Training for the SOLMS, part 2
Force training, theory and what the books do not tell you:

by Randy Blanchard

The reason most dogs fail in the SOLMS is because of a lack of understanding on how to navigate through the force fetch part of your training program. An effective force fetch program starts with an assessment of the dog, follows a sequence of bench work, transition from the bench to the ground, a walking fetch drill and ends with a force to the pile drill on land and over water. All of this is designed to achieve three main goals. The goals are first to teach the dog to hold, fetch and out an object on command, second teaching the dog that he is responsible for being disobedient and third allowing the dog the ability to make mistakes.

Before the training begins you must have an assessment process. This allows you to know what you are dealing with. You test for intelligence, trainability and desire. This information will dictate how you proceed. Your program has to fit the temperament, character and sensitivity of the dog. Tailoring the program to the individual dog means success.

You start with leash work to teach basic obedience and to put the dog in the right frame of mind for bench work. Leash work is the start of teaching the dog that he is responsible for being disobedient. This is done by corrections on the leash. You give a command and the dog has one second to comply. If not, he receives a correction in the form of a tug on the leash. If he does as he is asked, he receives praise. The most important part is timing and It has to be perfect. It is timing that allows the dog to decide if he is going to comply with your request. Once the dog understands he has choice two things will happen. First, he will tend to make the right decision and second if he has not complied, he will take responsibility for the correction. Leash work should last between eight to ten minutes then you proceed to the bench or training table.

The bench is where the dog learns to hold, fetch and out an object on command. It is a process that builds consistent retrieving performance. The dog learns that it is his job to retrieve not because he likes to but because it was a command. This is taught by following up on the theme during leash work that the dog is responsible for being disobedient. The preferred method to teach fetch is the toe pinch. When you command fetch the dog has one second to comply. If he does not, then you apply pressure to a cord wrapped around the dog's paw. Initially the dog will respond to the pressure by opening his mouth to register his displeasure and at the same time reach for the source

of the pain. As soon as he opens his mouth insert the wooden dowel, release the pressure and give the dog lots of praise. Over time you move the dowel farther away from the dog's mouth and ask him to fetch.

There is a difference between punishment and motivation. If a dog perceives that he is being punished your chances of success are limited. If you are motivating the dog will be comfortable on the bench and want to learn his lessons. There are a number of signs that let the trainer know that he is moving in the right direction. First is eye contact. Eye contact builds boldness and the dog is giving you his undivided attention. This is why a soft voice is important when doing bench work. It puts the dog at ease. A major breakthrough is when the dog understands that he is responsible for being disobedient. This occurs when the dog refuses the fetch command. After one second you apply pressure on the cord and the dog immediately reaches and grabs the bumper instead of moving his head towards the source of discomfort. Once the dog understands this concept training goes easy. It seems strange but another milestone you look for happens after the dog is starting to fetch on command. For some reason, a dog will not release the bumper. It is almost as if the dog is saying, "If I have a bumper in my mouth you can't pinch my paw." This is just a short phase and something you should ignore. All you have to do is slowly turn the bumper backwards so it moves to the back of the dogs mouth and at the same time put your thumb behind the bumper and ever so slightly add a little downward pressure on the lower jaw. While doing this softly command out or whatever release word you use.

A big part of bench work is praise. Never underestimate the power of praise. On the table you only praise the dog when he has a bumper in his mouth. Spend a couple of minutes praising and softly stroking the dog before taking the bumper.

During bench work you should try to get between one to three corrections per lesson. If you require more than three corrections the dog is telling you that he does not understand the lesson, or he is confused. When this happens you have to simplify then end the lesson on a positive note. A lesson on the bench should not last any longer than ten minutes. Short sessions keep the dog interested.

Once the dog is fetching on command and reaching for the bumper in different positions around him you start to get the dog to pick up the bumper off the table. This usually takes three days. This is the final stage of bench work. Bench work ends when you can place a bumper on the table, step back five feet, point to the bumper and in a soft voice command fetch. The dog should immediately scoop up the bumper and hold it until you lightly grasp the bumper and ask the dog to out.

For some reason dogs do not seem to make the connection between fetching off the training table and fetching off the ground. This is why you need a transition process. The transition period can be taught in one or two lessons. Just get them to fetch off the

training table, walk them down onto the ground. Take the bumper then place it on the ground and ask them to fetch. It is a fairly easy process.

Once the transition is complete move right into the walking fetch drill. This is one of the most important drills in the professional trainer's bag of tricks. It teaches the dog to scoop up an object and promptly return to the trainer. The key to the drill is to keep moving. This really causes the dog to think and pay attention to what he is doing. To start you have a bumper placed approximately fifty feet away from you. Walk the dog on a leash towards the bumper, when you are a few feet away from the bumper ask the dog to fetch …. Keep Moving, whatever you do, do not stop …. If the dog does not comply reach down and apply an ear pinch. Start walking in a circle, after moving three paces command fetch and apply another ear pinch, take three more paces and by this time you are back to where the dog first refused to fetch. Command fetch again and he should pick up the bumper. If he does give lots of praise and keep walking for another fifty paces, then stop the dog. Wait a moment then take the bumper. Now you move right into the drill. Lay out eight to ten bumpers fifty paces apart in an oval and start walking towards the first bumper, ask the dog to fetch and carry on to the next bumper. A few feet away from the next bumper stop the dog, take and discard the bumper by tossing it behind you. Then ask the dog to fetch and continue on with the drill. When you can run the oval three times without a correction you are ready for the next step. You replace half the bumpers with dead birds. If this goes well then replace the remaining bumpers with dead birds.

A well-planned force fetch program ends with a force to the pile drill on land and over water. This drill is important as it is the beginning of teaching blind retrieves and teaches the dog that he must return with the game over distances. It also promotes a healthy, positive attitude in delivering game. This drill ensures that the dog will always return with the game.

The best way to teach this drill is with the e-collar. Essentially you are asking the dog to run to a pile of bumpers, pick up one bumper and return to the trainer. The drill follows the same principles as taught on the bench. You combine force and praise to get the dog to run to the pile and return. To do this you must follow a sequence. The pile of bumpers is placed fifty to sixty yards away from you and the dog should be on a long check cord.

Start by establishing the pile. Toss a bumper to the pile and get the dog to retrieve. Send the dog twice to the pile. Do not give any praise just take the bumper. Now you start force stage. Have the e-collar on low and send the dog. When the dog is three or four strides away from you command fetch – over time you change to the command back. This is the cue to tell the dog you are doing a blind retrieve – On the fetch command wait one second and apply a correction. You should be able to obtain three corrections

on the way to the pile. As soon as the dog touches a bumper command in a loud voice, "Come!" On the return do not say anything. Repeat and apply three corrections. The third or plain stage. Send the dog to the pile two more times but do not say anything except maybe come. The fourth part is the praise stage. Send the dog and as the dog runs away from you give lots of praise. Start low and increase the loudness of your voice as the dog moves away from you. Example – "good dog, Good Dog, GOOD GOOD Dog! When the dog reaches the bumpers sharply command come and praise all the way in. The dog will be excited, just ignore that. Send the dog again with praise. The final part is the plain stage. Send the dog and do not say anything. The reason you have a plain stage is because when using the e-collar you must separate force from praise otherwise you will cause confusion in the dog.

This drill should take three days. On the second and third day replace the bumpers with dead birds.
The third goal in the force fetch process is allowing the dog the ability to make mistakes. At the end of each lesson on the bench you should run the dog in a field for ten to fifteen minutes. This allows the dog to unwind and more importantly it is the perfect opportunity to allow the dog the ability to make mistakes. A dog that is not afraid to make a mistake will usually make the right decision. This pays dividends when hunting as well as running the DK tests.

The key to passing the SOLMS is related to your force fetch program. It is the job of the owner to patch up any holes in the training program and carry on with the training. Knowledge is power and all it takes is a desire to alter your program to promote success.