

Letting go of the toy

How to get your dog to actually let go of the toy for fetch games.

By September Morn

Q. Our Border Collie-Australian Shepherd mix is very high energy, as you'd expect from his ancestry. My biggest problem is getting him to release the toy when we play. I would really love to fix this problem! Can you help?

A. Some people play using several balls or retrieving dummies, and don't bother to teach their dogs to release on cue. They simply throw another item as soon as the dog comes back with the previous one. This works if the dog drops the item when he goes after the next. But if he carries his item with him when he runs after the new one, you'll have to do a lot of walking to play this game.

One way to teach a dog to release an object is offer to trade something the dog values for it. A dog who loves food will probably be interested in swapping "his" object for "your" tasty treat. A dog who prefers toys or balls might trade his for another toy. You know your dog best, so you probably know what he'd value highly enough to trade for.

Make the swap, then praise and reward by throwing the fetch item. This way he'll learn that he gets to chase and fetch it again when he gives "his" item to you. He'll realize he's a winner both ways, and will soon enjoy playing fetch better than keep-away.

Pair a cue word or phrase (like "give" or "thank you") with the act of swapping, and before long your dog will know what that word means. You'll be able to say the cue, he'll give you the ball, and you'll reward him by throwing it again.

If his current keep-away game involves staying out of your reach, you can fix that with the magazine-and-chair method. With this, you can be comfortable while your dog figures out that the only way to get you involved in the game is to make it easy for you. Throw the fetch toy, then sit down, relax, and read your magazine. Have one of your hands open, palm up, on or beside your leg, ready to receive the toy if your dog "happens" to put it there. Don't pay any obvious attention to him, and definitely do not reach for the toy if he comes near with it. To make this work, you must appear unconcerned with results.

Your dog will try his familiar tease game, but you "won't even notice" He'll come closer and closer, hoping you'll try helplessly to grab the item from him. But you won't. You'll be reading your magazine. It's OK to demonstrate once or twice that your hand is in position and ready to receive, but don't reach toward him.

Just sit there reading until you feel the toy touch your hand. Some dogs will place it directly in your hand, but most miss the hand at first. If your dog either places the item in your palm or drops it at your feet and steps back, throw it for him. Then go back to your magazine.

He'll soon figure out that if he wants you to throw the toy, he'll have to "wake you up" by putting it right in your lazy ol' hand.