

Improving your Group Experience- OR How to be a Better Training Groupie

There are many advantages to group training, yet finding a compatible group seems to be one of the more challenging aspects of our sport. Here are some basic guidelines collected from various sources suggesting how to make group training more productive and more enjoyable. Whether you train with a regular group, or just drop in for the day, consideration, flexibility and cooperation go a long way towards making your time and efforts well spent!

In general:

- Have a goal, and plans for balanced long term, weekly and day-to-day training.
- Each day, be prepared for your daily group training with a (flexible) plan that can easily accommodate others.
- Be realistic about your dog's abilities, pro and con, and train accordingly.
- Don't worry about how your dog looks to others- think of how YOU look as his coach.
- Don't lose your temper with your dog, or other groupies.
- If someone offers you an observation, try to take it constructively rather than personally.
- Think carefully before offering unsolicited advice to others.
- Be respectful of the land you are using, and other people's equipment.

Preparation:

- The night before, check your gear and equipment. (Load starter pistols, check batteries in radios, charge collars, defrost birds, etc.) Pack your car, and be sure you have gas. Check your tires.
- Check directions and map and estimated driving time.
- Have a chair, and water/food for you and your dog.
- Keep a first aid kit in your vehicle for emergencies.

Suggested gear and equipment: (Not everyone has everything, but most of us end up with most of this stuff -or more- eventually. Not to mention a bigger vehicle!)

- Whistle, extra whistle, lanyard, duck/pheasant calls
- Collars, leads, tabs, slip-cords, ropes/lines of various lengths
- Heeling stick
- Bumpers (white, black, black/white combo, orange, or others for special purposes)
- Birds when possible
- Bags or buckets to contain bumpers or birds
- Necker
- Bird rack/ netting
- Starter pistol and shells, and/or popper gun (shotgun for flyers)
- Ear protection
- Two- way radios and extra batteries
- Small gear bag for the field for your gun, shells, calls, tape, radio, bug spray, sunscreen, etc)
- Large gear bag for collars, leads, compass, rangefinder, etc. etc.
- White, and dark or camo jacket/shirt

- Camo umbrella
- Umbrella stand
- Flagging tape (orange and white)
- Binoculars
- Holding blind
- Mat for line and or blind (or place board)
- Tie out stake
- Blind poles
- Rat traps
- Decoys
- Boots/ waders
- Hat, visor, sunglasses, gloves, extra socks, etc.
- Good rain gear
- Chair (one with a pocket for your gear bag works well)
- Neoprene vest for your dog (winter)
- Canoe or duck boat and accessories
- Mechanical launcher/ electronics
- Dry towels
- Dog comb or rake, tick repellent
- Coolers/ice

Training day:

- Arrive at the appointed location on time. Air your dogs appropriately.
- If you need to leave early, let everyone know this from the start.
- Plan what you will do about lunch breaks, running puppies, etc.
- Drive and park only in designated areas, and be aware of rocky or soft terrain.
- Keep all dogs contained in crates or staked out except when running. Keep dogs quiet.
- Carry out what you carried in.

Set-up:

- When designing set-ups, communicate your needs clearly, and be flexible. Then let the most experienced people make final decisions to accommodate everyone efficiently.
- Know how to adapt a test to your dog's level, or ask someone experienced to help you.
- Appoint a marshal, and set a running order. Be ready to set-up, throw, or run your dog as determined. (Consider numbers of dogs, bitches in season, other special needs)
- If the group is large enough, have someone on line signaling gunners, giving numbers, taking and bagging birds, practice judging, etc.

Training:

- Unless the group is very small, or you have a very long walk, always have a dog waiting in the holding blind. Don't keep workers waiting.
- Watch the test, and plan an appropriate challenge for your dog's level of experience. Anticipate your dog's responses and know what you (or the gunners) will do to intervene (or not) in various possible situations
- Before leaving the holding blind, explain your running plan clearly to the gunners, and

ask for acknowledgment that they understand what you want. (Use radios rather than yelling, and push the talk button BEFORE starting to talk)

- Take your time on the line with your dog, and strive for consistent and succinct communication.
- If you even suspect your dog didn't see a mark, or you need a mark rethrown for any reason, don't fret. Just ask politely. A re-throw takes less time than a bird not seen, and is not wasted time and effort.
- Remember you are training, not testing! Use opportunities to teach. Maintain your standards, and be fair to your dogs.
- When you have finished running, thank your gunners before leaving the line.

How to be a better groupie:

- Pay attention. Keep tabs on gunner changes, rebirds etc, and pitch in to help quickly and cheerfully.
- Make new or inexperienced trainers feel welcome. If you are a new trainer, ask questions, listen, and try to be helpful.
- Know how to use all equipment properly, and if you are unsure, ask.
- If you need to borrow equipment until you get your own, offer to contribute batteries, shells, \$\$\$, snacks, etc.
- Learn to be a better thrower/gunner.
Be sure you clearly understand exactly what each handler wants BEFORE they come to the line.
Be sure to shoot, throw and sit/retire exactly as requested, and as signaled.
Know when and how to attract attention with arm swinging, duck call, hey hey, or shot.
ASK!
Be able to get a good arc on your throws, and get the mark at least 25 feet away from you. Practice! (Or get a mechanical throwing device)
Keep all bumpers or birds bagged at the gun stations.
Don't distract dogs by making noise, moving around, or reloading guns or launchers while they are working.
Stand still while other birds are being thrown, and sit down after all birds are thrown.
Keep throws consistent. (It helps to make the fall area with orange tape so marks stay the same with gun changes)
Try to make the effort for everyone's dog that you would hope they make for yours.
Try to be encouraging and supportive. This can mean a lot- some days more than others.

Summary:

Most of all, HAVE FUN! Remember, that is why we do this! Enjoy your dogs, your company, and your scenery. None of us are perfect, and we all have an off day once in a while. But a little common sense and common courtesy go a long way in making our training sessions more enjoyable and more productive for everyone. So let's all try to practice the GOLDEN RULE to enjoy happy training!

The following are some of John Cavanaugh's suggestions for making the most of larger group session. Consider them to make the training situation seem more like a real test/trial! (used with John's permission).

Retriever Training Manual

www.weebegoldens.com John Cavanaugh

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LINE CHORES FOR IDLE TRAINERS

Help handler line up his dog
Sit in judges chair - give numbers / signals for birds / call for guns up, etc
Honor to correct/ Creeping/ noise
Toss diversion birds
Cold honor marks
Socialize pups
Get others dogs ready to run
Holding blind time, multiple holding blinds
Sort birds, etc/ prepare for gun changes
Multi gunners on each station/ false flyer station
Video / Audio taping
Keep other dogs quiet
Take delivery in honor box (clear the line)
Marks for little pups during setup / breaks
Clean up trash on grounds
Practice diagramming test, judging
Organize / Clean-up truck / equipment
Help new-comers (behind line, with basics, etc)