

Dog Trainer in Lincoln County Caught on Video: Is it Training or Abuse?

By Nicholas Phillips, RiverFront Times, Nov 11, 2011



- Trainer Ed Nelson stands accused of abusing this yellow lab

Trainer Ed Nelson of Lincoln County openly admits it: Teaching hunting dogs how to fetch ducks and geese safely and effectively requires the use of force — at least sometimes.

The legal question is this: Where's the line between "force training" and abuse?

The Lincoln County Sheriff believes Nelson crossed that line on July 28, 2010. That was the day that someone secretly shot a video of him whipping an unruly pup at Dakota Labradors — his training facility in Old Monroe.

On May 2, 2011, Nelson was charged with misdemeanor animal abuse, punishable by one year in prison and/or a \$1,000 fine. This week, he told Daily RFT that he wants to defend himself in front of a jury.

"I'm not an animal abuser," he insisted. "I didn't do anything wrong."

Training a dog to retrieve waterfowl is not a trivial undertaking. A rambunctious canine that doesn't follow instructions runs the risk of jumping in front of a firing shotgun (and also, might scare the birds away). So sportsmen drop thousands of dollars to have their dogs trained to obey specific commands.



Nelson, a retired McDonnell Douglas employee, says he's been training dogs for 15 to 20 years. During that time, he's worked with some 500 animals and helped them earn more than 200 "titles" (distinctions given to dogs that do well in formal field trials).

"My clients are doctors, lawyers, businessmen," Nelson says. He's even trained dogs for William K. "Billy" Busch of the Busch brewing dynasty. [Disclosure: Nelson has also trained dogs for certain members of this reporter's family].

But by July 2010, Nelson says, he'd been having problems with one of his neighbors. He believes it was she who clandestinely filmed him from behind a fence.

On the day in question, Nelson was training a yellow lab named Bo using the "force fetch" method. The basic idea of force fetch is that you apply discomfort to a dog until it does what you want.



It's simple conditioning: The dog figures out that the way to escape the discomfort (be it from a shock collar, or pinch on the ear) is to accomplish the task at hand.

There's disagreement among trainers over how much force should be used, and how much reward should follow. Checkout different viewpoints here, here, here and here.

But it's clear from the video that the yellow lab was a tough case, and Nelson does not spare the rod.

"That dog was wild as the wind," Nelson says. "I told [the owner], 'We may have to use drastic measures to turn this dog around.'" In the video, Nelson and an assistant used both a whip and shock collar on Bo.

A sheriff's deputy who saw the video testified later in court records:

The shocking was not consistent with typical use of a shock collar for training. The pain level of the dog seemed to be excessive and the animal can be heard yelping and cowering down clearly in fear. [Nelson] strikes the dog....in what is in my opinion an excessive and brutal manner. The video is what I would describe as shocking in its....lack of compassion toward the animal in what could not be interpreted as training.

Whoever shot the video sent it to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), who in turn sent it the Lincoln County Sheriff's office.

A deputy interviewed Nelson on April 28, then described the conversation in a probable cause statement. Here's an excerpt:

Nelson denied ever striking a dog with force. Nelson stated he only would use the "heel training stick" (which is about 36 inches in length, made of braided leather, is flexible and would accurately be described as a whip) to touch the front or back of the dog for heel training. Nelson insisted he never has struck a dog and never would. I then showed Nelson the video of him striking the dog....

When seeing himself strike the animal he stated the dog was a very difficult dog and he would not even try to train a difficult dog like that again....

Nelson stated this incident.....was the only time he ever hit a dog with a heel stick

"That dog is totally turned around," Nelson told us earlier this week. "He's a great hunting dog." He says the owner, Doug Beasley of Leavenworth, Kansas, was notified of the incident on the day it occurred. Beasley did not immediately respond to a phone call from Daily RFT.

Nelson maintains that he grows attached to the canines he trains.

"I pour my heart and soul into these guys," Nelson says.

(As we reported in our recent feature "Fowl Play," celebrity hunter Jeff Foiles accidentally shot a dog in the winter of 2007-2008. Nelson had trained that particular dog. When Nelson heard the bad news, he says, he "cried like a baby").

Nelson says that, since the abuse charge was filed, his license has been revoked by the Missouri Department of Agriculture.

His case is 11L6-CR00527 - State of Missouri v. Earl E. Nelson