

Dog Training – The Basic Steps Part XXII

There are many principles in dog training which must be adhered to if success is to be achieved. As I have mentioned before, the # 1 resource every handler has is his or her eyesight. Quite simply, if you do not have your eyes on your dog, you won't know when to correct it if it does wrong, nor praise it when it does right. In order to get the correct timing for both those things you must have your eyes on your dog to observe its movements and responses.

Nearly every week I have a few clients who have been attending obedience dog clubs, but because they still have a few problems which need ironing out, they seek further tuition on a one to one basis. To get a general idea of how they have been working, I ask them to do some very basic heelwork which would include a few turns and sits. Within the short time of about three minutes, I notice the handlers are continuously looking straight ahead and hardly saying a word to their dogs. And when and if they do speak, they have no idea how to use their voices effectively and find it hard to express their pleasure when giving praise. They lack the necessary intonation, volume and speed of vocal control, also the correct timing. I know immediately that those handlers have been told by their instructors to look straight in front and not towards their dogs. I also know that whilst their instructors have given commands correctly, like, "forward, left turn, right turn, halt" they have not been taught how to use their voices effectively, when talking to their dogs. The only way they will learn how to do this is to listen very carefully to the way instructors use their voices in order to get the best out of their dogs. Each instructor should have an imaginary dog at his or her left side and talk to it, in between the orders given to the class. In time the instructor's voice will become so infectious, that the handlers, possibly without realising it, will mimic not just the words of command, but the phrases used. So when the instructor says to the class, "forward" and the handlers use their dogs' names and "heel", the instructor should immediately praise the imaginary dog, saying several times, "good dog, very good," as it responds. Likewise, when bringing the class to a halt the instructor, having given the order to halt, should then say, "sit" followed by, "there's a good dog, very good" The class should then be shown how to gently and slowly stroke their dogs on the side of their faces and be reminded to constantly keep their eyes glued on their dogs, so that should they get up at any time, they must be taught to sit again immediately and accurately.

When I trained my first dog in a beginner class, a few instructors often mixed with us to train their dogs. We, as beginners, were constantly hearing how the experienced instructors were talking to their dogs and it certainly rubbed off on to us. Without a doubt, this arrangement greatly assisted the instructor who was conducting the class. Furthermore, they were re-enforcing the training of their own dogs by working them amongst highly distracted beginner dogs. Many years later, when I took up stewarding and judging obedience trials in England, I could often tell by listening to competitors' voices and noting their respective styles as they came into the ring, which club they belonged to and whom their instructor was. I always think that proved how well those instructors had trained their pupils.

Several years ago I was invited to observe an obedience dog club training. The secretary asked me to feel quite free to walk around and watch each class in

action, and if there were any points which I considered needed improvement or correction to let her and committee members know of my findings. Naturally, I was quite happy to be of service to them in that regard.

Well, most of the classes were, in my opinion, doing quite well. Naturally, I felt they could be improved and I was happy to suggest a number of ways which would make things easier for the handlers, dogs and instructors. However, as I moved across to the far side of the field to watch a beginner class in action, I became very alarmed. The handlers were heeling their dogs abreast of each other, up and down the given area, just doing sits and right-about turns. Having done these a few times, the instructor asked everyone to do these with their eyes shut. Quite frankly I could not believe what I was hearing. This was nothing but stupidity. As anyone could well imagine, the handlers started to walk all over the place, crashing into each other and treading on their dogs' feet. The dogs became highly excited or stressed even in that short time. It was an absolute fiasco. What the instructor had in mind, I had no idea. What on earth did he think he was going to achieve?

At the end of the morning I informed the secretary that the general standard of work was most satisfactory. I also made suggestions as to how they could improve certain aspects of the work, for which she and the others were very appreciative. Not wishing to shock her too much, I then told her how appalled I was to witness the beginner class being asked to repeat that part of their work with their eyes shut. She was equally appalled and said that she would look into the matter and see that the instructor was brought to account.

Straight Line Concept

Another very important principle in dog training is known as the straight line concept. It is the basis for all obedience exercises. Let's have a look at all the progressive exercises we teach the dog. The very first exercise we teach is heelwork conducted in a long straight line, which includes several sits. At the end, the dog is praised and dismissed so that it can relax and walk freely again on the leash.

Then we introduce the right-about turn. The dog is still being taught to walk on that same straight line. Later, the right and left turns are introduced. So the walk is made up of straight lines between the turns. Then we progress to the most important exercise in all forms of dog training — the recall, whereby we walk in a straight line, with the dog on the full length of the leash, then call the dog, "Millie, come" and walk backwards as she turns to come towards us. We are still on the same straight line. When teaching dogs to retrieve, the same thing applies. With the dog on the leash throw the dumb-bell a little way straight in front and command, "fetch". Praise as soon as the dog picks it up and walk backwards in a straight line and take it from the dog.

As soon as your dog knows how to retrieve, scent discrimination can be taught. Placing about six articles, about half a metre apart, in a straight line, give the dog your scent for one moment from your hand and lead it on the leash slowly in a straight line over the placed articles, so that it can sniff each one. When it reaches the last article, the only one bearing your scent, encourage it to pick it up with, "good dog" and walk backwards parallel to and past the other articles. Sit the dog and take the article from its mouth with, "give, good dog."

Similarly, seek forward should be taught in a straight line. By leaving the dog in a sit stay position, proceed forward for about twenty paces and ensure the dog is watching you as you place your article down in the grass. Return to your dog by exactly the same route, stand beside your dog, give it your scent and beckon it to seek forward along the track on which you have walked twice. Your dog will have a reasonable idea where the article is, but not exactly. As it seeks forward, it will put its nose to the ground and follow your track. Give praise as soon as your dog finds it and recall her.

When teaching the seek-back, heel your dog off-lead into the wind across a field, discreetly dropping an article in the grass. After about forty yards about-turn, sit, give your scent, say, "find" and beckon the dog to proceed forward following your single track. Praise the moment she finds it and recall her. So you see how the straight line concept is established in the dog's mind with all the exercises we teach it. Remember, always make it easy for the dog to understand and grasp. I'll write more on this fascinating subject next month.

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