

**A Tale of Two Skills**  
**Or**  
**The Marriage of Target and Retrieve**  
**By Barbara Handelman ©2007 all rights reserved**

**Teach your dog to eagerly and reliably target your hand before implementing this method of teaching the retrieve.** Using this method ensures that your dog will not only learn to pick up and carry objects, but that he will also deliver the object into your hand. <sup>1</sup>

This method of retrieve training describes four stages: the “take”, the “hold”, the “delivery” and the “fetch. Some other methods either omit or underplay the “hold “ and the “delivery”. Service dogs must collect and deliver unusual objects including groceries that spill from a dropped bag, eating utensils, eye glasses, pieces of paper, keys and other personal items that a dog might either find distasteful to hold in his mouth, or that might be damaged by less than a firm but gentle hold.

Because of the delicate nature of some items, such as eye glasses and credit cards, or paper products that stick to or dissolve on a dog’s tongue, I recommend teaching dogs an alternate way of picking things up, using only their front teeth and lips. Once mastered, this skill gets its own cue, I call it “pick”, to differentiate it from “take it” or “get it” which many handlers use to designate an item they want their dog to grab and hold firmly in behind their canine teeth but in front of their molars.

A service dog must “deliver” the item to a handler who may be unable to reach for or easily grasp the retrieved object. In order for the retrieve to be successful, the dog must purposefully press the article into the person’s hand and wait to be cued to release the object. This type of solid hold and delivery can also enhance the performance of competition obedience dogs who must fetch, hold, and deliver dumbbells and other articles during a performance of obedience exercises.

**Applying the 4 D’s to Retrieving:**

As you incrementally build the dog’s ability to target your hand and retrieve objects, **keep the four D’s: distraction, duration, distance and difficulty**, in mind. The four **D**’s come into play any time you train a new skill. Keep **distractions** to a minimum whenever you are training a new skill. Increase the level of **distraction** only when the dog begins to perform the new skill reliably in a low stimulus environment. **Duration** becomes a factor with both targeting and retrieving. Initially when teaching the dog to target your hand, a brief touch should be your criteria for reinforcement and reward. However, as his skill develops, increase the criteria by delaying the click while the dog offers increasingly sustained contact with your hand. Similarly, when teaching the hold, build **duration** by incrementally increasing the time during which the dog holds the object prior to hearing the click. **Distance** comes into play when you begin moving the object around to different locations at increasing distances from the dog and when you send the dog away from you to fetch the object. **Difficulty** increases each time you change any of the other **3 D**’s.

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda Buja, an extraordinarily talented clicker trainer, agility competitor and herding instructor, first introduced me to the concept of marrying hand-targeting and retrieving. Brenda outlined her method in an email that I adapted, with her permission, and elaborated on for the purpose of this article and other training materials.

### A Note about Coordinating Clickers, Treats and Leashes:

I have often thought a third hand would be a nifty appendage for clicker trainers. Figuring out how to coordinate a clicker and treats while keeping one hand free as a target can be more difficult than training the dog.

I suggest that you hold the clicker in the same hand with which you plan to deliver treats. Keep your other hand free to be a target. If your dog is on leash during training, you might want to put the leash on the floor and place your foot on the leash.

### Hand Targeting

A quick review:

- ♣ Present your hand to the dog, palm facing the dog. Allow the dog to sniff your hand. Click and treat (c/t) for any attention the dog pays to the hand.
  - Click even the slightest glance of the dog's eye toward your hand; look for a head turn and movement toward your hand. Progress in tiny incrementally changing steps.
  
- ♣ If the dog ignores your hand, put a dab of peanut butter or other delectable on you palm and let the dog sniff and lick it off.
  - Click when the dog touches your palm; his treat is the opportunity to lick off the peanut butter.
  - After luring no more than 3 times, offer the flat of your hand again without a food lure on it.
  
- ♣ Build the hand targeting skill to reliability by practicing frequently and until you are getting rapid repetitions with distractions and in a variety of situations.
- ♣ Increase duration in tiny increments by delaying your click while the dog maintains his contact with your palm.
  - If the dog breaks contact before you click, **you raised your criteria for reinforcement too rapidly** and exceeded for your dog's attained skill level.
    - ♣ Go back to an interval of delayed clicks at which your dog was successful. Practice at that level for at least 5 more clicks then start building duration again in smaller increments. Only increase the criteria for duration if the dog has been successful on each of the previous 5 tries.

### Component Stages of Teaching the Retrieve to Hand:

**Please note: This chapter covers ways to build a solid working retrieve.** Moon, my Aussie, has none, zero, Nada, zilch, not one drop of natural retrieve instinct. After twenty years living with border collies who would rather fetch than eat or breath, Moon had me stumped. Moon, is a soft dog, who shuts down easily in the face of mild verbal corrections. Moon is my "crossover dog" the one led me to search for creative training methods. Moon led me to clicker training. With a clicker and

some new knowledge I was able to shape Moon's retrieve, one tiny step at a time. Moon never learned to love retrieving, but he'll do it when I need him to.

Enter Luca. The pup who would naturally chase anything, take it in his mouth, carry it around, and even bring it back, most of the time; no need to "teach" him to retrieve. **Huge mistake!**

I have spent a ton of energy retraining Luca. It would have been far easier if, four years ago, when he was a puppy, I had taught the foundation skills, first! Those all important foundation skills discussed here, especially **hold and deliver**, inherent in the working retrieve. Having allowed him so much opportunity to practice his exuberant play retrieve, with lots of mouthing during the hold/carry, and tugging during the delivery, has required untold hours of remedial training.

### **The Take:**

- ♣ Reinforce the dog for looking at, approaching, sniffing, or touching an object held in your hand. I usually hold the object quietly in my hand, but I might also move it to get the dog's attention.
- ♣ If the dog already targets your hand on cue, do not use the target cue to evoke interest in the object you are holding.
- ♣ The goal is for the dog to initiate investigatory interaction with the object in your hand.
- ♣ Reinforce the dog for licking, nose bopping, or mouthing the object.
- ♣ Reinforce the dog for grabbing or biting the object (you might again move the object around to excite the dog), the dog should get credit for having the object in his mouth, initially, for only an instant.

**The "take" should be fluent and on cue before moving on to the hold; i.e. the dog should willingly take an offered object into his mouth, closing his mouth around the object. Do not release your own hold on the object. At this stage you want to retain control of the object while the dog happily takes it into his mouth.**

With a dog like Luca, whose default, hard-wired mouthing behavior remains very strong in relation to any new objects he encounters in his environment, I initially retain control of new objects. Even though Luca understands the verbal cue "take it" in relation to objects old and new, I still like him to begin with some "free-shaping" investigatory interaction with new objects, then some targeting, after which I will add the verbal cue "take it" or if it is a fragile object, I'll ask him to "pick". I do not, however, relinquish control of the object, until I am certain his hold is appropriate.

For practicing the "take" and "hold" stages of the retrieve, I created a "**hold stick**". I bought inexpensive, narrow gauge (1/2 inch PVC pipe) and had it cut into eighteen-inch lengths. I covered it with vinyl tape, so it would show up well on camera, otherwise the colorful tape serves nothing other than a decorative purpose.

### **Pick**

I often yearn for feedback about my training, especially when Luca and I keep encountering the same problems over again without new ideas presenting themselves to me. We had been working on putting used paper towels in a waste bin in a public bathroom for ages, and they kept ending up on the floor in shreds, until one day a passerby stopped to watch and observed, "the towel is sticking to

his tongue”. Ah, the light dawns! No wonder he kept pawing at the towel, and spitting it out, instead of “putting” it in the bin, as I knew he could do, on cue, with balls and other solid objects.

We started training a new way of picking up paper and other delicate objects, one that required that Luca use only his lips and front teeth. I began by presenting delicate items such as paper, eyeglasses and credit cards to him, between my fingers, in such a way that he could not access more than a tiny portion of the item. The new method worked well.

When Luca is calm and distractions minimal, he can now easily pick up most delicate items, including credit cards without damaging them. Knowing Luca as I do, however, I know that his hard-mouth is hardwired into his system. A slip up with paper, or even my glasses can be managed. Replacing credit cards is a huge nuisance, and I think I’ll leave their retrieval to my Aussie, Moon’s, natural soft mouth, or friendly passers-by. Luca and I just aren’t there, yet!

### **The Hold**

- ♣ Begin to reinforce the dog for holding the object briefly - for less than one second, at first.  
**Retain your hold on the stick.**
- ♣ You may have to click early to ensure that you capture the moment that the stick is actually in the dog’s mouth. Clicking early is much better than clicking late.
- ♣ If your click is late, you will be reinforcing a DROP rather than a HOLD.
- ♣ In the beginning, however, your dog may only offer you a hold of infinitesimal duration. Delaying the click to encourage him to hold on longer may prove to be an exercise in frustration for both of you.
- ♣ **If the dog lets go of the stick, before you click, YOU delayed the click too long.**

I absolutely concur with Sue Ailsby’s “**Two Grab**” method of training the “hold” and gratefully acknowledge her generous permission to include her description of that method here:

When I'm working on any part of hold (strong hold, long hold, specific location in mouth), I never, NEVER \*N\*E\*V\*E\*R\* let go of the dumbbell. I don't know where the idea comes from: that as soon as the dumbbell lands in the dog's mouth, the person needs to drop it like a hot potato! The result will be a totally controlled hold, totally correct, for as long as you want, with BOTH of you holding the dumbbell. While this is happening, I can also put a little pressure on it, try to pull it gently away from the dog, push it down, push it up, jiggle it a little, which are things that will encourage a stronger hold. I can also feel the grip on the dumbbell and watch the jaw muscles, so I can click more pressure.

If the dog releases at an inappropriate time, or throws the dumbbell back onto the molars, etc, I can simply take it away, count to 10 and start again. If the dog is paying more attention to wanting to chew the dumbbell, etc, then the dog isn't playing my game and I'd change the parameters – dog hungrier, better rewards, and/or lots more clicking for less. By the time I'm starting to think about stronger grip and correct placement, the dog is totally working for my reinforcers and not thinking about using the dumbbell as a toy.

How do you click for the take but get them to understand they have to hold it for some length of time?

This is a perfectly normal step in the retrieving process - and a very frustrating one for the trainer. Here we are, clicking for the dog grabbing it, then just TRY to get the hold!

NON-USEFUL SUGGESTION: wait for a longer hold before you click (withhold the click). Most dogs at this point are giving you a 3/100000s of a second hold. Waiting for a longer hold might give you a 4/100000s of a second hold. Big whoop. Even if you had time to spot it, you don't have time to click it.

USEFUL SUGGESTION: Go for TWO grabs. That is, grab, click, treat. Grab, C, T. Grab, C, T. Then: Grab, nothing. Just sit there and pretend no grab happened at all. If the dog decides you aren't playing any more and wanders off, he isn't ready for a longer hold yet. If on the other hand, he gives you a "Hey, STUPID! I GRABBED it!" and grabs it again (that's twice, right!), eee hah, click, treat. So then you're looking at:

Grab CT Grab CT Grab CT

Grab Grab CT

Grab Grab CT

Grab Grab CT

Grab Grab CT

Grab Grab CT

Grab Grab CT

GrabGrab CT

Notice how the grabs are getting closer together? Ailsby's Principle of Laziness states clearly that if you require two distinct grabs and only ever click the second one, the grabs will get closer together and less distinct. Pretty soon the dog says "Hey, this is a lot of hard work! Would you still click if I just put my mouth over the dumbbell and sat there THINKING about coming away and hitting it again?" and you agree that, hmmm, yeah, you could probably live with him just holding it in his mouth for a few seconds instead of the original two hits..

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Further, according to Ailsby the retrieve object-as-a-toy becomes a problematic because the handler gives the dog too much responsibility for the object, too early. Ailsby says about her dog, Scuba:

I'm quite sure that Scuba would love to toss a credit card around, and I'm sure credit cards would make very satisfactory chew toys (for a minute at least), but the fact is that I need Scuba to pick up and hand me a credit card very, very gently (credit cards don't work very well with tooth dents in them!). She's never been allowed to play with credit cards, to learn how much fun they are to dent, or how far they'll fly if she throws them. Until she knew so much about credit cards that there was virtually no danger of her ever learning these things, she was never in "charge" of the card (having said that, I can picture Scuba running down the aisles at PetSmart with my credit card, a happy gang of clerks behind her picking up everything she flicked her tail at! I'm pretty sure she knows my PIN number.)<sup>2</sup>

### **The Delivery, Also Known As: “The Marriage of Target and Retrieve”:**

- ♣ Once the dog can sustain a solid hold on the article for more than 10 seconds, you are ready to work on the delivery.
- ♣ Extend the palm of your hand. Your dog should retain his hold on the object during each of the following steps toward building the delivery to your hand:
- ♣ When the dog looks at your hand.
- ♣ When the dog approaches your hand.
- ♣ When the dog touches your hand **WITH THE OBJECT**.
- ♣ Incrementally delay the click until the dog demands that you take the object by **PUSHING** it solidly into your hand with some force.
- ♣ Dogs whose foundation skills were clicker trained understand that the click ends the behavior. Most, therefore, release the retrieved object when they hear the click.
- ♣ Add a cue to the release, which will ultimately replace the click when the behavior is fluent. I use “thank you!” since I am truly grateful that my dogs retrieve myriad objects that I drop.
- ♣ To practice the **delivery**, and as a prelude to the **fetch**, I offer the dog the dumbbell, or other object with one hand, and extend my other hand as a target into which the dog may deliver the object.

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Ailsby wrote this brilliant section on the “Two Grab” method of training the hold and retrieving in an email to the OC-Assist-Dogs list. She has generously granted me permission to publish it here, having edited only slightly for clarity and formatting and purposes to fit this context.

- The target hand can be moved, incrementally to increasing distances, encouraging the dog to **carry** the dumbbell for the first time.

### **The Fetch:**

- ♣ Begin to place the object in various places (on a chair, on floor, beside or even behind the dog, etc). Click and treat the dog for picking it up.
- ♣ When the dog is comfortable picking the object up from many different locations, begin to place the object a few feet farther away from yourself and wait for the dog to move toward the object
  - If he does not spontaneously move toward the object, you placed it too far away.
    - ♣ Back up to the distance where he was previously successful and begin again.
- ♣ Click and treat the dog for holding the object **and** moving towards you (fetch!). **Be sure to vary the timing of the click**, so that you are reinforcing him along the way toward the delivery.
- ♣ Incrementally increase the distance the dog must move away from you to pick up the object.
  - Wait before throwing the retrieve object until:
    - ♣ the dog will reliably move away from you to pick up an object that you placed at incrementally increasing distances;
    - ♣ until the dog will solidly hold, carry and deliver the object to your hand.
  - **Excitement adds a strong distraction factor.** Some dogs who have been reliably performing all the steps of the retrieve get such an adrenaline rush from chasing a thrown object that all the other components of the retrieve fall apart.
    - ♣ If this happens, back up to an earlier level where the dog was successful, and build up more gradually toward retrieving an object that is thrown.
- ♣ Toss the object a short distance and present your hand for '**delivery**'. Gradually increase the distance you throw the object. **Remember to click and treat in various places in the chain, not just the delivery!**
- ♣ Practice the outlined steps with a wide variety of objects of different size, weight, texture and composition....a tooth brush, a small hair brush, a sock, a pencil, a key, a clicker... use your imagination.
- ♣ Always build on success. If your dog becomes frustrated, starts to loose interest, resumes mouthing objects instead of carrying them quietly, or in any other way regresses while developing these new skills; back up to a stage where he was previously successful.
- ♣ Whether your dog shuts down, or displays frustration behaviors, he may be telling you that you increased your criteria for reinforcement too quickly.

### **Scent Discrimination**

I believe that scent discrimination skills connect to the other retrieve skills that are essential for service dogs. There are two items that I drop more frequently than any others: my keys and my clickers. I not only want my dogs to automatically pick up my keys, and my clickers when I drop them, I want them to be able to find them for me if I loose them. These are the only objects for

which I train an automatic retrieve. *For other dropped items, they are taught to wait for a cue before picking up what has fallen. I don't want them rushing in to pick up medicine, food, or sharp objects that might hurt them. Safety depends on their waiting for a cue before retrieving almost all dropped items.*

Knowing how to find an object with my scent on it, means that my dogs can search for my keys if I should drop them in a pile of leaves, or leave them in some forgotten place in the house. Luca knows the object «keys» by name, he knows the cue «find» and he has been trained to seek out a metal object with my scent on it from among a group of identical objects, only one of which has been scented by my hand. For more information on training scent discrimination, I recommend Dawn Jecs' book Simply Scenting. While not a «clicker book» per se, the methods are positive and easily integrated with clicker training.

### **Problem Solving**

I have two dogs with very different attitudes about retrieving. Moon has zero natural retrieve instinct and even less natural inclination. I had to build his “working” retrieve from scratch using the methods above. It was a slow process, but he will now pretty willingly pick up items I designate, though he is not enthusiastic about it.

Luca, has all the enthusiasm and drive imaginable, but that too can be a liability. I made the mistake of thinking that because he would willingly pick up anything and carry it, that I didn't need to go through all the steps I now know are essential. What I created was an enthusiastic retriever who would mangle and repeatedly drop objects he retrieved. We had to go back to the drawing board and retrain his retrieve from scratch using all of the above steps.

### **Increasing the Challenge**

When your dog becomes proficient at the take and the hold, have him practice changing positions while retaining his grip on the object in his mouth. I have found that it is surprisingly hard, in fact *much harder* for my dogs to do doggy push ups (move from a sit to a down back to a sit) with a dumbbell in his mouth, than it is to move across a room, pick up the dumbbell and return to me with the dumbbell. Some other challenges to try include:

- ♣ Have your dog carry an object away from you.
- ♣ Have your dog walk backwards with an object in his mouth.
- ♣ Have your dog turn in a circle with an object in his mouth.
- ♣

Why might your service dog need to meet such challenges? In order for your dog to be able to carry a message to a person in another room, he'd need to carry a paper away from you. If your wheelchair were stuck somewhere, you might need to direct him to grasp a strap, hold it and pull backwards. To free a strap of your backpack that is caught on something, your dog might have to grasp it and turn in a half circle away from you.

We must think «outside the box» when we are training our service dogs to retrieve. Targeting the hand with the retrieved object; and firmly pressing the object into the person's hand, assures the delivery. We never know what embarrassingly awkward, unforeseen situations, or life threatening

emergencies lie ahead. The service dog which performs all aspects of a solid retrieve, under any and all circumstances, may save his handler's life.