One important difference between training retrievers the American way and training the British way is that in the U.K., obedience and steadiness are stressed from the outset. To achieve steadiness, we want to stress to the young dog that just because something falls from the sky (a training dummy at first; later a duck or pheasant or other bird), it doesn’t necessarily follow that the dog will leave the handler’s side. In fact, ideally, even in the face of scores of shots being fired — as is often the case in the U.K. — and an equal number of birds falling from the sky, the dog will be alert, but steady, and confidently so.

How to achieve such steadiness?
As we’ve already seen, when we introduced our young Lab to retrieving, we didn’t send him every time we threw a dummy. Now, as we advance the training of our young dog, we want to continually reinforce steadiness with drills designed specifically to do just that.

The British perspective
Steadiness and quietness are the two primary components of civility in retrievers — and two of the most important qualities of shooting dogs used in the U.K. Recognizing this, British retriever trainers constantly reinforce these traits in their dogs.
The young retriever remains motionless as the handler begins to throw dummies in a circle around the dog. Initially, the dummies land at a reasonable distance from the retriever, 15 paces or so. As they do, the handler reinforces steadiness by commanding, softly, “Stay.” Soon, a duck call and blank pistol will be used as well in this exercise. But in these introductory lessons, the handler will only throw the dummies.

The dog is never allowed to retrieve these dummies. Instead, the handler picks them up, one by one. Then the dog is briefly praised and the exercise is repeated. In time, the dummies will be thrown closer to the dog, and even by skipped by the dog as hard as the handler can throw. Overall goal: To teach a dog to be steady, and comfortably so, even in the face of great temptation.
With this exercise, we are advancing the previously discussed notion of finesse training — or the introduction of certain exercises designed to ensure that skills already learned by the dog are not eroded by skills more recently taught him.

Example: The comparatively intensive retrieving our young dog is now doing will erode the early steadiness he learned if that steadiness isn’t reinforced by drills designed specifically for that purpose.

By the third day of this steadiness exercise, the dog might naturally lie down, knowing he will not be asked to retrieve. This is the first sign of capitulation to this task and the handler should encourage it by alternately asking the dog to sit and lie down while dummies are thrown.

Gradually as well, the trainer should add more pressure to the dog in this exercise, beginning by clapping his hands and saying loudly, “Hey! Hey!” after throwing each dummy.

The dog might move at this point. If he does, he should be returned to the spot he was sitting. Then the exercise should be repeated, again with clapping and shouting.

Advanced phases of this exercise include:

• The addition of a duck call blown either by the handler or an assistant while dummies are thrown.

• The firing of a blank pistol while dummies are thrown (assuming the young dog has been properly introduced to gunfire).

• Moving this exercise in all of its variations to different locations, including the shoreline of a lake or river, where dummies are thrown into the water while the dog is expected to remain steady. (The dummies are picked up by an older dog or by the handler using a canoe or boat.)

• The addition of another dog (one that is older and already steady) sitting 15 paces or so from the younger dog.
I think I am beginning to understand the notions of concurrent training and finesse training. But I must say that retriever training considered this way is more complex than I thought it would be.

Complex is one word that can describe the process of training a dog or other animal. Interesting is another. Challenging is perhaps the most accurate.

Whichever it is, you’re correct: To take a dog to a fairly high level of training, the trainer has to think on a number of different levels. As importantly, the trainer must prepare a dog for advanced training by properly training the fundamentals.

The steadiness drill in this lesson proves the point. Recognizing that the retriever training we began in Lesson 22 necessarily plays to our dog’s instincts while simultaneously playing against our early steadiness training, we want to make sure, as we move ahead, that we do not lose our dog’s steadiness while gaining important new retrieving skills.

This isn’t difficult, particularly with a dog that is naturally predisposed to being steady and quiet. But it is a concept that is novel to the American way of training — and a concept that otherwise wouldn’t get much attention by someone intent on watching his dog retrieve time and again — only to find that during hunting season, the dog bolts to make a retrieve the moment a shotgun is fired.

Simple in concept, the steadiness drill nevertheless is critical in application, as the trainer begins first by simply sitting the dog and throwing dummies around him. In time, the trainer claps his hands and yells during and after throwing the dummies.

Also, the dummies are thrown closer and closer to the dog, and the addition of a duck call and a blank pistol move this simulation closer to the real thing that hunters see every day in the field.

This drill can and should grow on a parallel track with retrieving exercises. Example: You and a buddy take your dogs to a training field, where each of you gathers your dogs at heel. One of you has a shotgun. The other has the dummies and a blank pistol. While the one with the shotgun pretends (without shooting) to target dummies being thrown over him and his dog, the thrower, with his dog at heel, tosses the dummies and shoots a blank pistol. Then you switch positions, never letting either dog retrieve the dummies. Do this and you are undertaking the serious work of preparing a dog to be steady in a duck, goose or dove blind.