

WATER TRAINING

By Christopher Kieres

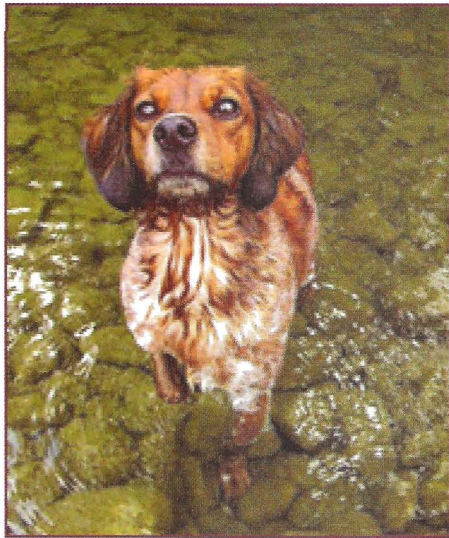
PART I: INTRODUCING YOUR BRETON TO WATER

Introducing your dog to water may not be a high priority in your training regimen. Either you are not an avid water fowler or maybe you've been led to believe that a Breton or a Brittany is not a "water" dog. Whichever may be the case, the value of water training cannot be overlooked. The primary directive of any water work is the retrieval of downed game, something that should be neither optional nor a mere bonus, no matter what the terrain. If a dog has been trained, yes trained, to retrieve down game from the water, they are more apt to perform in other situations. Not to mention, this will afford the avid upland hunter the choice of trying their hand at the occasional waterfowl.

Any sort of water training should start as early as possible in a puppy's development. It doesn't have to wait until the puppy has begun formal training, in fact there should be nothing formal about their first experiences. That being said, the water doesn't need to come in the form of a waterfowl refuge or wetland area. Any water will do and the younger the pup the less water you'll need. The first time in the water should be merely an introduction to it. Don't force the pup, let them experience it for themselves. There can be no greater step backwards in all a puppy's training than to make the water a bad experience. Many times I have heard stories of a puppy or dog that refused the water and the handlers' answer was to throw them in because "They'll get used to it." Nothing could be further from the truth. If you have never been in the water and someone threw you in, how much would you trust that person in the future?

I try to find water that has a gradual entry where the puppy can work their way towards deeper water. Water clarity is also important; animals by nature fear what they cannot see, and being able to see the bottom will do nothing but help build the puppy's confidence. Next to consider is the ground in and around the water that you'll be using. Most young dogs are not comfortable in boggy terrain, they can feel trapped and easily frightened. Those sorts of conditions are better left for later stages in training. Eventually you should expect your dog to enter water under any circumstances, but for now we must focus on the introduction.

"I led my dog to the water but couldn't make him swim". As with the old saying about horses and drinking water, so goes a dog and swimming. Any number of things can be used to get your puppy out into the water. Their favorite toy, a bird wing on a fishing pole, or even a dead bird. I've heard numerous occasions



Picture compliments of Daniel & Camilla, France.

where pups would balk at a dummy thrown into the water but couldn't be held back if you skipped a stone. So don't be afraid to try the unimaginable. During the course of training you're sure to use a wide variety of methods to entice your dog into the water. For all the wings, dummies, dead birds and dirt clods, there can be no more important training aid than a good set of chest waders. The key is to get out there with your dog. They will feel infinitely more comfortable because you'll be there right along side of them. I will put my pup on a fifteen foot check line, go out in my waders and call the puppy to me. Now I didn't say DRAG the puppy to me, I said call. And if you're anything like me you'll want to do this privately to avoid anyone seeing how foolish you're bound to look. but believe me it'll be well worth it in the end. The check cord is simply to keep the puppy from running the other way. This brings up one VERY important point; the only time a dog or puppy should ever even have a collar on, much less any leash, is if you yourself are in the water with the dog. Otherwise they can easily become tangled in under brush, debris or anything else that might be underwater and drown. No training is worth risking your dog's life.

The most often overlook scenario that is liable to come up in your water training is the fact that you may need to teach your dog to swim. This is not a joke, nor is it something to be embarrassed about. It is simply a fact of life. This is another reason to have those waders handy. I had a dog that was fine in shallow water but refused to pursue the dummy into deeper water simply because he didn't know how to swim. He would go if I was out there but would walk on his hind legs and wildly splash the surface like a child. I simply had to pick up his hind end and help him through the water until he figured it out. He is now, I'm proud to say, a very strong swimmer and reliable water dog. I too was confused by this at first, believing that naturally all dogs could swim (doggy paddle?). Upon encountering this I consulted a friend of ours, who happens to be one of the foremost trainers of versatile hunting dogs with over 50 years of experience, who said he had a set of chest waders just for that reason.

That concludes the introduction phase of water retrieval training. Always remember the most important key to this and any form of training is patience. We are conditioning our dogs to do what comes naturally to them upon command in a language foreign to them. Trying to make each training session a positive one will reap faster and more consistent results. In Part II we'll move forward into the retrieve, where the dog will begin to move out on its own. I'll focus primarily on using the dog's natural instinct to retrieve as a stepping stone towards achieving consistent results.

PART II: THE NATURAL RETRIEVE

Once your puppy is well accustomed to the water they should begin entering on their own without you spending as much time in with them. By now your puppy has probably started chasing the stick or whatever you throw into the water. This is their "natural retrieve" instinct. I believe this time in training should be handled very carefully if you hope to get consistent results down the road. I say this because you'll be walking a fine line between disrupting later training.

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I call this phase the natural retrieve simply because I use no commands. This is a fun time for the puppy that utilizes what comes naturally to them without developing willful disobedience. If you simply throw the dummy and they bring it back to you that is great, if they don't, big deal. But if you throw the dummy and give the command "fetch" and they don't bring it back to you they will be laying the groundwork to let you down in the future. Any command should only ever be given when you have complete control of the dog until you are confident that they will perform that command consistently. I use this same philosophy in "whoa" and "come". Simply put, we will accentuate the positive and ignore the negative.

For this training we will still need chest waders and our check cord, but we'll also need something for them to retrieve. Start small, whether you use a canvas or rubber dummy or both; get the smallest ones you can find. Most supply dealers will carry a puppy size specifically for this time in training. I suggest attaching a rope to your dummies that is about 10 to 15 feet long lest you become the retriever. Don't worry if your puppy shows a preference for one type over the other; exploit this to get positive results.

This phase of training does not have to always be in the water; in fact it may help you to start this in the back yard. I will begin this phase of the retrieve once I have started my pup in "whoa" training as a diversionary tool (i.e. recess). This will help take your puppy's mind off the rigors of whoa while still gaining the positive results towards future training.

Once you do get to the water, start on the shore near the water. Using the dummy with the rope on it get your puppy interested in the dummy before you throw it in the water. They can never be too excited to get the dummy. When you have their attention throw the dummy into the water. I would suggest already having your waders on just in case. If the puppy doesn't go to the dummy, coax them until they do and if they still refuse the water take them to the dummy coaxing as you go. Remember to avoid using the "fetch" command. At this point the retrieve is immaterial. What we are looking for is the puppy's willingness to enter the water for the dummy.



Picture compliments of R. Clay

Whenever they move towards the dummy a ridiculous amount of praise should be used. Once I get my pup in the water I try to keep them there as long as possible, the more comfortable they are with the water the better. To do this I will continue to throw the dummy around the water and take the puppy to it if need be. Although this should still be a bit of a game and fun for your pup, don't ever let them completely ignore the dummy, doing so will cost you later. The key is to rekindle the puppy's interest in the dummy and make it fun again, but once you notice the puppy's interest waning, it's time to stop for the day. Forcing the issue will only frustrate the pup and make it a bad experience. This is a keynote to any training: always stop on a positive note with the puppy wanting more. This will develop their enthusiasm and that's what we want.

As with all forms of training, there is no set timetable or specific structure for this training. The puppy will let you know when it is ready to move ahead, and always remember that no two pups are the same. If you have two puppies that are six months old that doesn't mean that they will both progress the same, so be careful not to compare the two. I will say however that once you have started your dog in formal fetch training the methods used in the natural retrieve should be suspended until they have a level of master of the fetch command. In Part III we'll cover "Fetch" training using the 'force break to retrieve' method and the training table. Until then, best of luck and happy hunting.

