

Dog Training – The Basic Steps!

Part XX

In last month's article I included four drawings of group obedience classes in action. I expect readers noticed immediately the problems they have either seen or even experienced first hand themselves in a class as it revolves in an anti-clockwise direction. Let's have another look at that figure 1.

Most of the dogs are pulling into the centre mainly because the handlers are walking into them. There are handlers who are not keeping their eyes on their dogs. One dog is lagging whilst another has completely broken away from his handler to pick a fight with the dog behind. Then look at the poor instructor standing in the centre of the circle scratching his head in a real dilemma as to what he should do next. "Surely", he says to himself, "there must be an easier way to conduct a class than this." Yes there certainly is.

I have watched many classes conducted in this way and I truly feel quite concerned for the handlers, dogs and the instructor. I knew that I would never be able to take a photo of so many faults happening in one split second. So that is why I have shown the many faults in one picture using line drawings. By contrast examine figures 2, 3 and 4 again in last month's magazine.

Counter marching

I use this term to describe how a class can be split into two teams to pass through each other in heelwork. This exercise should only be introduced when the instructor considers that the handlers have adequate control over their dogs. It is quite easy to set this up. Let's imagine there are 10 handlers with dogs sitting in line abreast of each other. The instructor should ask them to call out their numbers from the right: "One, two, three.....until the last handler calls out: 10" Then, with even numbers remaining still, odd numbers are given the order to "forward." Having walked about 10 metres, the order is given to right-about turn and halt. Remembering their numbers and gaps they were in, both teams are given the order, "forward" and as they approach they pass through each other.

Naturally, many of the dogs will be distracted to others in the approaching team, but it is up to every handler to watch intently and prevent possible distractions with an effective voice. So before the two teams pass through each other, it is the duty of the instructor to prepare the handlers. For example, as each dog is about to pass through, each handler should use a quiet and warning tone of voice like, "heel, leave it alone, heel, leave it", then having passed through successfully the dogs should be praised immediately.

The main purpose of this exercise is for each handler to get even more respect and attention from his or her dog. It also teaches handlers to concentrate even more by keeping in straight lines and abreast of each other.

The teams, having passed through each other to proceed a short distance, can be given the right-about turn and pass through again. As progress is made it should not be necessary for the handlers to keep talking in a warning tone to their dogs: "leave it alone", but they should praise their dogs as soon as they have passed through successfully without being distracted. That is very important to assure each dog it has done well.

In further lessons of counter marching other exercises can be introduced. Just as the two teams are about to pass through each other the dogs can be told to "sit" then to "stay" whilst the handlers step around in front of their dogs to turn to face them. The same can be done with the drop and

stand exercises. To bring the whole class to face the same way, even numbers can be given the order to, “forward” then “right-about turn” and “sit” when they have come into line with the odd numbers. So you see how easy it is. Counter marching can always be included in demonstrations obedience dog clubs may be required to give. When done well it looks most impressive and audiences love to see it.

It is not always possible for an instructor to see how every dog responds, when he or she has given the order, “class, forward.” To overcome this difficulty the instructor can occasionally ask the handlers, who are standing abreast of each other, to lead off one after the other. So when the first handler at the end of the line has walked forward three paces, then the second in line should do likewise, and so on with the rest of the class. They will then be walking in a diagonal formation. Having walked for a certain distance, the first handler can come to a halt with his or her dog in the sit position. The rest of the class do likewise to form, once again, a straight line abreast of each other. This method not only enables the instructor to watch how each handler and dog starts the heelwork, but also how each handler performs the “sit.” It also gives a little time for the instructor to give any necessary individual tuition as handlers, one after the other, prepare to sit their dogs. They will all be different. The instructor should try to memorise handlers’ faults. So as they prepare to sit their dogs, the instructor may well have to say for example, “keep your feet straight, don’t step into your dog, say ‘sit’ once and guide its behind down and forwards, don’t use the dog’s name – just say ‘sit’, hold the clip part of the leash vertically above the dog’s head, praise immediately, ‘Good dog’, gently stroke the dog on the side of its face, — well done everybody. That’s very good work.”

Surprisingly, when a class has been working for several weeks, some clever dogs anticipate the order given by the class instructor, “class forward” and consequently step forward before their respective handlers have even given the command, “heel.” This is never seen in the early weeks of training. It only happens when they’ve been at the work for some time. This fault is easily remedied. First of all the instructor should tell the class that it has been noticed that some dogs are anticipating. So, when the order is given, “class forward” everyone should keep quite still and if any of the dogs get up to move off, they should be made to sit again. An instructor will only need to do this a few times and the dogs will soon realise that they have to wait for the command “heel” from their respective handlers.

A similar thing can happen with the recall, particularly when a recall is about to be carried out where the dog has been told to stay in the sit position, as required in a novice trial. Once again, this is quite easy to remedy. The instructor should say to the handler before hand, “don’t call your dog until after the third time I have said, ‘call your dog’. If your dog should attempt to move on the first or second order, take it back to the same spot where you had told it to stay and start again.”

Several years ago a young man attended my school with his female German Shepherd dog. After several weeks she was doing brilliant recalls whilst free running in the park. One day, when she was about 50 metres away, I asked him to call her which he did immediately. I noticed that in a split second she responded before he said, “come.” The handler had not noticed this. So I told him quietly not to say a word nor create any body movement the next time I said, “call your dog.” I waited until she was a long way away and was engrossed in some nice smell with her back to him. Then I said, “call your dog’. She responded instantly. It was a fast recall with a perfect straight sit in front as she gazed up at him. He was absolutely amazed that his dog would perform such a fantastic recall without any command or signal from him. Clever dogs — those German Shepherds! More next month folks, continue to enjoy your training.

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