

Sure Steps to Steadiness! – Part I

By Kit Critchlow
JGV-USA

I guess before I tell you one method for training a gun dog to be steady, I should throw out a definition. For different people it means different things. For the purposes of this article I will assume that steadiness means steady to wing, shot and fall. For pointing dogs you can throw pointing in the front of that list. For all hunting dogs the method is the same. Steadiness is nothing more than transfer of control of the hunting situation from dog to hunter and back to the dog again. When Spot hunts he is in control. As soon as Spot points or flushes the bird he is expect to transfer that control to the handler. After the handler makes the great shot (which he never misses, correct!), then control is passed back to Spot with the command to retrieve. When looked at from Spot's point of view this can be a very complicated and frustrating sequence. After all, Spot's ancestors never passed control of the situation to their hunting partner. If they did, they wouldn't have gotten dinner.

THROUGH THE EYES OF SPOT

How can this be confusing? All Spot has to do is stand there until you release him. Correct? Try to put yourself in Spot's place. You are in a situation you were destined for through many generations of selective breeding. You were bred to have a high prey drive, courage and determination to make it through a tough day of hunting. All of your instincts are telling you first to pounce on that bird before it gets in the air... But wait, Dad said, "you can't do that." Now the bird gets off the ground, more instincts kick in and push you to lunge with all your might so dinner doesn't get away yet another time. That is why you are here in the first place. All of your canine ancestors were able to catch their prey and pass on their genes.... Wait, Dad said, "you can't do that." Bang! You remember that sound. You usually catch birdy after that sound!... But wait, Dad said, "you can't do that." Now you see birdy falling to the ground fluttering. If you hurry you get a second chance at dinner..... Oh man, Dad said, "you can't do that!!"

As you can see, this is much more complicated for Spot than "Stay until released." For a pointing dog you are expecting the dog to resist four genetically ingrained temptations in a very quick sequence (point, wing, shot and fall). This is very difficult for Spot to understand if all four are taught at the same time. The easiest way to teach complex behaviors such as this is to teach them in reverse order and add another step after Spot has mastered the previous step/s. I was lucky enough to be taught this method by Steve Kohlmann. Since then I have seen many people try to teach several of the steadiness steps at the same time with very slow progress.

Preparation

The prerequisites for this method are an enthusiastic retriever, a dog that is crazy about birds and a reliable "stop" command. If Spot isn't bird crazy then don't consider making

him steady until he is. If he isn't a reliable, enthusiastic retriever then this method will not work either. These are two requirements for any effective hunting dog, so get these things accomplished before you work on steadiness.

The stop command can be WHOA, SIT or HALT (chin on the ground). As long as you can stop Spot at any distance with any amount of distraction. At this stage the proper use of an electronic training collar (e-collar) will take many frustrating hours out of your and Spot's day. Much more humane!

PROPER USE OF THE E-COLLAR

Lets take a moment and talk about the proper use of the e-collar and how it can be used to teach a command like WHOA, SIT or HALT. I guess the proper way of stating this would be to say that the e-collar is used to condition Spot to react to your command in a timely manner. We can teach Spot to turn off low level continuous stimulation from the e-collar by complying with our command.

The electric collar is an extremely powerful tool when used in the proper manner. It can also be an extremely destructive tool if used incorrectly. If Spot is ruined by the use of the e-collar it is not the e-collar's fault. It is the person pushing the button.

The first thing that must be accomplished is finding the correct level of continuous stimulation for Spot. Each dog will be different depending on the dog's temperament and tolerance for electrical stimulation. To find the proper level to use, put the e-collar on Spot tightly. Now just sit around and let Spot sniff the grass. Maybe even give him a treat to relax him a bit. When Spot is looking away from you, use the lowest setting the e-collar has with continuous stimulation. Did Spot react? If not then you can move to a higher setting. Keep increasing until Spot acts like he has a mosquito on his neck or a fly buzzing around his head. You want Spot to be able to think clearly while stimulation is turned on. Keep in mind that his tolerance for electricity will be determined by his level of excitement as well. That is why you need an e-collar that has instantly adjustable levels at the transmitter. If the low level is being ignored then level two must be used and so on. Sometimes it is difficult to tell exactly what level is needed, but with time in the field and training in the yard you will learn exactly what level is needed for each particular situation.

Another note here is that some dogs have been previously abused by the e-collar. These dogs may overreact to even the slightest amount of electrical stimulation. It isn't that the dog is getting hurt, it is that the dog is preparing itself for the big jolt. The e-collar should be introduced to the dog properly the first time. If used in the yard and house until pup has an understanding of what the e-collar means, then there will rarely be a need to increase the stimulation. To properly introduce a dog to the e-collar I recommend going through the Tri-Tronics Three Action Introduction¹. This three-week course will give Spot the understanding and conditioning he needs to perform more difficult tasks in the field.

Hopefully your e-collar will deliver a level of stimulation that is low enough for Spot. If not, then I would recommend getting a different e-collar. You cannot train with an e-collar that is too hot for Spot! If Spot vocalizes, overreacts, spins in circles or the like, the e-collar is too hot. Now that your e-collar is set to the proper level, lets talk a little about using the e-collar for reinforcement instead of punishment.

REINFORCEMENT OR PUNISHMENT

What is the difference between reinforcement and punishment? Well, think back to when you were a kid and mom gave you a spanking for that picture you painted behind the curtains on the wall. Did she suddenly appear and catch you in the act and smack your hand immediately or did she see the art work a week later and give you a spanking at that time. The latter would be punishment, while immediate correction and changing the behavior is considered reinforcement. If you got immediately corrected while in the act of painting every time you painted, how often would you be painting? I figured you were pretty smart! Probably not more than once, and definitely not more than twice. If you didn't get caught for a week every time you painted, you may be tempted to do it again. The point is that timing is very critical. Especially with an animal that doesn't have the reasoning capacity that a human does. Spot will definitely not associate the spanking with something he did a week ago. A few seconds is enough time difference for Spot to associate a correction with the wrong thing.

Spot will associate a correction with whatever he is doing at that moment. If Spot broke on the shot and was just about to latch onto the bird when you nailed him with electricity for the first time, what is Spot going to associate that electricity with? That's correct! The bird. Definitely not a good way to build Spot's desire. Poor timing and the use of punishment made Spot associate the stimulation with the wrong event in the sequence.

ORDER IS IMPORTANT!

Speaking of sequences... Earlier I mentioned how difficult it is for Spot because of the tempting sequence that occurs during steady to point/wing/shot/fall. So how do we get Spot to associate any reinforcement (positive or negative) with the desired steadiness? To do this we have to break the sequence of events into small pieces so Spot can associate reinforcement with that particular event. The retrieve is the positive reinforcement that is used to help Spot learn steadiness.

WHY THE RETRIEVE?

So why do we use the retrieve as the positive reinforcement for steadiness? Why not use a biscuit or a pat on the head? Well, I'm sure that most of you know the ultimate reward for a dog that has just watched a bird fall is bird-in-fangs. I can't think of any other positive reinforcement that Spot would want more. Spot will want that retrieve more than anything and do whatever it takes to get it. What will it take? Steadiness! I highly doubt that Spot will give a hoot about the dog treat you put in front of him while he's

marking the location where the bird just fell. He wants that bird and that bird is the ultimate reinforcement and reward.

Another note on the subject of retrieving. I mentioned earlier that a very enthusiastic retriever is required for this method. I'm sure you are starting to see why. I will take this one step further. If you have to holler at Spot or use any kind of force to get him to come back to you and deliver the bird properly then things will get side tracked and Spot will not enjoy the steadiness training the way he should. The reward of the retrieve will become diminished and possibly useless. The bottom line is, take care of proper delivery before you begin steadiness training. That way you won't get side tracked.

Since we're using the retrieve as a timely reinforcement and we can only introduce one of the events in the sequence at a time, we have to start with the last step before the retrieve. That step is the "fall" of the object to be retrieved. Then we add shot, wing and point respectively. If we were to start with steady to flush, Spot would have two more steps to go through before he got the retrieve. At this point the retrieve would no longer be reinforcement; it would be a reward and probably not associated with any of the steps in the sequence.

With each step we make sure that Spot thoroughly understands what is expected for that particular step in the sequence. That way when we go to the next step in the sequence Spot will not associate our negative reinforcement with the wrong step. Spot already experienced positive reinforcement for the last step so he will associate the negative reinforcement with the newly introduced step. The more black and white we can make it for Spot the faster he will learn and the longer he will retain his lessons. Order is important!

Before you go any further make sure that Spot is fully trained in retrieving. It will make your days afield much more enjoyable and ethical as well as give you a tool for steadiness training. If you would like more information on this subject I would suggest getting the Tri-Tronics videos *Trained Retrieve Part I: HOLD* and *Part II: FETCH*. I've seen no better method for training a dog to retrieve. This method is also free from the Dobbs Training Center on the Internet at: <http://www.dobbsdogs.com>.² Check in the Retriever section. There is a lot of other good info there as well.

In Part II of this article I will discuss different "stop" commands and how to train "HALT". Until then get Spot ready by increasing his prey drive and turning him into an excellent retriever!

¹ The Dobbs web site has articles on this and a wide range of other training topics. Reprints of the articles they have written for *Pointing Dog Journal* and *The Retriever Journal* can be found there free of charge.

² For those of you who don't have Internet access, you can get a Dobbs Catalog from Dobbs Retail Store, 2757 Highway 20, Marysville, CA 95901, USA, Toll Free (888) 326-5527.

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