

Gator's Ready to Hunt Ducks

Collar Can be Most Effective Tool for Training Dogs

Editor's Note: This is the third story about Gator, a black Labrador being trained at Deep Fork Retrievers in Choctaw. *The Oklahoman* is monitoring Gator's progress as he learns to be a hunting retriever.

At last check, Gator was 5 months old and had just completed "puppy head start". He was ready for his formal training.

Now 9 months old, Gator is on his way to becoming a polished gentleman's hunting retriever.

He has just finished a sort of "boot camp" for duck dogs and is ready for his first hunt.

In dog training jargon, Gator is a "started dog," said John Amico, owner of Deep Fork Retrievers in Choctaw.

"He's smart enough that he can hunt for you, go get your ducks, and be an asset to the hunt, not a liability," he said.

Introducing the Collar

Amico got Gator to this point through use of an electronic training collar.

Electronic training collars are the most effective way to train, Amico said. They are used either exclusive or in part by almost all professional trainers, he said.

Today's training collars have variable intensity levels and do not physically harm a dog when used properly, Amico said.

Different dogs respond to different levels of intensity, and the first thing Amico does when strapping on a collar is to determine how much pressure to use.

"We spend a fair amount of time trying to figure out what level of pressure will motivate the dog because you don't want to use any more than you have to," said Amico's wife and co-trainer, Beth Ann.

If you use too much pressure, then you are "just beating him up. You are not teaching him anything," Amico said.

"We're trying to get a trained dog that is happy. That is vitally important."

Collar Conditioning

Amico collar conditioned Gator by teaching him how to turn off the mild pressure of a training collar by responding appropriately to the working words he was taught as a puppy.

Through judicious use of the training collar, Gator figured out how to escape and avoid the collar's discomfort.

By doing so, he learned the motions of a retrieve.

“When you are training an animal, in reality all you are teaching him is how to move,” Amico said.

“All working dogs perform three motions. They come towards the handler, go away from the handler and remain stationary.”

Retrievers are trained to make these motions because they represent the components of a retrieve: they sit still, they go get a bird and they bring the bird back.

Trained behavior is achieved through consistent repetition, Amico said.

“We say, as an example, the word ‘here’, and as soon as the dog begins to step forward, the training collar pressure is turned off.”

This timing sequence of on and off pressure reinforces the concept that the dog first learned as a puppy – when he responds correctly to a word, he gets what he wants.

“As a puppy, he got a food treat when he came here – now we have trained him to terminate pressure when he comes here – again getting what he wants,” Amico said.

Once the dog learns to turn off or escape pressure in response to a word, Amico reverses the sequence to teach him how to avoid pressure.

“First we say the word and if the dog does not comply, then pressure is applied and the word is repeated. As before, when the dog complies, the pressure goes away.”

This timing sequence trains the dog that a quick response will avoid pressure altogether.

“Life hasn't changed,” Amico said. “Gator always gets what he wants. With repetition, these motions have become trained behavior and we now have total control over the dog's body as it relates to the act of retrieving.”

Conditioned Retrieve

Up until this point, Gator retrieved because of his bred instinct. Now, he must be taught “fetching is his job and he must do so because we say so,” Amico said.

Gator learned to fetch, carry, hold and drop an object through a technique called “conditioned retrieve”.

Teaching Gator the words “hold, carry and drop” keeps him from eating birds and achieves control of his head.

The overall benefit is delivering birds to hand, which is necessary for advanced training and ensures that all shot birds are recovered, including cripples.

Field Work

Gator is then taken back to the place he loves – the field. Amico started overlaying the body and head control he gained through collar training so Gator is able to complete his retrieves properly.

“We have taken Gator to many different places to train, presenting him with possible terrain features and hunting scenarios to make sure that he always responds to his trained behaviors,” Amico said.

“The duck blind, the bank, and the boat are different places to the dog. He has to be taught the same responses apply regardless of where he is.”

Ready to Hunt

Gator is now a happy dog that knows what his job is and loves his work.

Because of his training, he is steady to wing and shot and delivers to hand. Amico will keep training Gator on field work to make him more reliable on his first hunt.

Every phase of Gator’s training relates directly to the hunt, but he is ready for the real thing. There’s advanced training in Gator’s future, but now what he needs is some game experience.

“You can train a dog until the cows come home, but still the only thing that teaches him to hunt is going hunting,” Amico said.

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