Force fetch ?? Yes, no, maybe….. probably not.

By Randy Blanchard

The dog training world in North America is slowly undergoing an evolution which is challenging traditional training methods. Trainers and owners are moving away from force and replacing it with a reward-based program. Under this system, you concentrate on communicating effectively with the dog. This article provides a road map describing the reasons, with examples, why you should embrace change and replace a force program with a reward-based training system.

Many North American hunting dog trainers place a heavy emphasis **on force fetch** as part of their training agenda. The foundation of any force program is avoidance training: The dog learns to comply to the trainer's commands, not because he wants to…. but because he's forced to do so. The dog complies in his attempt to avoid discomfort. There is a belief that force is necessary to decrease undesirable behaviour. **This is false**, as many dogs do not respond well to force. Instead, **they become resentful and lose respect** for the trainer. This can manifest into different kinds of negative behaviour including arguing with the trainer, disobedience issues, and can lead to serious mouthing concerns.

Behavioural problems can be avoided by adopting a reward-based training program. The goal is to **establish a relationship** where the dog recognizes you as the leader and wants to follow your commands. This is **called respect**. When a dog respects the handler, he will automatically relate to you and training in itself, becomes fun, easy and everything falls into place. The training principles do not change, rather, it is the technique and method that changes. Reward-based trainers understand that each

dog is different, so they change their program to fit the temperament, characteristics and abilities of the dog. This is why **they are successful.**

A reward-based system focuses on persuasion as opposed to force. The idea is good behaviour is rewarded so it will continue. Bad behaviour is not rewarded and will disappear. Treats are used to motivate good behaviour, but **the key is eye contact**, if your dog avoids looking at you, you have created a problem. If the dog is trained to maintain eye contact then **he is engaged** with the training process.

It takes **no time at all** to teach a dog to maintain eye contact. Just have the dog sit or stand in front of you, have a treat in your hands, touch both of your hands to your nose. The dog knows you have a treat and will stare at your nose. Do not say a word. Simply look into his eyes, slowly move your arms outward so you form a T. The dog will move his head back and forth looking left and right. It's comical because he looks like he's watching a tennis match!! At some point the dog will look you straight in the eye. **As soon as he does** give a reward word like,"yes" then give him the treat. Within one or two short sessions the dog will stop looking at your hands. Instead he will look directly into your eyes calmly waiting for his treat. **Now you have his undivided attention.** His training adventure is ready to begin.

There's a method and a process to dispersing treats. There are two new cue words used to motivate. There is a "marker" word and a "reward" word. **A marker word** just lets the dog know that he's doing a good job and to keep on going. The word of choice is "good." A **reward word** tells the dog that he has just earned a treat. Most trainers use the word,"yes." There are two important things to note. First**, always give a two or three-second delay** between the reward word and the treat. The delay allows the dog to enjoy the treat a little longer. Second, **be unpredictable** in rewarding treats. A dog should never know when he has earned a reward.

One of **the most important training tools** a reward-based trainer has **is his voice**. For the most part your voice should be soft, calm and soothing, though this depends on the type of dog you are working with. Some dogs are nervous, slow or thoughtful while others are wild and rambunctious.

They can be impulsive and even thoughtless. When dealing **with the soft ones**, your voice should be a little on the **loud side and enthusiastic**. At the other end of the spectrum your voice is **calm and methodical**. When a dog does a training exercise incorrectly, he **must know immediately** that he has made a mistake. This is done with the tone of your voice. Make a harsh sound like "No," "Aaaah,""stop," or any word that works just be consistent.

The funny thing about reward based training is you **must keep negative reinforcement in your back pocket,** ready to be used at a moment's notice. Before applying any kind of negative reinforcement, the dog **must understand when he's wrong**. Dogs learn by trial and error so making mistakes is part of the training process. Intelligent trainers turn mistakes into a positive learning experience. You start by teaching the dog what not to do. This is referred to as proofing. The rule is when a dog makes a mistake tell him he's wrong. Bring him back to where he was right, then simplify the task.

There are only **three times** a dog will not follow a command: If he's confused, makes a bad decision or is being disobedient. **It's up to the trainer to determine** which error it is and respond accordingly. If a dog is confused then your response should be gentle. All you are doing is communicating that he made a mistake. A bad decision means your tone should rise a little **indicating that you are not happy**. If the dog is clearly disobedient then show displeasure with your voice, **immediately get to the dog**, hold him by the collar then without saying a word lead him back to where he was right and repeat.

The first time I used this method was with a client dog, a soft, intelligent Scottish Labrador retriever. She had developed a peculiar behaviour where upon retrieving a bird she would race by her owner and jump into her kennel in the back of the truck. It was a head scratcher as the dog was not confused, wasn't making a bad decision and certainly wasn't disobedient. I took the dog in for training and never had an issue. **We started by explaining** what we wanted the dog to do. **Step 1** – the dog sat several feet away from from me, I called the dog to me and asked her to sit, gave

her a treat and repeated this three times. **Step 2** – Next day placed a dead bird between me and the dog, asked her to fetch, come to me and sit. **Step 3** – Had the dog sit, tossed a dead bird and gave the retrieve command. There were no problems. I repeated it a second time but I had my truck with a kennel in the back parked right behind us. There was no problem at all. This behaviour was accidentally taught by the owner. Later in the week the owner came by to see the dog work and take her home. We set up a long retrieving test. Everything went according to plan until the delivery. The dog blew past the owner and headed to the kennel. I asked the client not to move and I went to the kennel. The dog was sitting in her kennel, wagging her tail and holding the dead bird. I didn't say a word, just followed the rule, took hold of the collar, **didn't say a word** just gently walked the dog to the original spot and had the owner start again. To my surprise the dog scooped up the bird, came straight back to the owner and did the perfect delivery by presenting her with the bird. I have no idea how this works. **All I know is it does**. That simple training technique cured the problem.

Good dog trainers spend their time **solving problems not creating them**. Connie Cleveland, the lady who developed this system and put science to the method, teaches that most dogs are sensitive and become upset when they make a mistake. **When a dog makes a mistake** you never call them to you as they will come in slowly, with their head and tail down. They are pouting and it's a mistake to allow this too happen. You want them to get over their mistake quickly, this is why you **walk out to the dog**. Some dogs when they make a mistake decide not to come to the trainer. The cure is to keep the dog on a check cord until the recall is perfect.

I've never understood the reliance on a force fetch program. **It goes against the natural ability of the dog**. Part of a dog's genetic makeup is retrieving. **All a trainer has to do is massage that natural ability.** We own six DK dogs and only one required a modified force fetch program. The others were retrieving fanatics. All I had to do was **teach them to deliver to hand.** This took no time at all because they related to me and were eager to learn. A reward-based system promotes good retrieving skills and a willingness to deliver the bird to the hand.

As you can see a reward-based system has merit because the trainer gains the respect of the dog. **The result is the dog wants to learn** and will follow his handler anywhere.