

Very Good Training

Retriever Psychology

Understanding how the canine mind works will help you become a more effective trainer

BY WADE BOURNE

"Andy," I whispered in my black Lab's ear, "don't break. I'll tell you when to go, okay?"

But on the next volley, Andy was in the water before our shotshell hulls hit the floor of the duck blind. Oh well, back to the drawing board.

Training a retriever is like dancing on ice—a slippery adventure. Each dog has its own strengths and weaknesses. To produce an obedient, capable retriever, a trainer must build on the strengths while minimizing the weaknesses. This process requires knowledge of training techniques, regular in-the-field sessions, and a determination to succeed.

But perhaps more than anything else, effective retriever training requires an understanding of canine psychology. Dogs don't reason as humans do, so trainers must understand how the canine mind functions and must be able to work with (or around) different behaviors. Trainers who are the best dog psychologists invariably produce the best retrievers for the duck blind or field trial competition.

Two trainers who keenly understand the importance of the psychological side of retriever training are Mike Stewart and Justin Tackett. Stewart is a professional trainer and breeder who operates Wildrose Kennels in Mississippi. He trained Drake the DU Dog and appears in each episode of *DU TV*, offering tips on how viewers can sharpen their retriever's skills. Tackett,

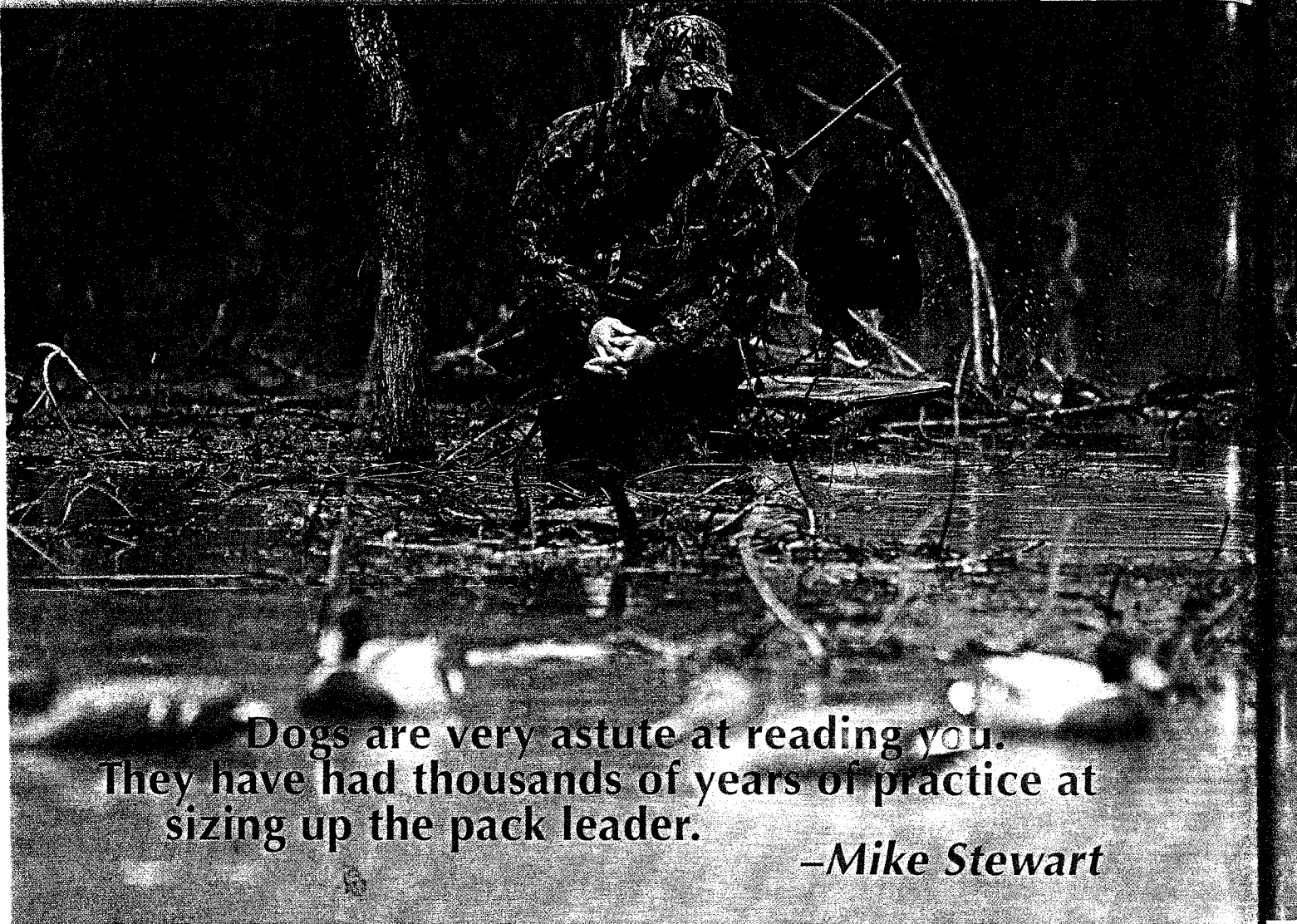
an amateur trainer and veteran field trial campaigner, is host of the *Ducks Unlimited Water Dog* television series, which follows the waterfowling exploits of Tackett and his canine partner, Yella.

Stewart is a proponent of training a retriever "the natural way"—no force, no abuse, and no losing patience with the dog. "I've read a lot about canine psychology, and I've applied this in my training," he says. "I've come up with a system that brings out the natural ability of the dog. This system is based on the handler maintaining a dominant relationship as a 'pack leader' and having the dog understand his role and what's expected of him."

"People who make the best parents also usually make the best retriever trainers," Tackett says. "They recognize that each child—and dog—has its own personality and must be handled differently from its siblings. Good trainers know how to customize a training regimen for their dog, and they have the knowledge and patience to work through problems when they arise."

Stewart and Tackett agree that dogs aren't robots that can be trained alike. They are intelligent animals with different personalities and abilities. Thus, a trainer must first know how the canine mind works in order to establish control over his retriever and then must structure the dog's performance through training drills and time-tested reinforcement techniques.

BILL BUCKLEY



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They have had thousands of years of practice at
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—Mike Stewart

**Mike Stewart:
"Be the Pack Leader"**

"There are four quadrants that determine how successful your retriever will be," Stewart says. "The first quadrant is genetics. You're not going to train a miniature schnauzer to be a great duck dog. Your retriever has to have good genetics to start with, and you can ensure good genetics by researching bloodlines and buying a puppy whose parents have the traits you desire. And don't scrimp in this area. When it comes to genetics, you usually get what you pay for.

"The second quadrant is the mechanics of training—which drills to run to teach a dog to be steady, to mark properly, to take a line, etc. Again, this is no huge obstacle. You can learn proper mechanics by studying a good training book or video.

"The third quadrant is the handler's ability," Stewart continues. "Some handlers are simply better at communicating their desires to their dog than oth-

ers. A good handler will put his dog on the bird better than a poor handler. Good handlers are better at building a teamwork relationship. Still, this is an area where handlers can improve as they gain experience and work with other handlers.

"And the fourth quadrant involves establishing the proper relationship between the handler and dog. This is where psychology comes in. It is essential to learn to read your dog and to understand how he reads you. You have to comprehend the concept of pack mentality. You have to be the dominant member of your pack, and your dog always has to be subordinate to your position. When you establish and maintain this relationship, you lay the groundwork for developing the dog's natural ability through a logical training progression."

Stewart explains that from a dog's perspective, he is not a member of a family but a member of a pack. "Dad, Mom,

the three kids, and the dog are pack members, and the dog is trying to figure out where he fits in the pack," he says. "So he's always jockeying for position. The more dominant a dog's nature, the more he'll try to move up in the pack."

Stewart says this is why a trainer must be the pack leader at all times. "You have to maintain your dominance through posture, voice tone, control of food, and other means by which your dog measures your assertiveness," he says. "Dogs are very astute at reading you. They have had thousands of years of practice at sizing up the pack leader. If they sense any weakness or inconsistencies in the leader, they may challenge his authority. In a training situation, this means they may avoid or ignore the handler's instruction."

Dogs live in the present. "They don't worry about yesterday or tomorrow," Stewart says. "With dogs, there are no 'maybes' or 'what ifs.' They think in black and white. They live in the



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moment in an absence of abstractions."

With this in mind, and with the dominance of the handler well-established, a trainer is ready to lead his retriever through a progression of causal relationships that comprise his training program.

"You work through a series of inter-related lessons wherein one causes the dog to remember something else," Stewart explains. "You build a relationship of trust and then you create good habits in the dog. This is what training is. You must be logical and repetitive throughout the training process. One accomplishment leads to the next new challenge."

Dogs are pleasure seekers, and if given the chance, they will avoid anything unpleasant. "This is why I first try positive reinforcement instead of punishment to achieve the behavior I want," Stewart says. "When the dog does a good job, I'll reward him at the moment of accomplishment. I may give a pup a small treat, but later I'll just tell him

'good boy' with enthusiasm. This helps build on positive experiences."

On the other hand, if a training session isn't going well, Stewart will simplify the lesson to assure some lesser success that can still be rewarded. "You must set the dog up to win," Stewart explains. "If he can't make a 100-yard mark, then throw him a 50-yard mark that he can complete successfully. Then end the session early and put the dog up after you reward him. It's very important to stop the session on a positive note."

"I'm not saying I never reprimand a dog, but I keep my corrections under strict control," Stewart continues. "If I get mad, I'm not in control. Again, if the dog accepts me as pack leader, and I can make him understand what I want from him, he'll usually comply. And when he does, he learns that compliance is a good thing. Then we've established a building block from which we can move on to the next lesson."

"You know the guy on TV, the Dog Whisperer (Cesar Millan)? All he's doing is reading the animal's behavior and then training the owner to take charge, to be dominant, and to accept nothing less than the animal's compliance with what the owner wants him to do. That's how you train a retriever. The drills may be different, but the psychology is exactly the same."

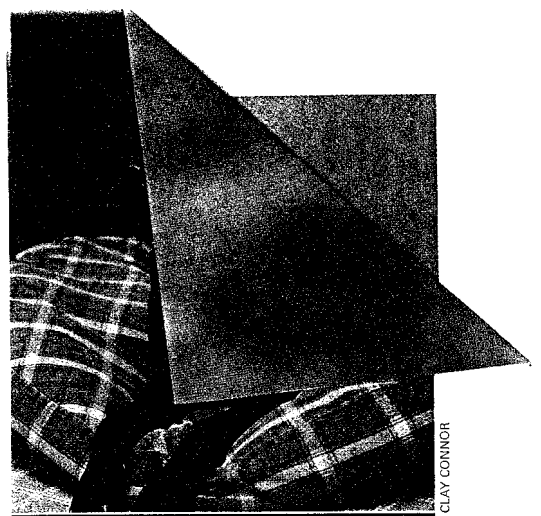
(Mike Stewart offers a 2 1/2 hour DVD entitled "The Wildrose Way: Retriever Training," which teaches training the natural way with low force. To order a copy, visit Stewart's website at www.uklabs.com.)

Justin Tackett:

"Customize Training for Each Dog"

"When training isn't going well, it's often the fault of the trainer instead of the dog," Justin Tackett explains. "Different dogs are motivated by different techniques. So a trainer has to figure out how to prompt his dog to provide its best effort. Being able to figure out exactly what a dog needs at a given time in its training is what makes a good trainer."

Tackett divides dogs into three categories (A, B, and C) and recom-



CLAY CONNOR

INSIDE OR OUT?

It's an age-old question: Can a hunting dog be a house dog? "It's not difficult to have a hunting dog as a family member, but it is difficult to keep a hunting dog as a pet," says professional trainer Mike Stewart.

"There's a big difference between the two," he says. "A hunting dog that's a member of the family has boundaries and limitations, while a pet usually has no boundaries. A hunting dog in the house must still submit to his master's control. He must recognize his boundaries in terms of where he can go and what behavior he's allowed to exhibit. In other words, he still has to know his place in the pack and that he's subordinate to you, the pack leader."

"I maintain control using dog beds," Stewart continues. "I teach an in-house dog that his place is on the dog bed, not the couch. I also prohibit my dog from having free range of the house. He doesn't need to develop territories."

"A leader goes first, so I always go through a door before my dog does. I don't allow my dog to have any possessions, especially chew toys. I crate-train the dog for times when there are social functions and guests in the home. Leaders eat first. If I give tidbits, I do so only after I've eaten."

"You must be as consistent with the dog in the home as you are in the field," Stewart advises. "Indoors, it's easy to relax control and overlook commands that aren't enforced. But if you do this, you can create obedience problems that may carry outside."

mends a different training routine for each group.

"Category A dogs will bust through a brick wall to complete a retrieve," he explains. "They are high-strung and high-powered, and because of their temperament, they are tough to deal with. They are not team players. They are not the dog that everybody wants. It takes a special trainer and a lot of attention and energy to keep these dogs under control.

"Category B dogs are the ones we're all after," Tackett continues. "They want to please their masters. They have good desire and a big heart. They're easy to work with and are team players. A category B dog is also the easiest to train, although we can create problems figuring how to motivate the dog to do what we want."

Tackett says category C dogs are the most difficult to train. "These are the dogs most amateurs have, and none of the training books were written for them," he explains. "These dogs have low to average desire to retrieve. They are usually very sensitive. Put too much pressure on a category C dog, and he'll probably fold up. He can't function under pressure.

"So the first step is to decide which category your dog fits in and then design a training regimen that fits his personality," Tackett advises. "You must get a category A dog under control at an early age. The first step is to make him steady. Then you must train the dog with extreme consistency and regularity. Everything must be in black and white—no mixed signals. For instance, I don't like throwing fun bumpers, which allows the dog to break. If you do this, an A dog will break next time and the next, and you've suddenly undone all the good things you've trained into him.

"Also, don't ask an A dog to do something unless you're in a position to enforce your command, and know that you must reinforce control and dominance constantly. You can't let an A dog get away with anything. With this type of dog, you have to walk a narrow line."

With a category B dog, the training



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routine differs. "Since these dogs are fast, willing learners, you want to continually push them and teach them all you can as quickly as possible. When a dog masters one concept, move right to the next step. Remember, these dogs want to please you, so give them the opportunity to do so. A dog learns most of what he's ever going to learn between 6 and 18 months of age, so teach him everything you can during this critical learning period."

Tackett advises that category C dogs—those with low desire to retrieve or great sensitivity to training pressure—must be handled with kid gloves. "You train these dogs with positive reinforcement," he says. "Move slowly, and make sure a concept is fully mastered before going on or imposing any discipline, which should be light. It is possible to turn a C dog into a B dog, but this takes a lot of time and patience on the trainer's part.

"A category C dog is 180 degrees different from a category A dog," Tackett continues. "You have to make the former love to play the game. And you must be careful doing this. If he ever gets off in the wrong direction, it's hard to get him back.

"With some dogs, you can't hurt their feelings, but with others, you can hurt their feelings very easily. And if you do, they will give up on you. The trainer must be astute enough to tell one type of dog from the other.

"The more time you spend working with retrievers, the better you'll become at reading their personalities and knowing how to develop a dog to his full potential," Tackett says. "So really, there's more psychology involved than anything else. Analyzing a dog is the thorny part. Once you get a good read on him, you've got a road map for where to take him." ☞

MORE TIPS FROM TACKETT

Justin Tackett advises trainers not only to know their retriever's personality type but also to remember these points when customizing a training regimen:

- Trainers should not underestimate their dog's intelligence. Most dogs are far more intelligent than many trainers realize.
- A dog is rarely as good or as bad as an amateur trainer thinks it is.
- A trainer must be consistent in his expectations of his dog. This consistency provides a basis for measuring the dog's improvement and for deciding when to move to the next level.
- Most correction or pressure on a dog should be verbal rather than physical. A verbal reprimand can be just as effective as a physical correction when issued with the right timing and tone of voice.
- It's impossible to train a dog to exceed its potential.