

This month, we will work on teaching your dog to retrieve a toy. For successful agility training, I often toss toys to my dog to reward him for behaviors like obstacle independence, distance work, and start lines. If your dog likes to have his own party with the toy and does not bring it back to you immediately, his hesitancy can hinder your training because it will affect your efficiency as a trainer. If your dog is wasting valuable training time by self-reinforcing with the toy, you cannot get as much actual training done in the same period of time.



By Mary Ellen Barry, photos by Clean Run

Foundation Fundamentals

Retrieving

Prerequisites: This article assumes that the dog already likes toys and will tug readily with you. A number of articles have been published on this topic in the past. The most recent is “Dog Play 101” by Wendy Pape in the *Clean Run Special Issue on Motivation, Drive, and Self-Control*. You may also want to check out the Tug It! training toy (available from www.cleanrun.com or www.tug-it.com), which is a new tool for training a food-motivated dog to tug.

For me, the final finished retrieve behavior looks like this:

- Toy is thrown
- Dog runs directly to toy
- Dog runs directly back to you in a straight line

The dog jumps up on you when he returns with the toy to put the toy right at your hip and into your hand. This has two benefits. First, it increases drive back to you and



second, the dog puts the toy right in your hand so that you do not have to bend over to pick it up. I have trained the behavior on the physical cue of patting my hip. My dog is only allowed to jump on me if I am patting my hip; consequently, I do not think this teaches your dog to jump on you all the time. If you have physical limitations or your dog is too large to be allowed to jump on you, you can teach an alternative, which is to have your dog stay on the ground and put the toy in your hand.

Note that I work all the steps in the order shown here; the behavior is backchained. When I have a young dog, I do *not* throw toys to exercise the dog *until* I have the finished retrieve behavior.

Step 1

In this stage you are classically conditioning your dog that tugging happens directly in front of you and that he needs to get to you in order to play with you. Have a long tug toy or one that is on a rope or a leash (the Sheepy Octopus sold by Clean Run is an ideal toy for

this exercise). Get on the ground (on your knees if you can) and start playing with the toy with your dog. Drop the toy and back up, then use the toy to pull your dog toward you. Remember that you are not yet expecting your dog to come directly to you when you

drop the toy. You are pulling him toward you to condition him that tugging happens exactly there, directly in front of you.

Proceed to Step 2 once your dog starts offering to come toward you when you drop the toy.



Step 2

Next, condition your dog that the start of tugging happens on your hip. If your dog is large enough, start in a standing position; otherwise, kneel on the ground or sit in a chair. Place the toy on your hip and encourage your dog to *jump up* to get the

toy. I say *Get It*. If your dog is hesitant to jump up on you, start by using food to encourage him to jump up when you say *Get It*, then you can go back to using the toy. If you started on your knees or in a chair, progress to standing before proceeding to Step 3.

Note: If your dog is too small to reach your hip when he jumps up, have him jump up to a point on your leg that is comfortable for him to reach when you are standing. That is the location that you should pat with your hand when you say *Get It*.



Step 3

As in the previous step, you can start this stage kneeling on the ground, in a chair, or standing, depending on the size of your dog and his willingness to jump up on you. Put the toy on the ground in front of you and give your dog a cue to *Get It*. As the dog picks up

the toy, pat your hip or leg and encourage the dog to jump up on you. The dog should have the toy in his mouth when he jumps on you. Begin tugging with him when he jumps on you with the toy. Let go of the toy and pat your leg again. The dog should repeat the

behavior, jumping on you again with the toy in his mouth. If you started on your knees or in a chair, progress to standing before proceeding to Step 4.



[Hot Dog]



[Cool Dog]



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Step 4

Put the dog in a stay about 10' away, facing you. Place the toy on the ground between you and the dog. Release the dog with your

Get It cue, and as the dog picks up the toy, pat your hip or leg. He should finish picking up the toy, run to you, and then jump on you.

Begin tugging with him when he jumps on you with the toy.



Step 5

Have your dog at your side facing the same direction as you. Throw a toy and release him with a *Get It*. When he gets to the toy and picks it up, begin patting your hip or leg to cue him to return to you and jump up on you with the toy.



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Alternative Training for Step 2

Get some treats and a clicker. Have your dog in front of you and place a toy on the ground. Ask your dog to *Get It*. When he picks up the toy, reach toward the dog and put your hand under his chin while he holds the toy, then

click. When you click, your dog will likely drop the toy in anticipation of the treat. The toy will fall into your hand when the dog drops it. Reach in with your other hand to deliver the treat. Once the dog is doing this reliably,

complete Steps 3, 4, and 5 above, using the clicker rather than tugging.

Good luck and most of all, have fun! 🐾



Mary Ellen has been involved in agility for 13 years and has achieved the USDAA ADCH with her Border Collies, 13-year-old Zoe and 7-year-old Fizz. Mary Ellen and Fizz represented the U.S. at the 2006 IFCS World Championships in the Netherlands where they earned six placements including three gold medals and will again represent the U.S. in May 2008, in Belgium. She has been an instructor at Say Yes Dog Training, as well as Clean Run and Power Paws Camps. She lives in Norristown, Pennsylvania, with her husband George, and offers private lessons and agility seminars. Contact her via mebarry@kineticdog.com.