

## Skills vs. Drills



### The Building Blocks of a Gundog

A friend of mine's Retriever whom I am training recently asked, "When will you start doing drills with my pup?" I imagine this question springs to mind for many owners who entrust their new hunting buddy to a trainer, be it a novice or a pro. This question carries not only the owner's expectations in terms of what the prospect will do when the training is done, but the trainers also who may be looking at it through an entirely different lens.

For most of us, I think it is fair to say, that as we look to the future, we visualize our pup as becoming a dog that executes retrieves in both the field and the water with confidence and *momentum*! But the reality is, that to get to that idealistic future state, there must be a complete Training-Life-Cycle (TLC) as a part of the pup's journey to become a working or *Finished* Gundog. It is a recipe that takes a lot of healthy ingredients and baked agonizingly slow. So what are those ingredients? Do we need all of them? Can we bake on higher heat and still achieve success? All great questions and ones that trainers and owners have wrestled with a lot longer than most of us have been around.

Dogs with and without great pedigrees have inherent attributes that either make them a natural or something less. But even dogs gifted with all the right components need highly developed skills that are established and ingrained through consistency, maturity and you guessed it, Drills. The variables are aptitude, quality of training, variety of training and time.

### What's the Difference?

Like many folks who get pulled into a new hobby, hmm, let's make that an "obsession", I do a lot of reading on the subject of Retriever Training. More often than not, I see the terms Skill and Drill used interchangeably. As a Project Manager and Six Sigma Greenbelt, I initially found that somewhat confusing as in my humble opinion, those terms hold quite different annotations to the trainer who may be trying to emulate what they have read. So let's see if we can find some common ground for the terminology.

When talking about a Skill, in general I am looking for the dog to have the ability to do something well. Generally, we achieve this through teaching and attrition. That is to perform a given task until it is deep-rooted in the dog's behavior. Think about how many times you told or will tell your dog to "Sit" in that first year.

Drills are somewhat different in nature in that we not only use attrition, we're also coaching, applying discipline and even more importantly "encouragement" to obtain the confidence and momentum that a finished dog should exhibit.

But here is the rub. To arrive at that end state, the building blocks are and always have been the basic and advanced skills that must be mastered. As those skills obtain a satisfactory level of proficiency, only then can we begin to chain them together and start

performing the drills that mature our hunting buddy into the Retriever that makes your friends envious.

### **Build Quality In**

So how can we use this understanding of Skills and Drills to build efficiency into our processes? I am sure we all had a 5<sup>th</sup> grade Grammar Teacher who told you more than once “Practice makes perfect.” I find that pretty solid logic. The problem is that when we apply it to Retriever Training, if this is your first dog and you have chosen to self-train your pup without a solid understanding of developing basic skills, complications will persist long after they arise. This is true when we skip required skills or fail to develop a skill. Unfortunately, too often this often hints to further impediments in other areas of your training program, especially if you’re approaching training in an ad-hoc fashion. Development of basic and high-level skills is our Quality Assurance (QA) that we can build into our Gundog with some type of programmatic substance.

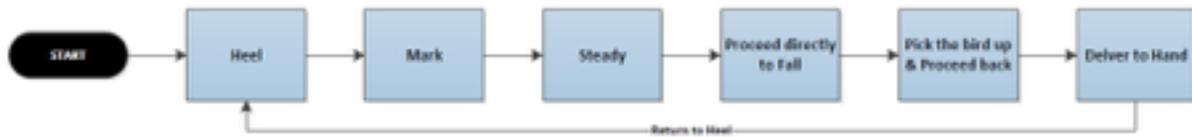
If what I just described above is your current situation, take heart. I am sure that even the greatest of dog trainers wrought problems onto themselves when they first started (I still do). One of the common threads that I believe I found among *solid* trainers is that when they see an imperfection during the execution of a drill they instinctively look at the end to end process and identify the explicit, no, make that specific skill that appears to be the weakest link and then take corrective action to fix that singularity. In other words, we do not run the drill and attempt to address a problem that is occurring in the middle of the drill in hopes that the issue will find resolution during the execution of the procedure, but instead, stop and give the skill in question undo attention until were satisfied the dog can successfully accomplish the function within the drill that is be performed.

### **Breaking it Down**

If you found that somewhat obfuscated, let’s take a deep-dive into something we’re all very familiar with, the Standard Retrieve. For example, when we breakdown the skills required to execute a retrieve, we find that we have six (6) skills that when performed flawlessly, give the illusion of a solitary flowing process. The skills depicted in Illustration (1) are:

- S1. Heel. The dog must line-up at the Handler’s side to observe the Mark.
- S2. Mark. The dog must visually observe target and remember the area of the fall.
- S3. Steady. The dog must remain motionless until released by the Handler.
- S4. Proceed directly to the fall. This mean the dog must resist suction due to hazard that leads away from the fall.
- S5. Pick the Bird up. The dog must locate the bird then pick it up and hold the fowl in such a matter as to not make the animal suitable for table fare.
- S6. Deliver to Hand. This means the dog holds the bird in such a manner as to not drop the bird until accepted by the Handler.

## Drill: The Standard Retrieve



*Illustration (1)*

Now let's say that the dog has started dropping birds or bumpers consistently on the way back to the handler. A quick glance at Illustration (1) points us to Skill 6 > Deliver to Hand. The question is, do we continue to perform Skills 1 -5 and then attempt to make a quick correction at the point Skill 6 goes amiss or do we stop and look for the root-cause of why our pride and joy is spitting out the very object that he was born to carry? Where it may seem obvious to stop and investigate, I would bet my wife's favorite shoes that most of us are guilty of pressing on at one time or another and chalking it up as a gaffe or hoping it is one. Some of us even go so far as to let the problem continue in hopes of self-correction over time.

### Don't Look the Other Way

Oddly enough, the above approach often yields positive results and lures us into applying a "take a seat and wait philosophy" to other problems that arise in the TLC when conducting drills. Some of us may rationalize that our pup is pretty smart and sorts these types of things out. After all, each of us was so fortunate to get the greatest pup ever! Right? The fact of the matter is that most of us would never take this approach in our day-to-day job when something goes wrong. Instead, you would analyze the problem and take some form of remedial action. When we apply this corrective approach to training our hunting buddies, what we develop is Quality Control (QC) measures that we can deploy throughout the TLC and reduce the number of future issues that we would otherwise be likely to encounter.

### Applying QC

In our scenario, our pup is dropping the bird sometime after picking it up at the location of the fall and before delivering to hand. The QC action would be to analyze why this is taking place. Dogs are just as quirky as you and I. Sometimes they just may not like a certain bumper or you have let them get away with it a few times and now in their mind it is acceptable. Of course, you may have also just not developed your Pups natural instinct to carry an object from a certain age or you failed to complete the training required to hold the prey or bumper in an acceptable manner. The appropriate QC measures would be to return to the yard and teach/develop the "Hold" skill until your pup can do it well. Once things are moving in the right direction, we can test in the field to evaluate our progress and determine if further development is required or our approach to teaching the skill needs to be revised. Once we're assured that the skill has met our expectations, we can have confidence that it will hold up in other drills that the pup will be required to perform during the TLC. Illustration (2) below (I apologize for Illustration 2 being somewhat of an eyechart) provides insight how we might approach our scenario from end-to-end.

## Drill: The Standard Retrieve

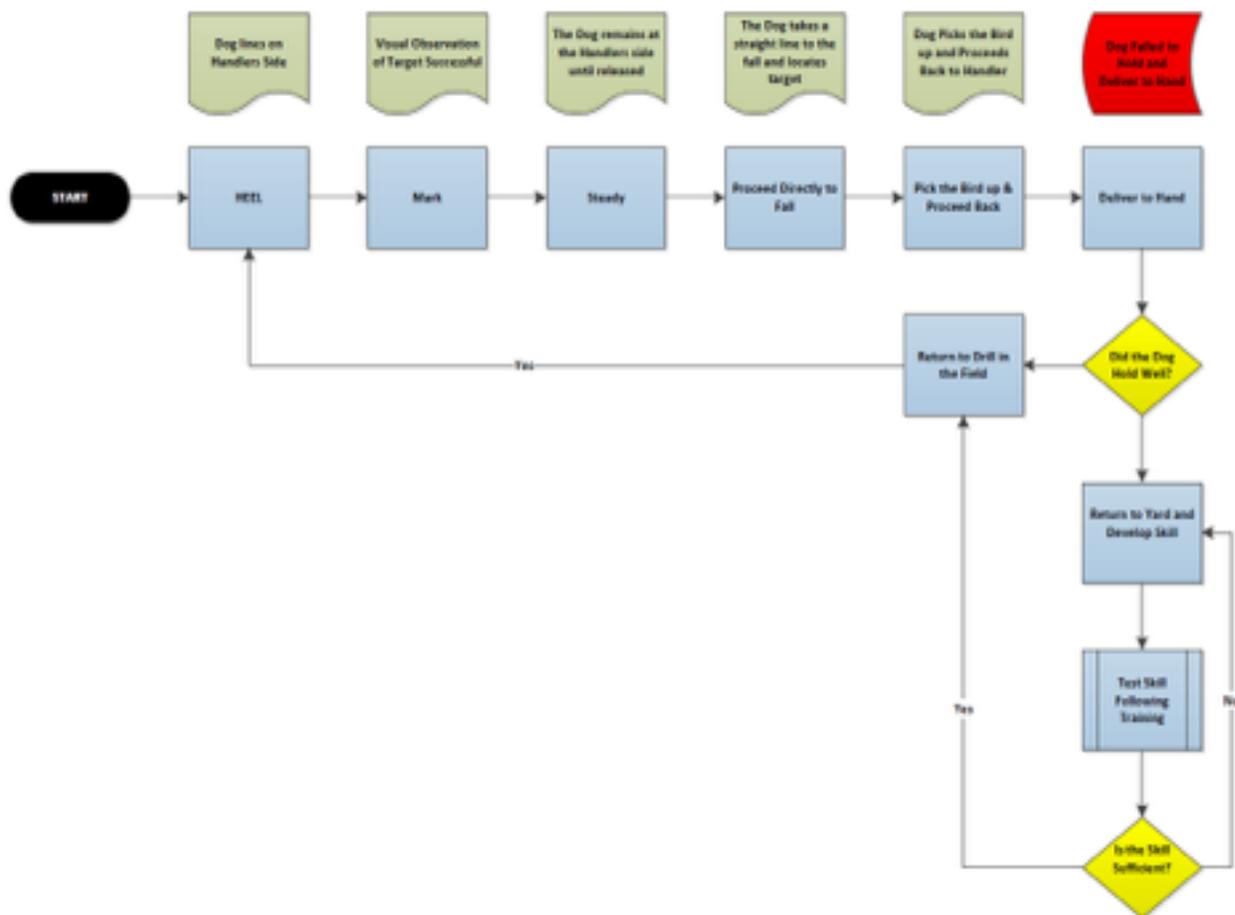


Illustration (2)

### Summary

It takes countless hours; spread across many months if not years, to have a fully finished Gundog. It is an investment that requires sacrifice on many levels. Those sacrifices are why many dogs, do not get the training they were originally procured for. The lucky ones end up with an owner willing to learn the ropes and pay their dues or continue to invest in the dogs training with a Pro. The unfortunate ones that do get trained never have the opportunity to sit quietly in the blind waiting on dawn and have the owners pride swell when they successfully pull off that first difficult retrieve in heavy cover. What can be worse are dogs that get partially trained and the owners take the dog on a hunt and when the opportunity to shine comes, they cannot deliver or in some cases become a liability to the hunt. It is a surefire way of eliciting disappointment from an owner perspective.

The building blocks for maximizing a dog's capability are systematically entrenching the "skills" that make a Gundog what it was bred to become. Being able to see a problem in the field is not hard. However, being able to identify the skill and then *retrain* that skill and seamlessly transfer that knowledge back into a drill or capability needed during the hunt or in a Hunt Test only comes with a solid training program, time, persistence and patients. That is one of the reasons that I advocate self-trainers put as much time into learning be it a formal training program, working with knowledgeable trainers, reading books, articles and blogs and be consumer of videos. If you bought your pup with the intention of being a self-trainer and lack confidence in developing the skills required, those are the resources that can ensure you get a great start in putting the blocks together.

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