

Following Sassy...5 months

This is the second article in a series following Sassafra through her first season of training. At five months Sassy's training has covered housebreaking, manners, socialization, introduction to birds, and fun retrieves. I am very pleased with her progress-she is quite simply a joy to be around. Even though I allow Sassy to play with her mother, Breezy, and also put her out in the kennel during the day with the other young dogs so she has company, I take her out by herself for plenty of one-on-one time.

Our training time is never about how I can rev her up and wear her out, or allow her to run around out of control, because that occurs on her own time when she plays with other dogs. Instead, these sessions are only 15 to 20 minutes at a time and involve motivational obedience and gentling exercises. I have not leashed her for any training yet, but rather convince her to comply with my commands for a reward.

For example, every single time she enters or leaves my front door, she must first sit and look at me until I release her by using her name and pointing out the door. She is motivated to sit first because going out either means potty or playtime. Coming back inside wasn't as easy however, so sometimes I rewarded her with a treat or her dinner, and through repetition and fun playtime inside, she was soon motivated to be in the house too. It especially helped to do this exercise with Breezy, because Sassy likes to follow her. I usually have them sit and wait together and have even begun making them kennel one at a time so each must sit and watch the other. This will be so beneficial later when I work on steadying Sassy with bumpers, as she will already have conditioning to the sit, stay, and honor.

Our new drills over the past month have included more free time in the house and access to more rooms when I am home. She is fully house broken and hasn't chewed a throw rug or tenderized a shoe in over a month! Although she is still very likely to get into trouble at this age, I can now spend time on the computer or watch TV and just check up on her every now and then. She is usually just playing with Breezy.

I continue to fuss with her head, teaching her to hold still for me while I clean her eyes every morning and check to progress of her adult teeth coming in. She tries to pull away and struggle, but she is becoming more accustomed to this drill and is learning to be more patient and trusting. Again, in another two weeks or so when I force break her to fetch and hold, it should be no problem for her to accept the bumper.

The only time I show her a bumper now is during our short training sessions. She has grown to love retrieving and will automatically sit when I hold one in front of her. Our drill is simple; I won't throw the bumper until she is sitting first. When she sits, I cue her to "Mark!" (Which means looks out for a flying object) and then I throw the bumper as far as I can in a field of six to eight inch tall grass. Sassy has become quite a marker, and I can even launch the retriever about 70 yards, and she will run to the area of the fall, put her nose to the ground, and quarter beautifully until she finds it.

When she picks up the bumper, I shrill me whistle for her to come to me as I step backwards and crouch down. She brings it back to my hand about 75 percent of the time, while the other 25 percent she may parade it around to play or come almost to me and then lay down to chew on the bumper. If I walk away from her whistling and calling, she usually picks it up and brings it to me. I will then reward her with another retrieve. I repeat this drill only about four to six times, quitting on a nice retrieve and return to hand. Even though she is very eager for more, this really makes her appreciate the bumper as a fun game. Each week I may add a couple more retrieves as she matures and her desires grow even stronger.

I also increase the difficulty level with water retrieves or by tossing the bumper about twenty feet out into some tall grass. This makes her works harder, but it also challenges her, and she loves the work. Again, I always incorporate obedience into these drills with verbal commands ("sit" or "come") and with whistle commands (one whistle= sit, shrill= come).

At least two or three times a week I bring Sassy out to the quail recall pen along with another dog. The other dog is steady to the flush and shot, so that it obediently sits when the quail flushes. I allow Sassy to follow the other dog and flush the birds; however, the other dog must sit and honor while I allow Sassy to chase the birds. I will also shoot my starter pistol so that she becomes conditioned to the shot and associates it with birds. The reason I let her chase is that I want her to have a bold bird flush, and I don't mind her chasing them because she has not caught one yet, and she thinks this game is a world of fun. She learns to use her nose and pursue the birds aggressively without any control or restraint yet. That will come later!

I have included some pigeon drills into her training, putting pigeons in launchers out in an open field. A training partner and I will walk through the field with her, calling her back and forth between us with a two whistle blast command, and as she approaches the birds, we launch them about 10 feet in front of her nose, shoot the starter pistol, and allow her to have a field day chasing.

What have all these lessons accomplished? Well, now I have a five month old puppy that is gentle and loving with people, very fun to be with, bonded to me, well-mannered in the house, responsive to both voice and whistle commands, well-socialized with other dogs, overjoyed to retrieve bumpers, and crazy about birds. She has champion blood lines with enough field trial juice to cause any puppy to be raving, obnoxious streak of lightning, but because she has been raised with a “game plan,” she is polite, kind, and respectful. Good luck with your puppy training and keep it fun and exciting!