



TRAINING WITH MIKE LARDY

Field Trial Hall of Famer Mike Lardy has trained more than 70 Field Champions and has won the National Retriever Championship a record seven times. Training with Mike Lardy, a two-volume set of Mike's RJ articles from past issues, and Mike's three videos – Total Retriever Training, Total Retriever Marking, and Total E-Collar Conditioning – are all available from Younglove Broadcast Services at 800-848-5963, or on the web at totalretriever.com.

My Advice

Editor's Note: Mike Lardy's column has appeared in *The Retriever Journal* ever since our first issue, more than 14 years ago. Mike's accomplishments in the field trial world are well-known and have been recognized at the highest level – by his induction into the Field Trial Hall of Fame in Grand Junction, Tennessee.

Like all professionals at the pinnacle of accomplishment, over those 14 years, he has continued to study, to learn, and to allow his techniques and philosophy to evolve. Recently, we asked Mike if he would go back through his earlier writings and update them with his latest thinking, and we are grateful that he has agreed to do so. This issue is the first installment of Mike Lardy redux. — SS

I didn't want to ruin the dog, so I haven't done anything with her yet," the owner explained to me as he dropped off his young dog for training.

You already have, I thought to myself. The eight-month-old pup was running frantically about, ignoring every command shouted by the owner, seemingly unaware we were even present.

Misguided owners of new puppies are often afraid they'll make mistakes, so they do nothing with the pup and deliver the pup for training at eight months of age. These poorly socialized and inexperienced youngsters have a difficult time learning and seldom reach their full potential.

Whether you intend to train your own dog or employ the services of a professional, informal training begins *the day you pick up your new puppy*. The main goal of early training is to

develop a good citizen. This is important whether your pup's destiny is field trial super retriever, gun dog extraordinaire, or family dog *par excellence*.

Housebreaking usually comes easily if the breeder has raised the pups properly. The litter should be raised in a medium-sized pen with a clean,

carpeted box near the entrance and shredded newspapers throughout the rest of the pen. Five-week-old pups can learn to keep the small carpeted area clean and to eliminate in the shredded papers. Puppies raised in elevated, wire-bottomed pens are more difficult to housebreak as they have never learned





CHIP LAUGHTON PHOTO

Training starts the day you bring the little squirt home.

to keep one area clean. In general, I would strongly advise against buying a puppy from a litter raised on wire.

Once you get your puppy home, you can encourage housebreaking by taking the puppy outdoors whenever it wakes up and by closely observing the pup when it's running loose in the house, watching for any sign it is about to "go." When puppies can't be closely monitored, they should be confined to a small crate. The puppy is unlikely to foul its own area if you use a small-enough crate.

Even if you intend for your pup to be primarily a kennel dog, the first few weeks need to be spent mostly in the home, with periodic crate confinement. Seven-week-old puppies can be taught to kennel by whistling them to the crate and feeding them inside it. They will view the crate as a safe, secure area – an attitude that will serve them well for future travels.

The first night or two at home, it's best to keep the pup right in bed with you. He'll feel more secure in his new home, and he'll wake you for an early morning airing. After the first couple nights, he can be left alone in the crate

overnight. A pup confined to his crate for meals and quiet time may throw quite a fuss when left alone. You'll have to learn when his cries are for legitimate needs like hunger or the need to air, and when he's just crying to get your attention. Make sure he has a comfortable pad or towel to lie on in the crate and a rawhide to chew on. If the pup has been fed, watered, and completely aired, then it is best to put his crate where his barking won't disturb you.

During early puppyhood in your house, the pup will learn your role in his life. He'll not only depend on you for food, water, and airings, but he'll learn that you set limits and the consequences of exceeding those limits. Jumping on the furniture or up on you may be off-limits. You'll discourage the pup from these behaviors by pushing him down, gently kneeling him in the chest, or sliding his back legs out from underneath him with your foot. These gentle admonitions are not delivered with anger but simply show the pup the unfortunate consequences of the undesirable behavior. Puppies should also be introduced to a collar

(non-choking) and lead at this time. While they may struggle at first, they will soon learn that the struggle pays no dividends and become resigned to the limits set by the lead and you. In short, through these kinds of general interactions, your pup will learn about the limits of the real world. He can't learn that sitting in a kennel by himself.

If you're not going to have time to raise a puppy in this manner, you should postpone buying a puppy. Leaving it alone in an outdoor run for 23 hours a day is no way to raise a pup. The puppy raised in the house for the first few weeks will learn his name, to come when called, to rest quietly between activity periods, and to keep his crate and your house clean. This early foundation of learning will serve him well for the rest of his life.

At eight weeks, your puppy will chase a rolled-up sock down the hallway and bring it back by you as it tries to escape to the family room. This early retrieving game exploits the natural tendencies of your pup. At 10 weeks, he'll bring back a small canvas bumper to you out in the yard as long as you retreat a little as the pup returns.

Avoid throwing the bumper near places the pup would like to escape to unless you get between him and that place. He should also wear his collar and a short lead so you can capture him if necessary as he streaks past. It's a good idea to throw a dead pigeon for him now. With a little encouragement or teasing, the pup will usually pick the bird right up. In all of these early retrieves, your job is to con the pup into holding on through the entire retrieve by backing away as he approaches you and then receiving the object from the pup before he drops it. If the pup drops the dummy, don't reprimand him – he'll learn about holding during formal training after six months of age. Right now, we're just trying to encourage the retrieving response.

It's also very important that the dummy is in plain sight on short grass in the yard. You want your puppy to learn to use his eyes first. Don't worry about teaching him to hunt or use his nose – that will come easily enough later on. Throughout this early training, you should remember to throw only a few retrieves during each session

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and to quit with the pup wanting more. Start these retrieving games when the pup is well rested – not after he's played with the kids for an hour.

Although formal obedience will come later, the eight-week-old pup is ready to learn how to "sit" and "here" with a little encouragement. He can even learn some simple casting games on the kitchen floor. Food rewards (like hot dog pieces) are appropriate at this age for encouraging the right responses to your commands.

At 14 weeks, you can have another person throw the dummy and fire a blank pistol. Have your helper at least 50 feet away so the pistol doesn't alarm your puppy. He'll quickly associate the firing of the pistol with a mark. You can gently restrain the pup from going until the dummy almost hits the ground, using his name as the cue to release him for a retrieve. If your pup is extremely eager, you might hold him longer and start this exercise sooner. On the other hand, if your pup is only mildly interested in retrieving, you shouldn't restrain him at all. You can extend the lengths of these early retrieves as your pup's ability dictates, but remember to usually have the dummy land in short grass where it's plainly visible.

The pup should be introduced to water anytime after you bring him home as soon as weather permits. It is better to wait until the water is above 65 degrees than to risk souring the puppy's attitude with cold water. The pup should be introduced in a playful manner by following you or an older dog into the water. An area of shallow water where the pup can run without swimming is an ideal spot to start out. Early retrieves should be thrown just into the water so the pup has no hesitation about going in – don't let the water become a barrier to retrieving by throwing long marks out in open water where a pup will be intimidated.

The five- to six-month-old pup should be able to do simple single marks to 100-150 yards and can be exposed to a variety of areas, including moderate cover and/or terrain. Your marks should generally be downwind and thrown a long distance 45 degrees from the gun. You'll want to keep a short lead on the pup during training to encourage steadiness and a return to you. A

dummy electronic collar should now be worn while training in preparation for using a live collar a few months from now. Although most hunters will be eager to get their dogs quartering and hunting in heavy cover, you shouldn't work on that until after you have developed crisp marking and started early handling work. Believe me, they'll learn to hunt soon enough!

Some days your schedule won't permit you to go afield with the pup, but you can teach some useful skills to him right in the backyard. You can start simple multiple retrieves by standing at the corner of the house and throwing a bumper along each side of the house. Make sure the bumpers are plainly visible so the pup will take off for the "memory" mark without hesitation. Again, don't insist on delivery to hand, but do everything you can to encourage it. By throwing from the corner of the house, you prevent the puppy from trying to pick up both marks together. You can accomplish the same effect by throwing the bumpers 180 degrees apart.

Other useful backyard training can include simple obedience lessons that teach the pup to "sit," "heel," and "here" ("come"). These commands were first introduced at eight weeks and have been used all along, but now you are beginning to formalize the training and improve the consistency of your pup's response. Working with a 10-foot lead, gently work the pup on these three basic commands. You are not looking to correct the dog for misbehavior – you simply want to shape or teach the proper response.

You should suspend retrieving with your pup when his adult teeth start coming in around six to seven months, because the tenderness in his mouth will lead to sloppy retrieving.

In my next column, we'll start formal-obedience and force-fetching as the beginning of a complete yard program that will have you handling your pup on blind retrieves in about six months. The early training you are able to give him between seven weeks and seven months will prepare him for the training that follows.

By starting early, you not only make him a better citizen and family dog, but you teach your pup *how to learn* so that everything that follows comes more easily. ●