

Dog Training — the Basic Steps

Part I

When dog owners arrive at my training school for the first time, much is noted as I watch them pull up and get their dogs out of their vehicles. All too often I see the dog jumping around in the car, sometimes barking and crying in excitement. Then the dog forces its way out of the car as the door is opened, nearly knocking or pulling the owner over! The dog then pulls extremely hard on the leash as it tries to charge up the drive towards me, with the owner hanging on to the leash like grim death!

Obviously, the dog is out of control! Therefore, both owner and dog need to be trained properly. Good training is based on affection and respect the dog should have for its handler. Regular exercise should include socializing with people and other animals and ample opportunity in being conditioned to everything in the outside world.

Regardless of which breed the owner has chosen, both should receive some basic training in order to live in harmony with each other. That should be fundamental in responsible dog ownership. Some owners have aspirations in showing their dogs; some may wish to compete in obedience trials and other forms of competitive work, while most just want to have dogs as happy, well-behaved companions.

I always advise that, for most of the time on a daily walk, the dog should be allowed to walk freely on the leash. That means it can walk on the full length of a slack leash either in front, behind, left or right, in fact anywhere around the handler, but it must not pull, jump up at people, bark at or chase after anything. Most dogs pull on the leash. To correct this annoying problem, all the handler needs to say is, "Steady" in a quiet, slow voice, give a quick short jerk on the leash, stand still immediately, slacken the leash and give quiet, slow vocal praise as the dog stands still. After a few seconds, the dog should be quietly invited to proceed with the words, "On you go" and praised immediately it responds. I always explain to handlers the reason why it is so important to stop. Really, it is a case of knowing how the dog's mind works. If such corrections were made without the handler coming to a halt, the dog would think, "Well, I get these corrections every few yards, but we are still walking. So I might as well put up with these corrections, uncomfortable as they might be, and continue to pull all the way down the street!" But by halting every time, the dog's mind works the other way. It will think, "Oh, I've been checked! I've been stopped right here and I'm not allowed to go on until invited to do so!" Well, that is how the respect is gained and quite quickly in most cases. Everything is quite simple when you know how!

In giving that correction, particularly with large, strong, heavy dogs, always put one foot well forward to act as a prop to prevent being pulled over. At the same time make use of your body weight by leaning back on the other leg; don't rely too much on arm strength. Also, it's not what you say; it's how you say it that counts. Keep the situation calm with a quiet slow voice, not a quick and/or loud voice which will tend to excite the dog to go faster.

If your dog does quite the opposite to pulling, by stopping to have a sniffing session on a tree or anything else, don't stop, keep walking and say, in a slightly stern tone, "This way!" It might be necessary to give a little tug forward with the leash. Keeping your eyes on the dog, praise immediately it responds. The same two words, "This way" can be used whenever you want to change direction. Remember, your eyesight is your number one resource in dog training. Everything else depends upon it.

When fairly good results have been gained during free walking, in which the dog has shown a certain amount of respect, the first session of heelwork can be introduced. Set yourself up first with your feet straight in the centre of the footpath in a quiet street. Using your dog's name first, say, "Millie, heel" and bring her to heel parallel and close to your left foot. Sit her beside you. Hold the leash handle plus one other point further down the leash in your right hand, in the centre of your body below your waist line, so that it hangs in a gentle loop between you and your dog. The leash must not be tight. Keep the left hand off the leash. Using an inviting tone, say, "Millie, heel", then step forward. With your eyes on the dog's two front paws, as soon as the first paw moves forward in response to your command, praise sincerely, "Good, dog!" Walk at a slow to moderate pace to keep the dog calm.

It can be expected that when any dog starts its training, it will venture too far ahead, out of the true heel position. As soon as this happens, take hold of the clip part of the leash with the left hand, say, "Heel" in a quiet, corrective tone of voice, give a quick horizontal jerk backwards at the dog's shoulder height, let go of it and stand perfectly still. It doesn't matter if the dog stands or sits. After a few seconds, invite again, "Millie, heel", step forward, praise immediately her first paw steps forward. Keep your eyes on your dog, be consistent and accurate in your timing, keep in a straight line and make everything as simple as possible.

To sit the dog in heelwork, prepare whilst you are actually walking. Put the clip part of the leash also into your right hand and hold it at 90 degrees above the dog's head, then have your left hand, thumb facing left, poised above its hindquarters. Command, "Sit" and show the dog what you want by guiding its hindquarters downwards and forwards, bringing its hind feet up to its forepaws. The moment it responds, praise it quietly and slowly, "Good, dog!" At the same time you can slowly stroke her on the side of her face with your left hand. Release the clip part of the leash from your right hand. Keep praising for several more seconds and remain standing as high as you can, so that the dog looks up to you. Never use your dog's name when telling it to sit. Upon hearing its name it is likely to turn towards you and consequently sit across you.

At the end of the heelwork, which should have included about five or six sits in about the same number of minutes over a distance of eighty to ninety meters, dismiss your dog with a short phrase like, "Off you go and play", or, "Go free". As you say these words, put both your hands under the point of the dog's chin and wave them slowly forward in the direction it is looking. This will help the dog understand what you are permitting it to do.

After a few days you probably won't have to use your hands, the dog will respond to the phrase alone.

As soon as the dog has been dismissed, free walking is resumed. Whilst a dog is free walking I wouldn't mind if it sniffed at several things as we're walking, but I wouldn't let it stop and detain me while it had a sniffing session. When the dog is heeling it must not sniff at all. It must pay attention to its handler and the work it is doing. When a dog is heeling it uses mental energy to concentrate. Therefore, one shouldn't train for too long. Five to six minutes is long enough. Then give it several minutes free walking so that its mind can relax. My general advice to clients is that if they intend to take their dogs out once a day, put in two lots of heelwork with free walking before, in between and towards the end of the walk. If they plan to go out twice a day, one training session can be included in the first walk, the other in the second. That helps to spread the training out.

I know that many people who show dogs are very reluctant to teach their dogs to sit, for fear they might do just that when they are required to stand in the show ring. Really, they have nothing to worry about. After all, dogs in obedience trials and demonstrations have to *sit, stand and drop*. All working dogs are required to do the same. So show dogs shouldn't be any different. However, I shall be talking about those exercises and more in future articles.

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