

What Would Todd Do? My Dog Won't Retrieve



At Craney Hill, Christina and I have always believed that understanding a dog comes before changing one. This isn't just a motto; it's the foundation for how I approach every training challenge, especially those that leave handlers scratching their heads. Take, for instance, the common cry I hear: "My dog won't retrieve!"

When a handler tells me this, my first thought isn't, "How do we fix it?" Instead, I ask myself, "Why is this dog showing me this behavior?" This shift in perspective is critical. What looks like a retrieving problem is often a symptom of something deeper—a gap in foundational understanding, a lack of confidence, or even a subtle breakdown in the relationship between dog and handler.

Redefining Retrieval

Let's clarify what retrieving actually means. For me, "retrieving is the act of leaving one place to go to another and pick something up." That's it. Whether it's a thrown dummy or a blind retrieve, the moment the dog has the object in its mouth, the act of retrieving is complete. What happens next—the return to the handler—that's obedience. This distinction is crucial because it helps us pinpoint the real issue: if

your dog picks up the object but doesn't bring it back, the problem isn't necessarily its desire to retrieve, but rather its understanding of, or willingness to comply with, the command to return. This is where obedience, or a lack thereof, becomes a primary factor.

The "Natural Retriever" Myth

I often hear the term "natural retriever," implying some dogs are just born to do it all. But let's be honest: true retrieving, as we define it, isn't natural. In the wild, a dog's instinct is to grab an object and often run off with it. They're predators, after all. If left alone, most dogs will pick up an object. The challenge begins when *we* try to get them to bring it back.

Our human reactions—yelling, coaxing, or even chasing—can inadvertently create pressure. The dog, not understanding our words, might drop the object or run further away. This pressure can quickly turn a potential retriever into one that refuses to pick up anything or, worse, damages birds. The issue isn't the dog's ability to pick up; it's often our approach to getting them to return.

Start Early and Do Not Move

To build a solid retrieving foundation, I live by two simple rules: start early and do not move. Research has shown that there's a critical window, typically before ten weeks of age, where puppies are most receptive to learning this skill. Missing this imprinting period can make training significantly harder later on.

When I start with a young puppy, I toss objects short distances. Initially, they'll often bring it right back. As they get older, they might start running off—that natural canine behavior. This is where "do not move" comes in. Resist the urge to chase or yell. Stay put. Let the puppy decide to come back. A few treats in your pocket can reinforce their return. This calm, consistent method, applied during that crucial early period, builds a strong retrieve without creating accidental problems. It's about patience, observation, and letting the dog figure it out, building their confidence and trust in you.

Trust Through Understanding

Ultimately, my approach to retrieving, and all our training at Craney Hill, is about developing a deeper connection. By asking "Why is the dog showing me this?" we move beyond superficial behaviors to address the root causes. This not only solves training issues but strengthens the relationship, creating a more confident dog and a more capable handler. It's a lasting lesson: patience, observation, and understanding are the cornerstones of effective dog training.

This article is part of our ongoing **What Would Todd Do?** series in **The Craney Hill Journal**, where we explore common training questions through Todd Agnew's decades of experience developing hunting dogs and field trial spaniels.

Todd's Takeaway

The retrieve you see today is often the result of decisions you made weeks ago. Before asking for more retrieves, ask yourself whether you've built the understanding that makes retrieving possible.

