



# Beyond a Basic Retrieve

Photos by Lonny Elson

Retrieving is one of the most valuable training tools used in teaching agility. In my article on “Teaching a Retrieve with a Clicker” in the March 2015 issue of *Clean Run*, I shared a training method that you can use to teach *any* dog a reliable and enthusiastic retrieve, even if your dog does not regularly play with toys. You may want to review that article before you start to work on this next step in retrieve training. With some continued work, you can start to enjoy all the associated games and tricks that come along with having your dog like to pick up, hold, carry, and deliver any item you choose anywhere you like.

You can teach your dog to do the recycling for you by picking up plastic bottles and putting them in the bin, or carry and deliver messages to family members around your home. Teaching a good “hold” can make for some interesting dog photos or can occupy your excited dog while you wait to go into the agility ring.

While you don’t need sophisticated retrieves for agility, these kinds of tricks strengthen your dog’s desire to run fast to a toy and return it to you quickly so that you can use retrieve toys as reinforcement during training. An added benefit to clicker training the retrieve/hold/deliver is that it will make you a better dog trainer and training tricks teaches your dog learning and shaping skills. There are many small steps you go through in this training while you are building the final tricks and if you can train *those*—think how easy training agility skills will be!

If you followed along in the first article and you have a pretty good retrieve to hand then you are ready to introduce some new words to your dog. The first one is *Give* or whatever verbal cue you want to use for the dog to release the item after he has brought it to you. The other cue is for the hold. I use that word and my dogs learn to hold the item until I give them their release cue.

## Give and Hold

The way my dogs initially learn to release their hold on an item is that they drop the item from their mouth when they hear the click so they can eat the treat. Now I want to begin to delay my click as well as ask the dog to hold the item longer after bringing it to me, or even just to hold the item on cue without a retrieve. After my dog retrieves the item and delivers it to my hand, I use my release word of *Give* just before I click. Do 2 or 3 sessions of short retrieves and use your release word just prior to the click before starting this next step.

I begin to proof Scoop by asking him to hold the dumbbell for longer and longer until I give my release cue of *Give*. Start with just a 1 second hold and build slowly while praising your dog continuously. Eventually I touch the dumbbell with one finger while praising and then touch with my full hand, but I don’t give the release word. I will click to end the hold as my hand reaches the dumbbell.



Here Scoop is demonstrating taking the dumbbell from me on my fetch cue.

After he takes it from my hand I pull my hand away and then I reach back in for it.

As I touch the dumbbell now I don't want him to drop it so I delay my click momentarily until I have my hand completely on the dumbbell.

Then I say *Give* followed by click and treat.

Proofing the hold: I reach for the dumbbell but don't actually touch it.

Eventually I touch the dumbbell with one finger while praising.

It is now that I introduce my verbal cue for the hold. While Scoop is holding the item, I begin to say *Hold*. I repeat the word as duration continues. Also, each time I touch the dumbbell or proof while reaching, I repeat the word *Hold*.

If Scoop drops the dumbbell, I pick it up and give it back to him while using the word *Hold* and praise immediately if he holds for just a second or two. If he is dropping the dumbbell, it is likely that I tried to increase the holding duration time too quickly. Add just a

second at a time to the duration of holding.

As soon as your dog can hold the item for a short time you can begin to work on your hold in many different locations and situations as well as with many different items and toys.



Work on your hold with many different items and toys.

I start to gently proof holding of all these items.

Start to add motion to the hold. Hand the item to your dog and then take a step back asking your dog to carry it to you on the hold cue—you can repeat the word *Hold* while you step away. Start walking backward in a small arc. As soon

as you stop moving, reach for the dumbbell and give your release word, then click and treat. Don't rush to the next step. Many dogs find it easy to hold while stationary but not while moving—even if they normally carry toys to you.

The next step is to stop moving and then ask your dog to sit without dropping the item before you give a release cue. Vary what you ask the dog to do while holding an item.



I now ask Scoop to hold an item while doing another trick. I ask him to *Sit Pretty*, then hand him the dumbbell and say *Hold*.



You could also ask your dog to hold an item and then move into *Sit Pretty* or *Stand* while he is holding.



I have given the dumbbell to Scoop to hold and then asked him to wave.

## Putting an Item into a Basket

This is a relatively easy trick which I sometimes teach in the beginning stages of clicker training a retrieve or even while introducing fetching a toy with my puppies. I sit on the ground with a small, soft dog bed in front of me. When the pup re-

turns with the item, I click and the toy ends up in the bed because of where the pup is in relationship to me and the bed. When the pup hears the click, he spits out the item. My treat is given close to the bed so that the pup begins to target the item toward the bed. The bed being larger than my hand is

easier for the dog to have a location to bring the toy. Eventually my hand replaces the bed, but I am left with a retrieve to hand or basket.

The following photo-illustrated steps show you how to teach your retrieve-trained dog to get the item into the basket.



I ask Scoop to fetch or hold while sitting in front of the basket. When I click he drops the item and it likely will end up in, or close to, the basket. Then I click and treat.



I can also hold my hand above the basket to help him get started and he will drop the dumbbell toward my hand after I click. I then let the dumbbell fall into the basket as he drops it. Then I gradually move the basket away from me, a few inches at a time. I usually begin throwing my dumbbell or toy at this point and let Scoop fetch it toward me and the basket. I click as he is in close proximity to the basket and the toy falls in. Once the toy is getting delivered to the basket reliably, with it still relatively close, you could introduce a verbal cue like In the Bowl or something else fun to say, depending on the trick you want to teach.

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Once Scoop learns to put the item in the basket on cue wherever I move the basket all around me, I stand up and practice him dropping it in the basket right at my feet, and then slowly move it farther away.

Scoop put himself and the dumbbell in the basket a few times while learning this trick. I just ignored his feet for the time being as long as the dumbbell got dropped in the basket. You can use a taller basket or box to discourage this behavior, or begin to make the receptacle smaller so that your dog can't step into the box so easily.

I hope you have fun with retrieve games and keep in mind how useful your perfect retrieve will be on the agility field. 🐾

Nancy Gyes and her husband Jim Basic run Power Paws Agility in San Jose, California. Nancy has been the AKC World Team Coach since 2006 and has been on the AKC World Team herself seven times: four times with Scud and three with Riot. Nancy and Riot earned both a 1st and 2nd place in Individual Agility at the FCI Agility World Championships. Nancy won the USDAA Grand Prix Finals four years in a row with three different dogs: Scud, Riot, and Wicked. Nancy and Wicked were also on the winning team at a Dog Agility Masters championship. Nancy and Riot were the 24<sup>th</sup> AKC National champions twice, and Ace was second in the Championships in 2012. Nancy and Ace represented the USA at the European Open five times and they were the first US duo to make it to the podium, earning a bronze medal in 2011. Nancy shares her life with four Border Collies aged 13 to 2 years. Contact Nancy at [www.powerpawsagility.com](http://www.powerpawsagility.com) where you can also view articles and videos.

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