

ELASTICITY OF SPANIEL HANDLING

By Todd Agnew



We have trained numerous retriever breeds, as well as numerous spaniel breeds, and there is a significant flaw in this rigid way of handling spaniels. Let me explain in detail.

Retriever training tends to be a more “black and white” method of training. It generally involves countless hours of drills for marks, lining and casting. If you want to compete seriously at the top level, significant repetition is required and there is limited tolerance for allowing a dog to figure it out or do what it thinks is best...think swim-by pond. The result of this rigidity tends to be loud whistles and aggressive handling. I am talking aggressive in the dog’s mind, not your mind. In all training, it has nothing to do with what we think is being conveyed. It is entirely about what the dog thinks is being conveyed.

The typical method of retriever training works for most retrieving breeds and has had great results. There are two primary reasons for this. The first is that it is overwhelmingly substantiated by the results of Labrador retrievers and the second is

that the retriever games never require the dog to quest game; not any serious test anyway. Labrador retrievers have been genetically bred for one purpose in the field; mark game and retrieve it. The most important result of this breeding goal is the development of a breed that is genetically gifted in its ability to do repetitive drills. Labrador retrievers from quality genetics will show up to work and put in long hours doing a repetitive job. Tomorrow, they will show up and do it again.

What about your spaniels? Most of the spaniel breeds are merry little workers. What we like best about them is the energy and excitement they provide. Every time we work them, you can see the brain working, thinking, planning and asking. It is because the brain is so attentive to stimuli that the uneducated find them “high-energy” and think they lack focus. Actually, they do not lack focus but they do bore easily. This is why they tend to break down quickly during repetitive drills. It is also why you need to think about elasticity in your handling in the field. When we talk about elasticity, think of a rubber band lying on the kitchen table. Put both you and your dog in the rubber band with each of you at opposite ends. As you go through the field with your dog, the two of you should always be attached by this rubber band.

So now that the two of you are attached, why is this different than what you already are doing? It is because I want you to drop your invisible lead and replaced it with the invisible rubber band. Spaniels (not genetically gifted and well-trained ones anyway) do not do well with black and white, alphabetic or numeric ordering or yes and no training methods. The spaniel mind performs best when it is stimulated and disciplined with a give and take methodology. The elasticity, or rubber band, allows this give and take. As you go through the field, sometimes your dog is pulling you and sometimes you are pulling the dog. The elasticity allows these pulls to be subtle; not harsh. Think of the following examples.

You and your dog are hunting into the wind and scenting is good. If your dog had its way, it would bust up the field with its nose full of scent. We cannot allow this or we will miss potential birds to the left and right. We need to pull the dog back and “force” it to cover the ground to the left and right. With training, we can accomplish this by generally walking in a zig-zag pattern that encourages the dog to change directions. When done correctly, the dog should change directions with rounded turns, not “stop and pivot” turns. This is an example of you gently pulling the rubber band and the dog “bending” to your wishes. The “stop and pivot” change of direction is equivalent to yanking the check cord. This bending is a more beautiful picture than the automated “stop and pivot” picture.

As you just “pulled” your dog going into the wind, your dog will pull you going downwind. In a downwind situation, your dog must take deeper bites before turning

back. This is because the wind is pushing the dog down the field and because the dog generally cannot smell birds until it turns back towards you. As your dog heads downwind, the rubber band stretches as the dog pulls you along. Once the dog turns, the rubber band closes as you and your dog once again get close to each other. If you do not “give” to your dog, you will be “hacking” at your dog going down the field and you will be breaking your dog from the proper use of the wind.

When you pick a place to hunt or are assigned a field for competition, you should consider it a sheet of music. The wind, cover, terrain and birds combined are the conductor. You and your dog are the orchestra. The two of you should go through the field pushing and pulling each other but you are always connected by the rubber band. You both give and take based on what the conductor (wind, cover, terrain and birds) gives you. The sheet of music is in front of you and the two of you must play the music together.

Loud voices, loud and/or excessive whistles never make for beautiful music. With proper training, your dog will return to you if you just stop in the field; no voice and no whistle. With proper training, your dog will look to you for direction; that is when to give the dog direction. With proper training, you can pull and push your dog all over the field without a whistle and without your voice. Of course, you need to train to be able to play the music.

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