

Training for the SOLMS Part 3

Force training, part 2

The Midas touch

by Randy Blanchard



Just like the previous article we are covering topics that books do not mention.

One thing that is never mentioned when discussing a force fetch program is failure. What happens when a dog puts up resistance and begins to shut down? This occurs more often than you would think especially with European blood lines. When you see the signs of rejection you must modify or change what you are doing to fit the needs of the dog and at the same time achieve your goals.

Failure is usually caused by not understanding what is involved in training or not being able to read the dog. There are four stages to training. Explain, force, praise and test. Knowing the stages will make you a more thoughtful, supportive trainer. The stages allow the trainer to focus and takes away confusion. You normally begin a lesson with the explain stage. You are concentrating on one thing and you will not move forward until the dog understands what you expect of him. Now you move right into the force stage. If there is resistance or the dog shows signs of not understanding swing right back into the explain stage. If the dog understands force push right ahead into praise. Finally, you need to know if the dog understands the lesson which is the reason for the test stage. During a lesson you can switch back and forth to any of the stages. For instance, if you encounter difficulties in the force you can immediately swing into a stage that will support the dog like explain or praise. Or in the testing part of a lesson you may have to move back to the explain stage. You change stages depending on the reaction of the dog.

Knowledge of the four stages of training will prevent falling into a training trap. A trap is when a lesson goes wrong and the trainer does not react quick enough. The lesson spirals out of control causing damage to the dog. The stages allows the trainer to see a problem before it starts and to take corrective measures.

Force is a two-edged sword which can either make or break a dog. Too little force can be just as damaging as too much force. The main problem caused by too little force is disrespect. A dog that is disrespectful will not follow commands and they are a nuisance to be around. They can also develop neurotic behaviors as their owners tend to nitpick them to death. Too much force can create permanent damage and end the hunting career of any dog.

If you want to be successful as a trainer you must understand how and why you are applying force. There are only three reasons that a dog will disobey a command. Disobedience, confusion or making a bad decision. You can only correct for disobedience. If you apply force to a dog that is confused or who has made a bad decision you will damage the dog as he does not understand why you are hurting him. Examples:

1. Disobedience – you ask the dog to sit and the dog refuses.
2. Confusion – The dog has been taught to sit and now you want him to whoa. On the command whoa the dog sits.
3. Bad decision – a young dog is doing a blind retrieve in water. Several feet in front of him a duck lands and swims off to the left of the dog. The young dog decides to swim after the duck and forget about he blind. I have seen this happen.

This is why you must teach the dog that he is responsible for being disobedient. A dog that understands this concept will take the correction and you will not cause any damage as long as the correction fits the crime.

Force does not have to be severe. Intelligent sensitive dogs will respond to the tone of your voice or a light tug on the leash or even a tap on the nose with your finger.

Dogs like to keep things simple and the trainer who understands this will avoid a lot of mistakes and confusion. Each lesson should have one topic and you only focus on that topic. Take the walking fetch drill. It has four topics. Heel, fetch, sit, deliver to hand then repeat. The main topic is fetch and this is what you must concentrate on. Young dogs tend to get excited when doing this drill and things like heel, sit go out the window. Ignore this and only concentrate on fetch. The other things can be fixed separately at a later date. If you make an issue with the other topics you will cause confusion and the lesson will be a bust.

During the force fetch program, you should never be in a hurry to take a bumper or bird from a dog's mouth. On the bench the trainer should only stroke and pat the dog when there is something in the dog's mouth. This praise encourages the dog to hold an object firmly without damaging it. One of the most important drills is the walking fetch. It teaches the dog to promptly pick up an object, carry it and delivery it to hand. The two most important parts of this drill is the fetch command and allowing the dog to hold an object in his mouth. When the trainer asks the dog to sit after fetching the bumper or bird he should take his time, give the dog praise, bend over and stroke the dog from the back of the ear down his side to the rear of the dog, stand back up, give more praise and repeat the stroking. Stand back up and after a minute or so slowly grasp the bumper, wait a moment and ask the dog to release. When he releases the object wait another

moment and then move on to the next bumper or bird. This produces nothing but good things. It prevents mouthing problems and It encourages the dog to want to bring you the bird.

One final point about the force fetch program is resentment. This occurs mostly if not exclusively in females. All I can tell you is the best females I have trained have all had issues with resentment. It happens enough that it should be mentioned. At some point during the force fetch process the female will register her displeasure against being made to do something. It could be anything. I have had females decide not to release the bumper or not to fetch or when doing pile work, they will walk back to the trainer instead of running. Resentment is easy to spot because the female will do everything exactly right except for the part that she wants to make an issue of. The best thing you can do is ignore resentment. If you make an issue of resentment you are proving to the dog that you are being mean to her and then the trouble starts. From that point on the training sessions go downhill.

Do not respond to resentment. Just move along with the program and apply a little extra praise. If the dog will not release the bumper, carefully rotate the bumper to the back of the dog's mouth and at the same time apply a little pressure on the bottom jaw with your thumb. softly ask the dog to release. At some point the dog will decide that this is a waste of time and start doing her job. At that point they buy into the program and become stars.

The force fetch program is the foundation of building a gun dog. You should end up with a happy, bold dog who wants to follow your commands and has no problems delivering game to hand. Then you can proceed with training for the SOLMS.