

Training the Perfect Retriever:

Drags, Marks and Blinds

Now it's time to move afield and get your dog into more realistic retrieving situations - after all, what's got a dummy to do with hunting? By Stephan Kolhman

DRAGS

Since you're most likely to be asked to perform a drag at the next test you and junior attend, drags are important part of your training program. When we talk about drags, we envision the scent track made by a person dragging a bird or mammal (rabbit, fox or any other predator) on the ground for a few hundred yards.

Once set on this scent trail, the dog is supposed to follow the track, find the dragged animal and retrieve it promptly and properly to hand.

Of course, before we let junior tackle a 300 yard drag, we must gradually introduce him to this new subject. As in blood tracking, we use the long leash for this purpose to keep junior moving slowly and purposefully on the drag. By having control over the dog, we avoid any wild scent chase or free search, which is the ruin of all retrieverdom.

Probably the majority of unsatisfactory scores given in this subject at the Solms/AZP or VGP goes to dogs that run wild and free and only by luck or happenstance stumble upon the bird. They have never learned to calmly track in a concentrated manner, and in all likelihood they will fail tracking that winged quail or "nicked" rabbit - which still has plenty of speed and a bag full of tricks to elude the following dog.

Here's how I introduce dogs to follow a scent trail. We start afield with a dead pigeon or quail, a string for dragging and junior and his long leash. First, let's put the dog out of sight of the following preparation: take the bird into an open meadow and place a hat or any other marker (twig, flagging tape, etc) at the beginning of our first drag. We then scrape the soil a bit with our foot and pull some feathers from the bird. Both the wound in the topsoil and the feathers mark the beginning of the track for the dog. Now we walk with the wind in our back ca 30-50 yards in a straight line, dragging the bird on the ground behind us and return in a wide circle on the downwind side of the drag. *(it is best to mark your drag by dropping something along the way every couple of meters – that way you know if the dog is off the track and where to return to when that happens. I use empty red shot shells – Trudi). Place the bird (without the string attached) on the ground (make sure the dog cannot see the bird from a distance – Trudi),*

Now get junior out, put a collar on him *(start with a soft collar; you don't want the first experiences to be unpleasant – Trudi)*, snap a checkcord on, and take him at heel over to the start of the track. Make sure you approach the track exactly in the direction the drag is laid, so there will be no turn to make once you get started.

At the marked spot, you best make junior lie down with his nose right on top of the feathers. Let him absorb the smell, but make sure he stays put for about a minute or so (*if your dog has not been taught the "down", just make your dog sit – Trudi*). Now you tell him "dead bird" (*"fetch", "bring" or whatever you use to retrieve – remember that it must be a Retrieve command and not a "seek" command that you would use to hunt up live birds!!!!- Trudi*) and point forward along the drag, keeping the rope good and tight to prevent him storming forward. As long as he moves with his nose on the ground and on the drag, we let him move forward. At this point, we don't give him more than about a yard of rope, to prevent him from getting too far off the track. Of course, junior really doesn't know what to do yet, so he will probably pick up his head trying to sniff some airborne scent. At this point it is useful if you can make him lie down again on top of the scent track, but maybe pointing with your hand to the ground will do the trick too.

At any rate, you must make it clear that you are interested in that scent trail, and that you want him to follow it. If you're lucky, he won't need much convincing and gets to the bird quickly, but chances are that he will start getting excited, or strays off the drag. With the rope attached to the collar you can and should stop him from moving off the drag. He's only permitted to go on directly on the drag, all sideways movements are to be avoided.

After several drags, junior will have learned that the quickest way to find the bird is by following the drag directly with his nose low and in a controlled speed (maximally a trot!). Do not allow him to sniff the air, to jump or run on the drag or to veer sideways. Naturally, you must make sure he always stays in front of you, never circling back. If junior needs more encouragement, just command "dead bird, fetch!", which will bring back memories of duty and drill from our back yard training.

With some luck and lots of help from you, junior finally finds the bird. Make sure he quickly picks it up without undue excitement, chewing or delay, and then take him back to the start of the drag at a brisk pace. There you make him sit, hold the bird while you pet his head and talk to him softly. After the proper command to release the bird ("Giiive"), you praise junior and let him play. I always make sure that after releasing the bird, junior gets a chance to release some of the tension too, by throwing a bumper or otherwise putting up a bit of horseplay. (*until you have completed your retrieve training, don't worry too much about the delivery, just take the bird from the dog whether he is standing or sitting and keep it upbeat – Trudi*)

Of course, we don't do another drag that day, but from now on we do at least one per day (until the dog is going well on a 100 meter drag). After several drags, junior will have learned that the quickest way to find the bird is by following the drag directly with his nose low and in a controlled speed (maximally a trot!). Do not allow him to sniff the air, to jump or run on the drag or to veer sideways. Naturally, you must make sure he always stays in front of you, never circling back. If junior needs more encouragement, just command "dead bird, fetch!" which will bring back memories of duty and drill from our back yard training. Most importantly at this point, we make sure that junior always is on the long leash, always gets reprimanded for sloppy, unconcentrated work, and always finds a bird. We gradually increase the length of the drag to 100 yards, and then start putting some bends (never sharper than 90 degrees) into the track.

Now is the time to reduce some of the handler influences, by letting the leash drag while following the dog closely. Increasingly we let him get further ahead. There is always a brisk breeze of dominance and control blowing while we work drags, so junior is kept in the line of duty. In contrast to blood tracking, we "make" junior do drags, and he should have no uncertain feelings about our readiness to force him all the way, should he decide in favor of more pleasurable activities. Keep cool, calm and control!

Only after junior reliably follows the track without corrections we let him go without our company. In the beginning we stop about 50 yards before the end of the drag, then 75 yards and so forth until we only walk him ca 30 yards from the start. Every time we increase the length of the drag junior has to work without our direct influence we also shorten the rope dragging behind him. At the end (which can be only a couple of days before the test if necessary!) we no longer let him drag a rope at all, but loop it through the collar, holding both ends at the beginning of the drag and then stopping at about 30 yards and letting one end go. The loose end will slip through the collar. *(Now you will do drag work only a couple of times per week and can start to increase the length of the drags, until the dog is working up to 300 yard drags reliably, with a couple of bends in the track. Once you are working longer drags, you will need to use a helper, otherwise the dog may follow your track all the way back to you, missing the bird along the way. Each time you increase the length of the drag, work the dog on the lead for a bit longer than you did on the shorter drags and gradually reduce the distance you go along with the dog. Also vary the cover in which you put the bird or rabbit at the end of the drag, so that eventually the dog has to go into cover at the end to find the bird and feels that you cannot see him – but be sure that you or your helper are able to see what he is doing so you can stop him should he try to bury or mess around with the bird when he thinks you are not watching! - Trudi)*

After many drags (which will take about a month) you should have junior trained enough that he will calmly follow a 300 yard track with 2 kinks in it, pick up a bird and carry it back to the starting point. We also make sure that the drag is laid by different people, so the dog will not always have the handler scent to follow.

The last step is to "test" junior if he really understood the message. We let a friend lay a 300 yard drag, ending directly under a tree, which the friend climbs, taking the bird with him. Send junior to retrieve, and - not able to find the bird at the end of the drag - he'll come back empty. Now is your time to leash him (remember: never punish an unleashed dog!) and to lay it on him, reprimanding him sharply for coming back without a bird. This must be a "memorable" experience for junior, one he's always thinking of should the tracking get difficult. Send him back out with as much authority you can muster, and signal your buddy in the tree to drop the bird. Bingo, junior finds and retrieves properly, and both of you engage in some happy time. This last step is very important, and it will make your dog search until "hell freezes over" before he comes back empty. Reliable? You betcha!

At the Solms/AZP/HZP, your drag will be laid by a judge. He will place a fresh animal at the end of both drags (you'll have to do a rabbit drag and a bird drag), and then hide with the dragged animal placed in front of him. If junior overshoots the animal at the end of the drag, no big deal, since he's allowed to pick up the animal at the judges feet. It pays to expose junior to the fact that there is always a bird or rabbit at the feet of the guy hiding in the bushes - it may save your tail at the test. At least,

the pooch isn't gonna get scared by the judge (some of which may look quite strange indeed!) and he won't come flying home to Daddy without a bird.