

Dog Training – The Basic Steps

Part XXIII

Last month I wrote quite a bit on one of the most important principles in dog training — the straight line concept. I explained how it is used in heelwork, recalls, retrieves, scent discrimination, seek forward and seek back. Let's now examine how it is used in other obedience exercises and more advanced work.

The stays

When training your dog to stay in the sit position, which is an extension of the sit in heelwork, as soon as the 'stay' command is given you should step around to face your dog. This keeps him looking at you and in the same straight line on which he had been walking at heel. Having returned and praised your dog, heel it forward in the same straight line.

You should do exactly the same with the drop stay and later the stand stay position. After so much experience, dogs get to know what the next part of an exercise is likely to be. When these three stays have been firmly instilled in your dog's mind, i.e. to keep straight without turning or flopping over to one side or the other, you can then start moving around in front of your dog and they should remain with their bodies facing in the same straight line. Don't hurry into it. Do it very gradually. When returning to your dog, return by the same way you left it. Don't return by walking around the back of your dog until you know it is quite stable, otherwise it is likely to twist around and get up.

Basic training for a guide dog

It may interest many to know that the first exercise a guide dog learns is to lead out slightly ahead of the trainer and walk in a long straight line, crossing over side roads without stopping at the down kerbs. After a few days it is taught to stop in the stand position at a few down kerbs, where it is praised gently then commanded to go forward again to cross the side street and continue. As the days go by the guide dog is trained to stop at more and more down kerbs. Finally, the dog learns to stop at every down kerb automatically and at flights of steps too.

Then the training becomes more demanding as the guide dog has to negotiate obstacles stretched partly across the footpath and sometimes the entire width of the path. In doing this the dog is ushered around the obstacle by the trainer then has to return to the imaginary straight line along the footpath. It also learns to allow for the width and height of the trainer and to avoid deep holes.

The work becomes even more demanding when the dog has to learn to disobey the command 'forward' to cross a road when traffic is approaching. After it has driven by the guide dog is encouraged to proceed still in the same straight line. It is also trained to stop approximately in the middle of the road if traffic approaches on the far side. When clear, the dog is encouraged to proceed to the up kerb and continue still in the same straight line.

Tracking

Initially, when teaching a dog to track, the person laying the track should walk in a long straight line down wind. This makes it easy for any dog during the early stages of

tracking. Visible stakes should be inserted at intervals along the track. They are mainly set to indicate to the handler the direction and length of the track as he follows his harnessed dog on a suitable length of tracking line. When the dog becomes proficient at this, two 45 degree angles in the track laid can be included, one to the right and several metres on one to the left. Two small articles can also be dropped on the track to create more interest for the dog. When found the dog should be encouraged to track on without delay to maintain continuity of the track in the dog's mind.

The high jump

When teaching a dog to jump over the base board of a high jump, you should take it over on the leash, proceed a little further, turn around and return over the jump. Once again, this is all conducted on the same imaginary straight line which passes through the centre of the base board. Later, retrieving a dumb-bell over the jump can be introduced. In some demonstrations various jumps have been set up in a straight line for the dog to negotiate before it retrieves a placed dumb-bell and return over all the jumps to present the object to the handler. It makes quite an impressive exercise and audiences love it.

So, there are a few more examples of how the straight line concept is used in dog training in order to make it very simple for the dog. Now in contrast to that simplicity, let me tell you of a somewhat sad story which I experienced a few months ago. I was assessing some handlers and their dogs for the Pets as Therapy program. These volunteers are doing a marvellous job in taking their dogs into nursing homes, hospitals and rehabilitation centres in which they give great comfort to the residents and patients. I asked three volunteers to walk their dogs down a wide footpath in a shopping area and to sit their dogs at heel when they reached the next down kerb. Two of them did this very well, but the third handler just waved her right hand up and down several times, pretending to have a piece of food in her hand. After a while the dog swung around and sat in the road facing the handler on a very long leash and in danger of having its tail run over by a passing vehicle. Out of interest, I asked the handler if she was satisfied with the result, to which she boldly replied, 'yes'. Later, during the walk I asked her if she would like me to show her how to get her dog to sit immediately, straight and close to my left side. She willingly handed me the leash and I showed her. The dog worked beautifully and as I praised it calmly, I asked her if she could see how easy it was compared with what she had been attempting to do. I was quite amazed when she said that she was quite happy with the results she eventually got, and that she was not going in for obedience trials. I replied that I was certainly not expecting her to do so, but the way I showed her how to use her eyes, voice, hands and leash were very simple requirements in training her dog in very basic obedience. The handler openly admitted that she had used food in training her dog to sit. It is, therefore, quite easy to see how her method had no foundation like the straight line concept. The only thing the dog wanted to do was to turn around hoping to get a food treat regardless of where it sat.

In summarising all these principles you should always establish a good foundation in training your dog, and then gradually build upon it with patience, care, understanding and consistency. After that it is just a case of maintaining the high standard with a watchful eye. Dogs are not infallible. Sometimes they might do the wrong thing and it's necessary to correct them and show them again. Sometimes they are not sure and therefore they need assurance and encouragement from us.

At times some outside forces unfortunately disturb them, therefore we must be ready to reassure them and build up their confidence again. We also have to be considerate, especially when our dogs get much older and are not physically capable of doing things they enjoyed doing in their younger years.

Next month I have decided to start a series of articles on canine temperament, which I feel will be of great interest to breeders, those who show in conformation, work in obedience trials, instruct in dog clubs and dog owners generally. Naturally, I will include more training advice where appropriate so that handlers can see how they should deal with problems according to the various temperaments their dogs have. Enjoy your dogs and everything you do with them. Cheers for now.