

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

©2005, Meredith Kuhn

Body Language

What does body language have to do with retriever training? LOTS! It is just as important as it is in obedience training and some handlers don't realize the silent queues they are giving their dogs.

The key to good results is consistency...how you step to the line, how you position your dog, how you place your hand to send them on a mark. Many of us are not consistent, but the dogs expect it. Sometimes the dogs anticipate, sometimes they misinterpret. It is our job to be as consistent as possible so our dogs know what comes next.

I have learned this through experience with my own dogs. I even have a dog that queues me when she is locked in and ready to go for a mark. Until Stella's ears are fully cocked, she isn't ready to go. Sending her too soon means she will probably have difficulties. That means I have to be a little more patient to allow her the time to lock in. Once I figured that out, her success rate on doubles improved dramatically. I had been sending her too soon for the memory bird. So now I watch for Stella's "lock and load" signal before I send her. What a difference!

If your dog is all set and ready to go, but you step up to send him, you have just undone all the positioning and body language. The dog is going to step up with you, and you have to start all over again. In the beginning, you have to be constantly aware of your body language and your routine and be aware of how it affects your dog. After a while, it becomes second nature and you won't have to think through the steps any more. If you are like me, you need that instinct and second nature to kick in when you are at the line because nerves will wipe your rational brain functions out for sure.

I can watch a new handler shift his or her weight, probably unconsciously, but the dog picks up on it and repositions itself. Worse yet, the weight shift occurs when the dog is being handled on a blind. The handler unconsciously repositions himself to maybe have optimum maneuvering room, but the sitting dog sees his handler shift to one side and takes that as a cast. And the handler can't understand what has happened. The bottom line is that they are more observant than we are and they watch for the slightest clue. If we aren't aware of this, we will be mightily frustrated!

There is no one "right" way or "wrong" way. If it works for you and your dog, then that is what counts. Several years ago, I was at a Senior hunt test. There was a man with a handsome yellow Lab and the dog did excellent work on all of his marks. When it came time to run his land blind, the dog lined the blind. When it came time for the water blind, the owner had to handle the dog for the first time. The dog took every whistle and every cast and did a wonderful job. However, some of the gallery made fun of the man because of his technique. His casts were all a bit over-exaggerated and he really threw himself into the hand signals. So what? He and the dog worked flawlessly as a team. In conversation with his wife, I discovered that he had done all of the training himself by reading books and other reference materials. He didn't have a training group or anyone to mentor him. None of us would know the preferred or "correct" handling style if we didn't have training buddies, pro trainers, training seminars, videos or other experienced handlers to give us tips and show us. As long as it works and it meets the hunt test requirements or your hunting needs, style doesn't matter. It was obvious that this man had been consistent with his dog and the dog knew what each signal meant. That's what we are after.

With my dogs, the least amount of body language is the best. I also very seldom use voice with my handling commands. One very important lesson I learned from a professional trainer is that

any time you add voice to a hand signal, Voice pushes the dog and the dog will go deeper. So, if you really want the dog to take an “over” cast, adding voice will make the dog go “over” and “back,” which would be off-line. If you add a verbal “back” to the hand signal for a straight back, the dog will drive deeper and harder than if you use just the hand signal. So there will be times when adding the voice is just what you need, but often, it is going to cause an over-reaction to the hand signal. And that will cause more corrective handling. The trap we fall into is frustration, so we add voice, then we add angry voice, and each time the dog goes deeper and more off-line and we don’t understand why. Try it without the voice and see if you don’t get a better cast. Instead of adding voice to an “over” command, walk the command—step that direction and reinforce the hand signal.

If you aren’t sure what you do when you run your dog, have a friend stand behind you and notice what body language you might be using. Or, have someone video tape you working your dog. It can be pretty sobering to see yourself on tape versus how you see yourself in your mind’s eye! You may figure out why your dog never takes an angle back cast correctly—because your arm positioning is not correct and the dog can’t figure out WHAT you want so he guesses and hopes for the best.

Another thing I learned quickly is that spouses don’t take kindly to advice or constructive criticism from their spouses! Sometimes it is a good idea to have a neutral third party observe and comment to maintain marital harmony. I have heard parents say that they can tell the child something numerous times with no result—then a “stranger” tells the child the same thing and it becomes gospel. I think the same thing applies to some spouses! Don’t get me wrong—I am thrilled that my husband is learning to play this game with me. I just want him to be successful with his dog so he gets REALLY hooked—so I may be a bit over-zealous with my “advice.” I am learning to be less “helpful” and am relying on other experienced trainers and handlers to provide advice to him.

So, just like with obedience training, or other performance events, consistency is the key. You and the dog will find comfort in routine and success in consistency.

Happy training!

###