

A Quick(ish) Guide to Gundog Training Games

Even if you don't intend to do formal gundog training, your dog will have fun learning to do many of the skills involved. Any breed of dog can learn these skills, but those from the gundog group will have greater motivation to do it as it's in their genes! Use lots of rewards when teaching your dog – initially this might be food, or the opportunity to play, but the more they enjoy retrieving, the work (along with verbal praise) becomes the reward.

As with any training, you need to break behaviours down into **small steps** and train these first. Once these smaller actions are happening consistently and on cue, they can be added to other actions until a full **sequence of behaviours** can be formed. Start the training indoors to keep distractions to a minimum, then train in the garden, then a park, and finally in the 'field'. When moving to each new area, you should re-start the training from the beginning, to set your dog up for success. This 'refresher' training will take less time at each new location.

It's important to train your dog in lots of different places, and in different weather conditions, so they learn to **generalise** the behaviours (and respond correctly wherever you are). During the training process, gradually increase: **distance, duration and distractions**.

It's a good idea to keep a **training log** so you know what you've worked on, and what your goals will be for the next session.

Basic Obedience

Sit - stay

Your dog not only needs to sit on command, they need to be able to stay sitting, even when there are multiple distractions. Practise lots by moving round your dog, throwing toys near them, leaving food temptations close by, and training near other dogs or people. Don't forget to reward them when they get it right. Be inventive, and help them learn that staying put is a really great thing to do!

Attention!

Your dog's name should mean 'pay attention to me'. It means that they look at you, and wait attentively for the cue you are about to give. It's best if they look at you, rather than just listen, because you may need to give them a directional control using body language. Name recognition is even more important when you're working with more than one dog. Sometimes trainers will use a distinctive pattern of whistle blasts rather than shouting their dog's name.

Recall

A confident call from you, or several blasts of the whistle, should result in a quick response from your dog, and a direct return. The best recalls are speedy and without hesitation, whatever the distractions. It takes a long time to build a reliable recall, so don't rush this aspect of the training.

Heel

Your dog (whether on or off lead) should walk at your side, and sit automatically (by your side) when you stop.

Leave

The 'leave it' cue has multiple uses, and means 'leave that object/ area/ dog/ person alone'. It will help to stop your dog chasing the wrong thing, or picking the wrong thing up.

Hold/ take it

A specific 'hold' cue is useful during training, but once they've learnt to fetch, this part should happen automatically.

Drop

When you say 'drop' your dog should open their mouth, and let go of whatever they'd been holding (preferably into your hands).

Advanced Gundog Obedience

Front

Your dog should sit in front of you, facing you. This is the position they will be in after a recall, or after a retrieve.

Finish

Your dog should sit by your side, facing the same direction as you. To get them into this position, you can teach them to either walk behind you, or quickly 'flip' into position (with their hindquarters moving to the side and then backwards).

Stop

One single blast of the whistle should mean 'stop immediately, sit, and look towards me'. This then allows you to give them the next command. If they are closer to you, you can simply shout 'stop!'.

Fetch

Possible verbal cues could be 'fetch' or 'get it', but the cue mean 'go to the indicated object, pick it up, hold onto it, and return to me'. Dummies or toys should be carried gently but securely, without mouthing. Once you ask your dog to fetch a specific item, they must only go to that one, and not be distracted by anything else either on the way there, or the way back.

Mark

This cue requires your dog to look out into the field in order to watch where the dummy/ toy falls. Say the cue just before throwing the object out.

Directional control

When training your dog which object to retrieve, you need a way to indicate which direction they should go in (called 'casting'). Direction is indicated with

clear arm and body movements. The arm you use will indicate whether they should move left or right. If you gesture towards/ past them, it means 'go away from me'. You can also use verbal cues e.g. 'back', 'right over' and 'left over'.

Go out

This cue requires your dog to start running in a straight line away from you until you give further instructions. Target training is useful for the early stages of training as you can get your dog to run out to a specific object (e.g. a cone) and then ask them to turn around and face you.

Steadiness

Steadiness is the ability to work in all weathers and environmental conditions without getting distracted, while maintaining a high willingness to work. This naturally develops over time, and with lots of practice. Young and inexperienced dogs will also learn from older, steady dogs.

Examples of things to work on include: increased distance; different surfaces; distractions; weather conditions; handler out of sight; finding hidden objects by scent (blind retrieves); directional changes; stopping your dog and allowing other dogs to retrieve; different objects to retrieve; jumping obstacles; retrieve from water; and getting used to the sound of guns (very important if they are going on a shoot or taking part in field trials).

Once your dog knows all the basics, you can allow them more independence to 'hunt'. You will set them off on their retrieve, and they need to quarter the ground (moving back and forth) searching for an object, and once they've found it, need to return directly to you.

Using multiple objects

Double Retrieves

Throw the first object, move your dog, then throw the second object. Do it in a straight line at first (see 1 below), and later on at an angle (see 2). Ask your dog to retrieve the *second* one you threw (the 'go bird'). Once they've handed you the object, set them up so they're facing the first one (the 'memory bird'), then send them to retrieve that. You can progress to using up to 4.

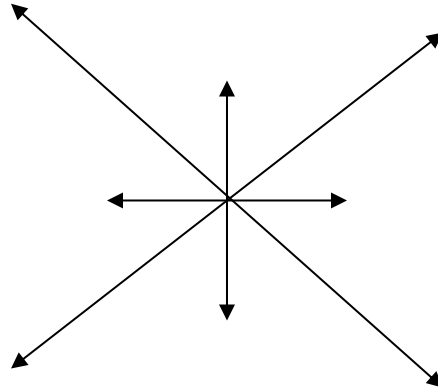
1)
Memory bird ----- Dog/ handler ----- Go bird

2)
Memory bird ----- Dog/ handler

Go bird

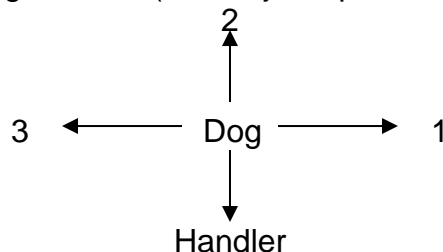
Blind retrieves: lining

Stand in the centre with your dog, and send them down each line to retrieve the objects you have thrown out. They should return to you after each pick up. Vary the distance. You could use orange ones too (dogs cannot see orange very well against grass, so have to use their nose to find it). Gradually increase the number of objects used.



Casting

Using directional cues (left, right, and back) you can get your dog to retrieve specific objects in the order you decide. This can be done standing still at first, and then can be done while walking round the training area. This pattern can also be used for retrieving in water (with objects placed on the edges at first).

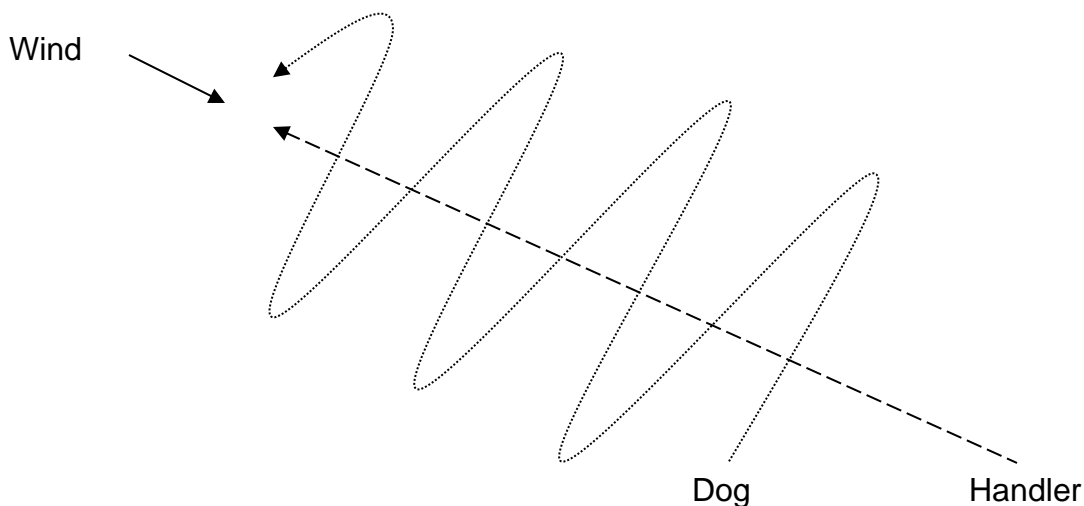


Searching exercises

Quartering involves dogs working back and forth across the ground ahead of the handler in order to find the required objects. They need to cover the ground efficiently and effectively, and remain responsive to directional cues (or a stop cue, or a recall cue). You can also teach them a specific cue to 'change direction', so each time you feel they are running too far one way, you give the

cue, and they move the other way. You may need to change direction too, until they get the idea. Eventually your dog will do this behaviour without needing to be told.

Later in the training you will be able to walk in a straight line down the centre of the area to be searched, while your dog runs back and forth searching for the object (see below).



Summary

Gundog games are a great way to have fun with your dog, and it helps to give structure to their exercise (both mental and physical). It also helps with their ability to listen to commands, and gives them an outlet for their natural drives.