

Dog Training – The Basic Steps

Part XXI

When I was invited to write the first article in this series of dog training the concluding paragraph touched on the sit and stand exercises. I mentioned then that I knew of 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. I went on to say that I would be talking about those exercises and more in future articles.

In article Part II I explained how the dog should be taught to stand in heel work. In Part IV I explained how to teach the dog to stay in the standing position. Actually, it is one of the easiest exercises to teach in obedience, yet people wonder why we don't teach it before the sit. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the sit is considered far more important, as you will have realised in previous lessons, for it is the most frequently used exercise in obedience trials. Secondly, the dog is more likely to move in the stand position when told to stay, whereas it is more stable in the sit position.

So, once the dog has been taught to stand the exercise can be taken one step further by making it into a stand-stay, where you leave the dog and come out in front to stand facing it. This is usually quite easy because you have already taught the dog to do a sit-stay. By combining two exercises it has learnt at different times —to stand in heelwork and to understand the stay —you now have the stand-stay, which will be used later in the stand-stay for examination.

You will notice that I said, 'later'. I wish to stress this point and explain why.

Stand stay for examination

If an instructor told handlers to stand their dogs and leave them by coming out in front of them, and then approached each dog in turn to examine it, a number of dogs, particularly the timid ones, would be likely to move away because they felt threatened by the approaching instructor. I have found this to be one of the biggest mistakes instructors make — and only because they don't realise how some dogs see them, and how and why they react in certain situations. It's all right for judges to walk up to and examine dogs that are working and competing in the ring — because they have been trained and are sound in temperament, or at least they should be. But when you are training you are training: you are not in a trial!

So how can we prevent things going wrong — the instructors making mistakes, the handlers becoming down hearted because their dogs move, and the dogs becoming worried about the exercise week after week? Well, really it's not very difficult. There are six stages leading up to the stand for examination through which the instructor can take the handlers and dogs.

Stage 1. The instructor should ask each handler in turn to stroll up (with the dog on a loose lead, not at heel, but walking freely), to talk to the dog and allow it to sniff the instructor, and to move around. As the dog does this the instructor should also talk to the dog, stroke it gently and observe its temperament. If this is all right, they can progress to stage 2 the following week.

Stage 2. The handler should be asked to heel the dog forward and stand it just next to the instructor, who, without moving, should allow the dog to sniff his or her hand and should then give the dog a few slow, gentle strokes under its chin, down the left side of its neck and perhaps along

the top of its shoulders to halfway down its back. It is also a good idea for the instructor to allow the dog to rest its chin in the left hand while stroking the dog with the right. This simple handling technique helps a dog to feel more at ease while being examined. The handler, still beside the dog, also gives it confidence. Should the dog move for any reason, the handler is in the ideal position to carry out the necessary correction and make the dog stand again.

Stage 3. The handler should be asked to heel the dog and stand it next to the instructor, who has remained quite still. The examination can then be carried out as in stage 2, but after about 10 seconds the instructor can ask the handler to leave the dog with the command 'stay' and stand in front facing it, no more than half a metre (18in) away. After about 10 seconds the handler should return, praise the dog and dismiss it.

Stage 4. With progress being made, the instructor can ask the handler to heel the dog forward and stand it about 1½ metres (4½ ft.) away. The instructor can then make that short approach to the dog from a slight angle, not from directly in front. The rest of the exercise can be carried out as in stage 3.

Stage 5. With more progress now being made, the handler can stand the dog nearly three metres away from the instructor, tell the dog 'stay', and stand a little further out in front of it. The instructor can approach and carry out the examination as before, and also walk around the other side, and then the handler can return to the dog by walking around the back of it.

Stage 6. When the instructor and the handler are quite confident that the dog will stand, stay and not mind being examined, the exercise can be done off the leash. And as time goes on, the distances and durations can be gradually extended.

Well, you can see how easy it is if you go about it gradually and carefully. Naturally all dogs are different, so you can't expect them all to advance at the same rate. It is therefore the responsibility of the instructor to decide when each dog is ready for the next stage. Some dogs go through fairly quickly, others take a little time.

I think it would be appropriate for me to mention here a point about testing dogs when they are promoted from one class to the next in an obedience club.

Many clubs have a system of periodically holding testing days. Handlers and dogs in every class (except the top class) have a number of exercises to do. If all are completed satisfactorily, the dog is promoted to the next class at the next training session. But if the dog passes, say, five out of the six exercises, it stays in that class for several weeks, sometimes until the next testing day. Quite often the exercise the dog fails is the stand for examination. This happened to me once. Because my Border Collie was so friendly with the instructors, in fact with everyone, she moved to make a fuss of the examiner during the test. It didn't bother me: she was after all only seven months old at the time and I knew it wouldn't be long before she settled down. And in any case, I would much rather have a dog move out of friendliness than through being nervous or (worse still) aggressive. However, I was promptly informed that the dog had failed and would have to take the test again in so many weeks' time.

While tests like these are all right in theory, I don't believe they are so good in practice. A dog can always have an off day, just as we can, and I know that some handlers get very tense when under the pressure of a test and their tenseness can so easily be transmitted to their dogs.

I honestly believe that the best way to promote dogs and handlers is to watch their general performance, taken as an *overall* performance. I believe in judging a handler and a dog on their merits. So, if the dog was quite satisfactory on five out of six exercises, I would look at the exercise on which the dog failed, see what progress had been made and gauge how the handler was coping with it. The fact that the handler had trained the dog to do the other exercises satisfactorily would indicate that, given time, success would be achieved quite soon. With that consideration, I wouldn't hesitate to promote both handler and dog to the next class.

I trust these points I have mentioned will be of help to all and I would like to say more about this topic next month. Happy days!

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