules or signals, both when training voluntarily offered behaviors and behaviors on cue. The rules and signals have to do with release cues, how we start and finish the training, our transports and our rules regarding play and breaks.

You can start training your dog as early as you like since you can always adjust the degree of difficulty based on your dog's ability. Even during the first few days, when you bring home your new puppy, you can start with simple exercises such as the basics of play, focus, steadiness, recall, holding, carrying and releasing objects. But keep your training sessions short.

Day-to-day

Most of a dog's day consists of time we don't consider "training time", but leisure time (even though dogs continue to learn whenever they are awake). When we are sitting on the sofa watching TV, we don't want a dog that whirls around or shows off her tricks. We want our dog to lie down and go to sleep, so we simply ignore the dog when she's trying out

²⁰ Swedish dog trainer Fanny Gott coined the phrase "controlling the madness", www.fannygott.com.



all her tricks and reward her when she sits and eventually lies down. If your dog is really active, you might need to put her leash on the first few times to help her calm down and be still. Soon the dog will learn it pays to lie down and rest when we are on the couch. And as she learns this, you can gradually reduce the rewards for lying down. Daily training is about reinforcing what we want our dogs to do and making sure that they don't learn erroneous behaviors.

We begin teaching our signals from day one, that for example offering behaviors will be rewarded and it pays to lie down and sleep when nothing happens. Since we want the dog to offer behaviors during training, we must teach her which behaviors are desirable in other situations. When we are sitting at the kitchen table, it pays to go and lie down or politely ask for food by staying calm and silent under the table while we eat. When we pick up the treats and sit down on the floor, offering different behaviors will pay off well.

We use a lot of environmental cues to let the dog know what we want. It's easier for dogs to learn environmental cues than verbal cues. Whose dog doesn't run to the door when the leash is taken out, or whose dog doesn't stand at attention when the refrigerator door is opened? The dog has clearly learnt the behavior that leads to rewards in these particular situations.

Training System

During the day, there are a great many environmental cues that tell the dog what we expect. There are also a lot of environmental cues in training – dummies, the training bag, the forest clearing where we usually train, and so on. During training, we spend extra time teaching cues that will make it easier for us to achieve our goals. Many beginners to clicker training worry about doing something wrong. Don't.

One of the most important things is working towards having a shaping savvy dog, who offers a lot of behaviors. You can hone the details later. We have refined our training system, but still discover things that surprise us. The most important thing to know is that everything we do has consequences. But to begin with, we want to say this: Keep going! It's better to experiment than to leave things the way they are.

Now we will try to describe our training system a little more concretely. It's not particularly unique. A lot of clicker trainers use this approach, with a few differences.

Voluntarily Offered Behavior

The dog is most often in front of us when we work with voluntarily offered behavior. But some of the voluntarily offered behaviors we desire are supposed to occur when the dog is close beside us: walking at heel, coming into heel position, being steady, as well as in various situations where the dog starts by running away from us, for instance during a blind retrieve. We usually keep the amount of time spent training voluntarily offered behaviors at our side quite short. Mostly, this is when we make the switch from a front-facing position to a side position. Otherwise, most behaviors in the side position will be on cue.

But ...

... doesn't clicker training place stress on the dog? Maybe. It probably would be stressful if we were constantly training very active behaviors and only did fast-paced training sessions without any rules or limits. But if we teach the dog what we expect and vary our training, the dog will learn to be both active and passive. And if we adjust our criteria based on the dog's ability, it won't be a stressful experience.

Retrieving for All Occasions

Do you have a gun dog and want to have a great time working with your dog and perhaps enter a field trial? Do you want to find a training method where your dog has just as much fun as you do? Do you want to learn how to combine reward based training and field trial training? If so, this is the book for you.

Retrieving for All Occasions is an accessible and inspiring book about how you can use the reward based training philosophy in your gun dog training. The book describes an approach to gun dog training that will challenge you to try something new – if you have the desire and will to do so. This book includes over 100 exercises to train a talented spaniel or retriever. The exercises are for introductory field trial classes for spaniels and retrievers, but this book is also useful for those who have pointers or setters and want to train them for gun dog work.

Elsa Blomster and Lena Gunnarsson are dog training instructors in Gothenburg, Sweden, and use only reward based training methods. They train and compete with their spaniels and retrievers in obedience, agility, rally obedience, tracking, and field trials.

www.retrievingforalloccasions.com

