

Dog Training - The Basic Steps

Part XIII

When I wrote my first article titled *Food for Thought* (VCA Gazette Sept. 2006), I said that I felt I had a moral obligation in the interests of good dog training, to help handlers by guiding them back on the right track to train their canine companions effectively and reliably. I have been greatly encouraged by readers who have supported me in condemning the wide use food rewards in dog training and, once again, I thank the VCA for inviting me to write a series of articles on the basic steps in dog training. I trust that all those who have followed my advice have met with very pleasing results.

Having covered so many of the obedience exercises I believe it is time that I should talk about the equipment we need to use, namely, the leash and collar. There is so much on the market today that dog owners often wonder which is the best equipment to buy. My first advice is that whatever you choose; make sure it is strong enough for the dog and comfortable for your hands. But of course there is much more to consider.

Leashes

The best type of leash is a leather one fitted with a solid snap hook. Ideally, this should be secured with two rivets or be hand stitched. The same should apply at the handle end of the leash. Before leather leashes are used it is best to soak them in neat's foot oil or treat them with saddle soap. This will prevent cracking, preserve the leather, and make the leash supple and comfortable to handle.

Leashes made out of webbing material are very good. They are strong and comfortable to handle and you can get a firm grip on them. Nylon leashes, although they are very strong, are rather slippery and therefore hard to grip. A chain leash is about the last thing you want to get for training. If you use one, your hands will really suffer! People buy them because they have dogs which chew through leather leashes! A dog that does this should be corrected immediately in training. The only time I would use a chain leash is when I find it necessary to tie up the dog for a short period of time; a potential chewer would probably bite through a leather leash in a few seconds and be off!

Collars

All puppies should be fitted with small leather collars and become used to being lead on the leash. This is just a start, and as the puppy grows, you will have to fit him up with a larger collar and a stronger and heavier type of leash. It is possible to train some dogs—those with high body sensitivity — on a fixed leather collar, but the vast majority need to have a slip-collar of some description. The most popular one is the slip-chain collar. This is available in various lengths and with different sizes of links. It should never be too long, but you should be able to put it on and take it off your dog's head comfortably. If it is too long it will probably come off when he is running, or he may put his foreleg through it as he jumps over a high obstacle, or if he is a small dog it may hang down and get in the way of his little feet as he comes towards you in the recall exercise.

With medium to large dogs, collars having longer links are the best. They have a better training effect and for this reason are used extensively throughout the world in the training of police dogs and guide dogs for the blind. They are often called 'fur savers' as they do not cut the dog's coat down the right hand side of the neck as the finer small links do. When training tough little dogs it is necessary to use the small link collars. Although most dogs need to be trained on slip-chain collars, others, which are highly sensitive, need to be trained on leather slip or broad nylon slip-collars.

You will notice that I refer to all these as slip collars. Sometimes I refer to them as training collars or correction collars, but I do not like the term '*choker collars*'. They were never intended to choke the dog! They are used to correct the dog only when necessary. Unfortunately, many years ago, someone gave them that name by attaching a small label on the ring of the collar, which read '*choker collar*' and it has remained like that to this day. I would very much like to see that name removed. It gives the wrong impression. In recent months certain individuals have been approaching equipment outlets advising them not to sell slip-chain collars anymore because they are harmful to dogs. Not only has this angered me, but it is quite obvious that those who have been spreading this type of information, do not know the first thing about training dogs.

Over the last few years, more and more owners have arrived at my dog training school leading their dog on a harness and leash. I point out straight away that they will have no control with that equipment. The dog must be trained on a suitable leash and collar. Sadly, they have been advised by their local veterinary practices or pet shops, that that is the best equipment they can use. As you know a harness is more expensive than a collar, need I say more?

Another piece of equipment that I totally disapprove of is the long extendable leash. More and more people are using them, but don't realise how dangerous they can be. Many times I have seen dog owners letting out more and more fine cord as their dogs walk out in front. All is well until the dog is distracted and leaps out into the road in front of a vehicle! Others may keep the cord short until they enter a safe off-leash park, wherein they allow the dog to run to the fullest extent of the fine cord. Suddenly another dog appears on the scene. The dogs make contact and whirl around, their legs become entangled in the fine cord, they panic and then they fight only because they are so stressed. It can all happen so quickly. I have also seen how that fine cord has quickly cut into the calf of a lady's leg and given her a severe rope burn. Whenever I see a dog on that bad equipment, I call my own dog away, because I know of the potential danger.

I totally disapprove of the Halti and any other similar equipment. They are not at all nice and from a public relations point of view they look bad. The halti looks like a muzzle to anyone in the street, and that indicates that it could be a dangerous dog. I have told every person who has brought his or her dog to me on a halti that it will be replaced with a suitable slip-chain collar and leash and the dog will be trained *properly*. In no time at all, the owner is overjoyed with the results. I have been invited to two different obedience dog clubs to give my advice. At one club they presented me with a problem of a German Shepherd Dog that was always surging ahead in heelwork. It had been on a halti for over a year, and yet it was still trying to surge ahead. The young lady allowed me to show her how to overcome the problem. Walking at heel in a small square doing *left* turns, the GSD very soon adopted the heel position. Then I carried out a few more exercises. If and when it attempted to surge ahead, I inserted a left turn. Then I asked her to do the same and her dog responded beautifully. Neither she nor the club members watching could believe it, especially after struggling with a halti for well over a year. At the other club a halti was prescribed for a young lady with her Staffordshire Bull Terrier. The dog hated the halti and was continuously trying to get it off. The handler was very upset and in tears! Being asked for my advice and help, I replaced the halti with a four-foot leash and slip-chain collar. The Staffie responded immediately and most favourably, showed great willingness and wagged its tail with pleasure. Then I got the handler to work her dog and she achieved the same results. Both she and her dog were so happy, and very quickly her tears changed to smiles. Once again, members of the class were amazed at the transformation they had witnessed within that short space of time. I give readers these two examples to show that many of the problems owners have with their dogs can be corrected quite simply with expert advice.

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