**MAKING WATER FUN "**

**Northwest Notes / THE LABRADOR QUARTERLY - Summer 2004**

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So much more important than being steady or following a line correctly OR what he does when he comes OUT of the water, is ENTHUSIASM FOR WATER. The aim should always be to develop a LOVE FOR WATER well before asking him to retrieve. Finally (especially for some of us in the Northwest), summer is here and it's the perfect time to start puppies and young dogs in the water or, back-up in your training a little and have some FUN with a dog you've been working with that has lost enthusiasm.

Dogs learn by simple association and the Labrador's first associations with water MUST be fun. In the summer and fall, puddles of various sizes can be found and become new places to explore together. Put your boots on and find a safe place to loose-lead walk through a few puddles together. Bring his favorite tennis ball or bumper (if he's already enthusiastically retrieving to you), toss a couple of your throws into puddles THAT HE CAN CONQUER !

Use your most encouraging voice and pat him all-over and celebrate the fun you're having as you play in areas of water ankle-deep. This MUST BE A POSITIVE ASSOCIATION. IF there was a time-or-two where patience was lost and the pup WAS forced into water, he may be "retrieving but not excited'. STOP water TRAINING for awhile and PLAY. You CAN develop a new love of water .

Choose to make it fun and not demand too much too soon. When your pup is coming to you 100% of the time when you call him (because he ALWAYS receives praise for coming), you can begin some short retrieves. Choose a really warm day or even better, a hot one. If you can, bring along an older, reliable dog to pick-up any dummies that you would loose otherwise and if that dog is not perfectly steady, a second person to avoid the puppy being beaten-out by the older dog.

What a way to CAUSE A NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION with retrieving in the water ! The first retrieve should be a very short toss into shallow water where the puppy will NOT need to swim. If he refuses to enter, walk out and pick up the bumper and walk through the water to the other bank, calling the puppy to follow. You might need to slip a lead on and walk puppy across remembering, NOT TO USE A FRUSTRATED TONE OF VOICE but a tone of voice that is encouraging and showing the pup how much FUN you're having !

VERY GRADUALLY, persuade and encourage him to pick-up VERY SHORT tosses in slightly deeper water. If he retrieves readily in the shallow water, move to a depth to where he will only be taking one or two strokes and REMEMBER, more important that "what you want to happen' is that HE has a POSITIVE experience and FUN ! For quite a long time, I do NOT require the pup to "stay' or be steady to the throw. OPPOSITE "wave the bumper into the air in front of them; tap it on the ground; and yell" Hey, hey, want it ?"

Your goal is for an excited entry with confidence. The best training is often done in the very SHORTEST sessions. One, two or three retrieves are plenty. The LAST of the retrieves MUST be positive and exciting. Do not end on a refusal though. He will learn that he can seize control of your authority and you actually CREATE an attitude problem. However, IF things go wrong at a training session or puppy gets bored, let several days go by before trying again "a perfect time to have some fun; play some catch !

Take some short drives to different places to find water. Having a second handler and reliable "pick-up dog' is a perfect way to add distance a little at-a-time AND really develop enthusiasm. HANDLER ONE yells or uses a cap gun and WHEN he has the dog's attention, he tosses. HIS DOG practices steadiness while HANDLER TWO calls his dog back. Take turns and have fun watching the dogs get pumped-up. I always end a session by teasing the pup with the bumper and not letting him have it. His last memory of each session must be "I can't wait to do it again!

**"A TRAINER ALWAYS ENDS UP WITH THE DOG HE DESERVES." (Robert Self)**