

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

By Mark Whalen
Poolesville, Maryland

Correcting Hard Mouth Issues

Question: I have my first Pudelpointer and had an outstanding first season with her this past year. Her performance has been extraordinary in every respect with the only issue being a tendency to chew birds excessively during the retrieving process. She had a lot of retrieving work with bumpers prior to the start of the season but virtually no experience with live birds. As my primary intent this first season was to maximize her exuberance and hunting enthusiasm, and her retrieving was otherwise excellent, I was reluctant to take any strong action to correct this matter and intentionally made minimal effort to do so.

If you could address the best means of early stage correction of this problem, it would be most appreciated.

Answer: Thank you for your very interesting question. You didn't state in your question whether your PP went through a formal force breaking process. Force breaking, if done properly, will pay dividends to you and is what separates Prize I UT dogs from all the rest. Take a look at our UT Test and the amount of retrieving that's required. The field portion requires that all shot birds be retrieved to hand. Then, of course, we have retrieve by drag and the duck retrieve. During the duck search, if the dog gets the duck in his mouth it must also be retrieved. What I would do with this dog is go through the formal force breaking process. For this article I won't go into all

the particulars of force breaking, but there are many very good articles in past issues of the *VHD* regarding force breaking. If you have already gone through the force breaking process, I will address some steps to revisit force breaking and how you can fix munching on game. Before I do that, it would be prudent to touch on a little puppy development which may correct any hard mouth issues before they begin.

I know that lots of people supply puppies with a bunch of toys including Beanie Babies, rawhide, squeaky toys, Nylabones, deer antlers, tennis balls, etc. I pretty much give my puppies Nylabones and that's about it. Nylabones last a long time and they will satisfy a dog's desire to chew, that includes puppies and old dogs alike. When they get short, I simply throw them in the trash. I do use Beanie Babies, but I only do that for very young puppies, in the hallway at my house to do some play retrieves. I never give them anything like that just to play with at their leisure. I will also never, ever give my puppy anything that squeaks. Squeaky toys will reward the puppy with a sound when they bite down hard, in essence promoting a hard mouth.

I believe many of the problems people encounter with force breaking are because they want to move forward and progress too quickly when the dog lacks a real understanding and has a limited foundation. Make sure your dog has a very solid foundation on hold and carry. For your PP, I would revisit hold and carry and progressively move to larger, heavier and more objects with offset weight. Be reasonable, I'm

not saying have your dog carry a 20-pound item. I am saying go to objects that may be six or eight pounds. Some dogs will struggle with this at first, but once they know how to do it, they will gain a tremendous amount of confidence. They will need to be able to hold it, carry it and jump on and off the table with it. As always, praise lavishly. Larger and heavier items inherently limit hard mouth; they will learn to have a firm grip. If they try to munch on it or roll it in their mouth they will drop it, which will warrant an immediate correction of "NO." The next step would be to introduce birds in the hold and carry stage of force breaking. I start with dead pigeons, and then I go to chukar, ducks and geese. Again, I'm going progressively larger and heavier. I will also use live, taped chukar and ducks. If I see them exhibit any hard mouth behavior on a bird in the hold and carry stage I will correct it with a sharp "NO" along with an index finger tap on their snout. If they continue biting down on the bird I will make them carry a double-sided scrub brush. The brush is uncomfortable and not very conducive to biting down on. Generally they will learn pretty quickly that hard mouthing a bird is not acceptable behavior. I also use birds in the last stages of ear pinch and the last stages of e-collar overlay.

Like anything else in dog training, if you don't make a correction the problem will most likely continue and get worse with time. I hope these tips help you out with your dog and both of you enjoy training this summer.

Good luck and good hunting... 🐾



Mark Whalen has been a member of the Potomac Chapter in Maryland since 1986. He has held various positions within the Potomac Chapter over the years, including Test Secretary, Membership Secretary, Vice President, and President. Mark became a NAVHDA Judge in 2003 and a Senior Judge in 2008. He is also a Clinic Leader and has judged at the Invitational level since 2009. In addition, Mark is currently the Program Manager for the NAVHDA Apprentice Judge Program. Mark resides in Poolesville, Maryland with his wife, Jennifer, his two daughters, Erin and Kelly, and their two German Shorthaired Pointers. For over 20 years, Mark has worked for Sodexo USA, which is a global food and facilities management company. He is a District Manager for Sodexo, and his territory encompasses the entire state of Pennsylvania. Mark is an avid hunter and can often be found in the salt marshes of Maryland's Eastern Shore, pursuing waterfowl and Maryland's elusive Sika Deer throughout the fall and winter months. He also loves to bird hunt and has made annual trips to North Dakota and Kansas for over 20 years.

A group of knowledgeable judges and trainers has been assembled and are available to answer your questions about training and testing. The topic will vary each month based on the questions we receive from our VHD readers. Please send your questions to vhd@navhda.org with "On the Right Track" in the subject line.