

## Dog Training – The Basic Steps!

### Part XV

First, I wish all my readers a Very Happy New Year and trust all your efforts in training your dogs will be successful and rewarding. Last month, I wrote about the four reasons for having a long leash. The first was in connection with situations which cause a puppy or adult dog to be disturbed. This month, I wish to elaborate much further regarding this topic.

When and if a dog is disturbed, it is quite natural for it to pull away to the end of the leash. If it is held on a short tight leash, the dog is likely to panic. Therefore, it is very important to allow the puppy/dog to go to the full length of a long leash, thus giving it a large area of independence, all around the handler, in which it can settle down and recover.

Every dog has a certain degree of suspicion, some more than others of course. Much depends on how the dog has been conditioned to things in the outside world and how it has been carefully socialised with other animals at an early age. It is only natural for dogs to show some suspicion when they see or hear things which they have not experienced before. Therefore, it should be our responsibility to help dogs overcome their fears.

In recent weeks house holders have been requested to put out hard rubbish on nature strips for collection. Whilst it does become rather unsightly, it is only there for about two weeks. When walking our dogs along the footpaths, either free walking or at heel, it is not unusual for some dogs to show a little fear, which we call suspicion, when they see odd shapes deposited along the road side. So when this happens, immediately let the dog out on the full length of the leash while you go up to the rubbish, run your other hand slowly over the bits and pieces and talk to them at the same time, saying something like, “Oh, hello bits of rubbish! How are you today?” Within a short time your dog will think that it is missing out on something. So it very gradually comes up to investigate wondering to whom you are talking! As your dog makes the inquisitive approach, praise quietly yet very assuredly. Finally, your dog makes contact by sniffing the objects, strange as some of them might be. As handler you have to convey to your dog that it is great fun investigating! Your dog will not only grow in confidence itself, but will become more and more confident in you too. I often ask clients if they’ve ever spoken to rubbish before! “No!” they reply. “Well, now’s your chance!” They readily understand the reason for this when they see the results.

When all fears have disappeared, it is important to walk back along the footpath for a few yards and make the approach again towards the object to which the dog showed suspicion. As you approach keep using an assured tone of voice with plenty of sincere praise. Definitely, no food rewards! Communicate with your dog and in return your dog will put its trust in you. Now, doesn’t that make you feel good?

If you did not take these necessary steps, then your dog is highly likely to show suspicion towards subsequent things it meets, and also remember the places where it had unpleasant encounters. A golden rule to remember is that whenever you are working your dog in obedience exercises and it shows suspicion for any known or unknown reason, immediately break off from training. When the dog has fully recovered, then you can resume training. Always take care of everything likely to affect your dog’s temperament—training can wait a while.

Several years ago in Lower Templestowe, my neighbour had cut some branches from a tree and made use of them by laying end to end along the edge of the street footpath to retain the garden earth. The next day when I was training a client and dog down the footpath, the dog suddenly barked furiously at the first six-foot log. Then viewing the situation from the dog's eye level, I could understand why he barked. Other small branches had been cut of it which made it appear to be like a cat lying down with its ears erect! In addition, two small pieces of bark had been scraped off which looked like the cat's eyes. Having taken the necessary steps to assure the dog that it was not a cat, he never re-acted to it again. Several more dogs of different breeds reacted in the same way over the next few months, but when ivy started to grow over the long logs, no more dogs showed suspicion.

One day I was walking a dog down a busy street in Kew and could see before me a telephone engineer, who had removed a manhole cover to sit just below ground level to repair some wires. The dog gave a suspicious growl and came to an abrupt halt. Getting down to the dog's eye level I could see how she saw the engineer. All she could see was his head, as if he had been decapitated! As I encouraged her forward to meet him, I explained how he first appeared to her. Highly amused he kindly made a gentle fuss of her and she wagged her tail in pleasure. I asked him if he would assist me in re-enacting our approach to which he gladly agreed and the dog walked along happily.

During a special dog training course I was holding for more advanced dogs, I carried on my right side a white high jump. The class of about fifteen handlers with their dogs was assembled over to my right. Suddenly, I heard a few of their dogs bark suspiciously. I knew why they barked. Apart from my legs, the rest of my body was obscured. The dogs had never seen a walking high jump before! So I turned around to walk in the opposite direction, so that they could see me. The barking stopped immediately. The class really felt they'd learned something when I explained why the dogs barked at an unusual sight!

I think the funniest occasion I have ever experienced in respect of how dogs see things, was years ago when I was in the final stages of training a Labrador as a guide dog. He was leading me through the book section of a large Melbourne department store. Suddenly he gave a little bark and moved backwards. Instantly, I released the harness handle from my left hand and allowed him to go to the full extent of the leash. I then stooped to see what had made him suddenly suspicious. Immediately, I saw what it was. A female shop assistant was dusting the books with a feather duster. When he noticed her she had her back to him, was crouched straightening some books on the bottom shelf and had put the duster under her arm. With her green overall touching the floor, and her head, hands and feet obscured from view, she appeared to him to be some strange green animal with a feathered tail! Naturally, I had to do something about this, so I approached the lady, who was now standing up, explained the situation, and asked her help. Seeing the funny side of it, she was most willing to co-operate. We let the dog examine the feather duster; he wagged his tail and was very happy to meet the lady. I then asked her to re-enact the situation at which he had earlier shown suspicion. This she did. I took him back a few yards and then towards her. As he passed her he wagged his tail again having completely overcome his suspicion. I thanked the lady for her co-operation, and ever since then she looked back on the incident as one of the highlights of her work in that store.

About twenty years later I was attending a social gathering in Melbourne when a lady came up to me to have a chat. She definitely appeared to know me, but unfortunately I could not

remember her. So I had to ask her where and when we had met before. “I was the green lady with the feathered tail! “She replied with a smile. It is truly amazing how people remember such funny incidents!

I hope that the stories I have related here will help people to have a deeper understanding of how our dogs see us and other things. How their minds work, what we have to do to prevent things going wrong which may affect the temperament of dogs, and how we have to help our dogs overcome any difficulties. I have always believed that all these things and more are all connected with basic training in some form or another. Yes, there is so much to learn. We never stop learning. But isn't it fascinating, eh! I'll have more for you next month. Cheers for now!

Michael Tucker