

Dog Training - The Basic Steps

Part XIV

I expect that, for many of you, this year has seemed to have flown by so quickly, and as we approach Christmas, my Border Collie, Pippa, dressed here in her little festive cap, joins me in sending our best wishes to you all and may you have a very Happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Last month I wrote about the most appropriate dog training equipment, namely, the leash and collar. In previous articles I have explained how the equipment should be used when either using it to walk the dog freely on it, or when training it to do a particular obedience exercise. The ideal length of leash and how it is used is very important, not only in basic training but at other times and situations too.

The ideal length of leash should be four feet, nothing shorter. There are four reasons for this:

1. When a puppy either sees or hears something which it finds disturbing, its natural re-action is to pull away. If it is on a short tight leash its movements will be severely restricted and it is likely to panic. Having it on a long leash the puppy is given much more freedom of movement in which it can settle down. A four foot leash at arms length should provide a circular area, of six foot radius, around the handler. This is known as the Dog's Area of Independence.
2. Those dogs which develop even the slightest degree of protective aggression will become progressively worse if they are held tight on very short leashes extremely close to their handlers they are protecting. A long leash allows space between the handler and dog and more freedom of movement, thus reducing any bodily contact which actually promotes protective aggression.
3. The four foot leash is necessary when teaching obedience exercises. A good example to take is the Stay exercise, where one needs to move away from the dog to face it. How could you do that on an eighteen inch leash? You can at any time make a four foot leash shorter, as when you teach the dog to sit, but you can't make a short leash longer.
4. This last reason for having a long leash is one purely for leverage. I shall always remember a young lady who brought a very powerful male Labrador to me years ago for training. It was on an eighteen inch long leather leash. Because it was so short, she was leaning well forward as the dog pulled her fast up the drive towards me. Upon reaching me, I acted quickly by grabbing the leash and prevented the young lady from having a nasty fall! I provided her with a long leash and she felt the benefit immediately, where by she could lean back when she had to make the appropriate correction to stop her dog pulling. Like so many others, she was so successful in training her dog to be very obedient within a few weeks.

In previous articles I have emphasised the need to hold the leash correctly when heeling, i.e. hold the handle of the leash in your right hand plus a second point down the leash also in the right hand. Keep your right hand in the centre of your body below your belt line, so that the rest of the leash, between your right hand and the dog's collar, hangs down in a loop between you and your dog. Keep your left hand off the leash, otherwise you are likely to put even a little tension on the leash which will be enough to make the dog pull. Now there is always the possibility that your dog might suddenly be startled by a loud noise, and its natural re-action will be to leap forward. If this happens, you should immediately release the second part of the leash in your right hand, thus giving the dog a greater Area of Independence in which it can settle

down after the unexpected shock made by a sudden noise, like a car back firing.

I find so many people put their hand through the handle of the leash and grip the next piece of leash in their hand for safety. But I point out that this is most unwise. I have seen so many accidents happen. When people arrive at my training school, I notice how they secure their leash in this way. The worst accident I have known was where a man was walking his St. Bernard along a country road. The dog saw a cat and leapt towards it across the road. The handler was pulled over and dragged face downwards across the gravel road. His face was in a terrible mess. He had no way of releasing the leash. Fortunately, there was no traffic coming along.

I have known of several occasions where dogs have pulled their handlers quickly around trees or lamp posts whereby they sustained facial injuries, all because they had their wrists through the leash handles and were unable to either release them or transfer them to the other hands. Other similar accidents have occurred where dogs have seen cats underneath frontal hedges of front gardens. In consequence the handlers were pulled through the hedges and received severe scratches up the arms, all because the leashes could not be released in those emergencies! They are not very nice stories, are they? But handlers cannot afford to have these unfortunate and unnecessary accidents. So take care.

Another mistake handlers make is where they hold the leash just over two fingers! That is asking for trouble. A dog can suddenly pull forward in a flash leaving the handler standing there amazed with no leash in the hand! Then the handler exclaims, "My dog has never done that before!" How often has that been said!

I believe that all these points I have mentioned are important for all handlers to know, because they are most necessary when carrying out basic training. A few people have asked me why I have written books and articles such as these. My main reason is because I care. I care about the well being of dogs and other animals and those who manage them. I owe much to those very experienced trainers who taught me years ago, many of them have since passed on to a better place. In return I like to share my knowledge and experience with others so that they too may enjoy the great pleasures I have had over all these years in dog training and helping others. Have a lovely Christmas.

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