



RELIABILITY AND THE RETRIEVE: JUSTIFYING THE EAR PINCH?

FREE ARTICLES AT SUZANNECLOTHIER.COM

A realistic look at the justifications used by proponents of the force retrieve.

By Suzanne Clothier

I am not 100% reliable. I sleep through alarms, forget to buy dog food (forcing me to create unusual concoctions from oatmeal, eggs and a single slice of cheese). I often find myself counting pills in a prescription container, calculating how many should be left in order to figure out whether I had indeed given a dog his medication that morning. I leave perishables in the car overnight, fail to return phone calls, empty the parrot's water bowl and then leave it on the kitchen counter until he brings it to my attention. I mail checks late or pay them twice. I call dogs by other dogs' names, or say "come" when I really mean "stay." I forget birthdays and anniversaries, or buy cards and gifts only to put them in a safe place where they are found months or even years later. In short, I am a completely normal human being. And therefore, I am not 100% reliable.

Chatting with a competition trainer, a friend of mine was discussing her dog's progress and mentioned that while the dog had had some problems with the retrieve, we'd been able to work it out in a humane, sensible manner and that the dog was doing just fine. This trainer knew my friend had been adamant about not using an ear pinch to teach her dog. "Well," allowed the trainer, "I'm glad that she's doing well. But is she 100% reliable? Only a dog who is force trained is reliable on the retrieve."

The world of dog training is full of such questions which are absurd in their very opening premise. If, as is rarely done, we actually examine the logic of the question of 100% reliability, we begin to see how much abuse is perpetuated in the name of training. There's several issues at work here - first, the concept that anyone or anything is 100% reliable; second, that being 100% reliable in regards to a retrieve is of critical importance; third, that force trained dogs are in fact 100% reliable; and fourth, that using force to achieve a greater degree of reliability is therefore justified.

The opening premise of 100% reliability is shaky at best. Take a quick look around your home, think about the people you know, consider your own behavior - why, go even further and consider the natural world and tell me what it is you see that is 100% reliable. I don't know about your house, but in my house, electricity works most of the time, but not 100%. Water runs out of faucets most of the time, but not 100%. Most mornings, my truck starts - but not always. I'm usually kind to my dogs, but not always. Face it - nothing in your entire world is 100% reliable. We operate in our daily lives under assumptions that people will, in all likelihood, do certain things, and machines will operate a certain way, and that the ground below us will remain stable. But people do odd, unexpected things; machines break down, sometimes inexplicably; earthquakes can turn seemingly solid ground into waves and chasms. From time to time, we are reminded that nothing is unchangeable, immutable, immune to alteration or failure.

Yet somehow, our dogs are expected to transcend what we know to be the workings of the real world, and be 100% reliable - at least when it comes to a retrieve.

Which leads us to the second point - what's so darn important about having a dog pick up a piece of oddly shaped wood or plastic that we threw away in the first place? If my truck fails at the wrong moment, it can be deadly - literally. If my dog fails to retrieve a dumbbell, no one is hurt. At best, I've lost a little face, if I'm foolish enough to bring my ego into the ring with me. I've lost my entry fee (less than it would cost to take a friend to lunch), and the time, effort and money required to bring me and my dog to this show site (all of which is "disposable income" anyway, unless you're crazy enough to spend the grocery money or the rent on your dog show hobby.) If the entire day's value hinges upon your dog's performance of the retrieve, then I suppose you have lost a lot.

But what of the time spent working with your dog to get to this point? What about the long drives where you find yourself talking to your dog about your feelings, plans or dreams? What about the sunrise or sunset you saw? Or the ice cream you shared with your dog? What about the joy in your dog's eyes when he realized that he, and only he, was the dog for the day? Or didn't you have time for that because you were too upset over your dog's failure to retrieve?

The reality is that the worst that will happen when a dog fails to retrieve is this: he fails to retrieve. I'm sure that a failed retrieve may translate into the loss of dreams, big dreams of national rankings, high scores, recognition and probably more. But sometimes, in the quest for these glorious dreams, we forget the reality of the dogs we "volunteer" to accompany us. We forget that we were the ones who chose to work with a living, breathing partner with a mind of his own, with his own particular gifts, with his own particular failings. Quite artificially, we magnify a simple act - the retrieve - to an act of possibly monumental proportions. A failed retrieve matters because we say it does. And for no other reason.

Assuming for a moment that a retrieve is of great importance, we can at least understand why absolute reliability in this exercise is of equal importance. This takes us to the third point, which is that force trained dogs are 100% reliable retrievers. Proponents of the force retrieve inevitably ask handler of dogs trained by other means, "Is the dog 100% reliable?" By logical extension, that indicates that force trained dogs are 100% reliable. If this were indeed true, and we are still willing to work with the assumption that a retrieve is of great importance, then it would appear that force training is critical, perhaps even imperative. But of course, it is not possible that force trained dogs are 100% reliable.

Let's take an absurd example: The handler of a force trained dog throws the dumbbell, gives the command to retrieve,

Space provided for your club, school, training business information here

COPYRIGHT © 2007-2009
FLYING DOG PRESS
SUZANNE CLOTHIER
PO BOX 105, ST JOHNSVILLE,
NY 13452
TEL: 518 568 3325
SUZANNECLOTHIER.COM



By Suzanne
Clothier

RELIABILITY AND THE RETRIEVE: JUSTIFYING THE EAR PINCH?

and as the dog takes off, the handler is attacked by a crazed spectator or another dog. Does the dog retrieve? Maybe, maybe not. Depends on the dog, doesn't it? (Hard core force trainers may be muttering, "You could proof for that. You'd just need some assistants...")

At this point, readers begin to sputter, "Well, of course, in that situation, you couldn't expect a dog to..." 100% means 100%. No exceptions. No mitigating circumstances. But even proponents of force retrieve training will admit that under certain circumstances, they would understand why a dog might not complete a retrieve. Unlike the implied or actually stated definition of reliability (100%), we now have a new definition - that dogs retrieve reliably under certain circumstances. Certain circumstances where failed retrieves might be acceptable are only as defined by the handler. The circumstances that a dog might define as conditions under which he could not possibly retrieve are not open for discussion. Why not? Because we are stuck in a logic loop which begins with the assumption that the retrieve is of great importance, therefore reliability is of great importance.

The reality is that after in all my years in the dog world, I have seen many failed retrieves from force trained dogs. If you doubt that, go stand outside any obedience ring and watch and then ask handlers how they trained their dogs. (Once again, hard core force trainers are muttering, "Well, they just didn't do it right.")

The last, and saddest, point is this: using force to achieve a greater degree of reliability is justified. This point deserves a book unto itself, for it contains the notion that it is somehow acceptable to inflict pain in order to achieve results. Much of dog training is built on this premise, which contains deeply rooted, widely accepted societal beliefs about "lesser" beings and our dominion over them. On this same premise, children are beaten in the name of discipline, entire races have been subjugated, enslaved or exterminated, women considered less than men's equals.

It is a strange logical equation that we have built here:

The retrieve is of great importance
therefore
Reliability is of great importance
therefore
Any means that may be used to improve
reliability is justifiable
because
The retrieve is of great importance.

Imagine that your boss had certain goals which he considered critically important. Let's say that it mattered intensely to him that for five minutes a week, you had to be absolutely, unfailingly polite to a stranger he brought you

to visit. He drilled you for hours during the week, rehearsing what you had to say, how you had to stand or sit, exactly how you would move, and precisely what actions you would take when he told you to. Any mistakes you made were met with a painful blow to the head.

About the only conditions under which many of us would "accept" such treatment would be if we were held prisoner. If the boss became our captor, if our very lives depended upon pleasing him since he held the control of our water, our food, our freedom, we might learn very quickly how to please him, and how to avoid the blows to the head. And he would be very pleased with us indeed - we would be highly reliable.

Why would such treatment be unacceptable? Why would you be outraged if your child's teacher used hair pulling as a way to teach your child to reliably perform multiplication? Would it be okay if your boss disguised the blow to the head by calling it a "love thump," and he justified it by telling you how far you could rise on the corporate ladder. Would it be acceptable if your child's teacher cloaked her techniques as an "hair massage," and pointed out that your child's math scores were perhaps better than the children whose hair had not been pulled?

In the end, the degree of pain you are willing to endure or inflict has a great deal to do with the importance you assign a given activity. For some workers, rising high on the corporate ladder would be worth the blows to the head. For some parents, improved math scores would justify having their child's hair pulled. And for some handlers, the retrieve is important enough to justify inflicting pain on their "best friend." Is it more important than the look of fear and pain in the dog's eyes? Is it worth having your "best friend" flinch away from you as you reach for his ear? If it's that important, isn't it worth investigating and mastering other methods which don't involve hurting your dog?

There is a considerable portion of dog training which is actually thinly disguised abuse. It has little to do with education of an animal, but it does have a lot to do with our egos, our assignment of importance to relatively unimportant actions, and our own deeply seated beliefs about animals. Humane training begins with a critical look at the premises and assumptions which undergird many traditional approaches. We become better trainers by refusing to swallow uncritically what is tossed to us as truth, by developing our powers of empathy and observation, and by searching for better ways to teach and educate the dogs we love.

The few moments of our life where a retrieve is all important are very, very few. Are those moments worth the price you ask your dog to pay for them? Because unlike you, in learning a force retrieve, he is 100% involved and feels 100% of the pain.