



Steady retriever? Train for it

U.K. National Champion. Tom Smith is a good friend from Scotland who won the 2001 British National Retriever championship, running his then 4-year-old yellow Labrador Field Trial Champion Craighorn Bracken.

Tom, a Scottish gamekeeper, took third place in the 1997 National Championship with Field Trial Champion Baldonian Baron of Craighorn, and was second in 1998 with Field Trial Champion Lochmuir Bonnie, who is the dam of Bracken.

Tom, 61, has been running field trials and breeding retrievers for more than 20 years. On the estate where he is head gamekeeper, he manages grouse, pheasants, ducks, geese and deer.

Among his favorite hobbies, in addition to training and field-trialing his dogs, are fly fishing (see accompanying photo) and deer stalking.

Exclusive interview In the interview below, exclusive to BritishRetrieverTraining.com subscribers, Tom offers keen insights into ways he and other top U.K. trainers make their dogs steady.

Q: Typically in the U.S., retriever owners pay little attention to making their dogs steady. Then when they are in South Dakota hunting pheasants, for example, they have trouble controlling their dogs when on bird scent. Yet field-trialers and their dogs in Great Britain face far more temptations during a typical day than American handlers do and manage to keep their dogs steady. How so?

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A: First, we have our dogs 100 percent trained before they see live game. There might be the odd exception, but that's generally what we do.

We begin with dummies, just as in retrieving. For instance, if we have the dog sitting in front of us and we are practicing his handling, sending him left, right and back, we will do so – but along the way, as he is running, we will throw dummies in his path and alongside him. As he encounters these, we have our hand raised and command, "No." Of course the dog is tempted to retrieve those dummies, but you would be surprised how quickly dogs learn to ignore those and continue for the correct dummy.

Next, we will wrap the dummies we are throwing in feathers from a pheasant or the skin of a rabbit, and throw them the same way.

Q: In America the electric collar would be used for similar training exercises. In part this is because American retrievers are generally hotter, or harder running, than British retrievers.

A: We don't use the collar, and I'm sure I could train an American retriever or any other retriever the same way and have the same results. But we have a lot of exercises we perform to make a dog steady, and the one I've just told you is only one of the first.

Typically, once a dog is ignoring dummies thrown at him that have been covered in feather or fur, we will move to a situation where we will shoot

game for the young dog that will fall near it. Here we will be teaching a dog not to run in, or break.

I like to take a young retriever who has sat through that kind of exercise while pigeon shooting with me. These are wood pigeons, not the kind of pigeons you have in America, and they are great sport.

Additionally, once we reach the advanced stage of training, we will throw a dummy over a pond that has domestic or reared ducks in it. Then we'll make the dog swim across and ignore the ducks while it continues for the dummy.

The key to training of this type is to start the correct way and not let bad habits begin in a young dog. We don't let bad habits begin.

Still, a young dog is going to make mistakes.

I was at a trial just last week in England and my young dog was running quite well. We had reached the finals. Then he was given a long retrieve, a grouse that fell maybe 200 yards away, and when it landed it fell over a bank.

I sent the dog, and it made a good mark, going directly to where the bird had fallen. But unfortunately, just as it reached the bank it encountered a covey of unshot grouse, and the dog became distracted and began hunting those grouse.

Of course I had to pick up my dog, and a more experienced dog was sent for the downed bird. That dog also encountered the fresh grouse scent, and remnants of that covey. But, being more experienced, it ignored the live birds and continued over the bank for the downed grouse. That dog won the trial.

Q: I've been with you on the 10,000-acre estate you manage when you will cast one of the three to five dogs you have at your side up a hill or to another distant spot, looking for downed birds. Given that, simultaneously, a driven shoot may be underway that you are organizing, isn't having so many dogs under such heavy shooting conditions a sizable task?

A: Not really. The dogs are trained to stay at my heel, and they don't go for a retrieve, or leave me, unless they are sent.

For the typical shooting man, however, handling that many dogs can be a disadvantage, particularly for the dog. In my case I will have a spaniel with me and some Labradors. For instance, right now it has been quite warm and

we are shooting grouse. So I have been taking five dogs with me each day, and trading out two of them in the afternoon, to cool and rest the others.

But none of my dogs retrieve unless they are sent by name, and consequently, they will look to me when there are many dogs alongside me to see if it is their turn. When they do, they can take their eyes off the place where the bird has fallen, and lose the mark. This is why the average person is better to work one-on-one with a dog, because you can give that individual dog more attention.

But I need multiple dogs for my work.

Waterfowl restrictions considered

• **Interesting and predictable:** The trend across the U.S., as access to ducks becomes more difficult and the ducks themselves are subjected to ever-greater pressure in places of good habitat, is that states are considering restrictions on hunters and hunting. In the bull's eye of this movement are non-residents of the nation's best duck hunting states. North Dakota is ground zero for such restrictions, at least so far. But a recent report (the report in its entirety is on the BritishRetrieverTraining.com home page, under "Biological Clock") completed in Arkansas suggests, among other actions, restrictions on non-resident hunting. If any of the report's recommendations come to life, it won't be this year. But the trend — from North Dakota (restrictions on where and when non-residents can hunt ducks) to Montana (restrictions proposed but not enacted on non-resident pheasant hunters) to California (restrictions considered on spinning-wing decoys) is clear: Where game birds remain in any numbers in the U.S., the nation's hunters are converging. And hunting restrictions are sure to follow

What to do: Look on the margins for hunting that might not be any better, or even slightly worse, than the top spots, but where there is less competition from other hunters. Example: In South Dakota this fall, where ringnecks are up more than 100 percent statewide, hunt (if you can) after Nov. 1, when most of the fair-weather uplanders have long since gone home. Also: Stay out of the hotspots, such as Winner, S.D., and check out instead areas farther north, particularly along the North Dakota border. Best might be the area just south of the North Dakota line and east of the Missouri.

Prediction: Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas to see better duck year

Last year was dismal. Duck hunters in Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas were disappointed last year by the number of birds they saw. Tropical storms didn't help along the Gulf Coast. But mostly, the ducks just didn't show up.

This year should be better. Duck production was up from a year ago, thanks to early rains on U.S. and Canadian prairies. But more likely, extremely dry conditions that have prevailed in the Upper Midwest since July 4 likely will result in a more complete and quicker migration come the third week of October, running through mid-November.

- **Reason:** The water just isn't available, unless conditions change drastically, to hold birds in key staging areas of the north — especially given the number of hunters that are expected to be present.

Upcoming in the next newsletter

- **How to** “finesse hunt” your dog this fall so his level of training won't decline.
- **Look for** the first installments of the training lessons to appear on the subscriber side of BritishRetrieverTraining.com in a few weeks. We'll keep you posted.
- **Finally:** As always, email editor@BritishRetrieverTraining.com with questions or comments.

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