

Dog Training —The Basic Steps!

Part XVIII

This month I have decided to direct my advice to trainers and instructors, particularly those who give freely of their time and energy in obedience dog training clubs. But of course my advice goes equally to all handlers so that they can achieve the best results in training their dogs.

I have always advised that when handlers walk their dogs daily, for most of the time they should walk them freely on the leash, allowing the dogs to walk on either side —in fact anywhere around them. But of course a dog should not be allowed to pull on the leash, jump up at people, bark at anything in the street nor attempt to chase after anything like dogs, cats and other animals, birds flying, people jogging, cyclist and other vehicles travelling along the roads. About ten minutes of a half hour walk should be devoted to obedience exercises, and that time can and should be split into two lots of about five minutes each with a bit of a break between those two sessions. So when you train in those short periods of time, train really well. If everything is taught simply and accurately, the dog will learn accurately. Dogs should never be over worked; otherwise they will become mentally tired. If and when that happens, nothing will be achieved.

Basically, an instructor should conduct a class with a four point plan:

1. Give a brief explanation of the exercise to be taught.
2. Give a good demonstration, preferably with a dog which doesn't know the exercise.
3. Carry out the practical work with each handler and dog.
4. Allow time for questions, answers and advice for the following week's homework.

I would suggest that six in a class would be an ideal number; there should not be more than ten. Much depends on the experience of the instructor. A responsible instructor should allow free breaks during the training, so that the handlers can free walk their dogs around the field. This prevents dogs becoming mentally tired. Much depends on the exercise being taught. For example, if I was instructing a class to do either left or right turns in a square, I would split the class into two teams, so that whilst one team was working, the other would be watching. After so many minutes practical work the teams change places. By doing it this way, all the dogs are only working half the time and relaxing half the time. The handlers are working half the time and have the opportunity of observing the other team work. This is very important. So much can be learned by watching. The instructor should take up a controlling position at one of the corners from where he or she can observe the whole class and give individual tuition to each handler on approaching that corner. The instructor also needs to face the members of the observing team so that they can hear the instructions. The position of the sun should also be taken into consideration. The audience should not be facing into it. Wind direction should also be taken into account, so that the instructor's voice can be heard.

When teaching the recall this should be done individually. The rest of the class should be asked to watch intently as each recall is taught. In classes of any size, there are likely to be various faults seen. In one sense this is good because each handler can learn how the faults can be corrected. Depending on how long the recalls take, breaks for free walking should be inserted at intervals to prevent boredom for both handlers and dogs! The practise of mass recalls is shocking to say the least! Dogs become very excited and confused, when they hear all the handlers call at the same time. The handlers become very frustrated and no way can the instructor give advice to them. It proves to be an absolute fiasco! It is a complete waste of time and nothing is achieved.

Time should always be allocated for handler's questions and helpful answers given by the instructor who should also give advice for their homework during the week. For example, let's have a look at heelwork on the leash. So many handlers tend to practise this within a small area in a park. After a while dogs can become very bored with this and their willingness to work becomes less. It is far better to walk along a street with footpaths upon which turns can be made to the kerbs and sits at the kerbs and straight road crossings can be taught. This is far more natural to a dog because it feels that it is going somewhere. After a break recalls on the leash can be practised at different places along a long path, as the handler allows the dog to free walk. Each recall made can be followed by a stretch of free walking until the next recall is made. The short periods of free walking allow the dog to relax mentally. This is very important.

Now let's imagine you have trained your dog to do a number of exercises. Enter a park, give your dog a little free run, call it to heel and then commence some heelwork with just a few turns and sits as you proceed towards the other side of the park. Then do a recall or two. Next, try a retrieve and possibly a retrieve over an obstacle, a free run here and there, plus anything else you have taught your dog which it enjoys. Give it the opportunity of socialising with other dogs. Make it fun! You will be surprised how much your dog will enjoy this type of routine over quite a long distance in a park.

Several years ago I took my daughter's dog to an obedience dog club at which I was a member. She knew all the basic obedience exercises, but I just wanted to work her in a class situation. Upon my request the instructor welcomed me to join her class four. After each exercise I dismissed the Airedale and allowed her to relax on the side lines. To my amazement the class was worked without a break for a complete hour! I was hoping that the instructor would take a hint when she saw me relax Penny so many times. The result was that, by the end of the training session, my dog was still very fresh, whereas all the other dogs were worn out, so too were their handlers!

At many clubs handlers are always told to keep their dogs on the left whether they are doing heelwork or not and for the whole time they are out for a walk. Sadly, the dogs are not allowed to sniff at anything. At a number of clubs the dismissal is not taught at all! This should be taught in the very first lesson. "How will a dog know," I ask, "when its work has finished and it can walk free again?" To allow their dogs to dismiss, some handlers have been told to say "Good dog" at the end of an exercise! But that's no good! They are words given to praise the dog, not to dismiss it. How confusing that must be for any dog! Every command must have its own meaning so that the dog can understand.

When training a dog you should have your eyes constantly on it so that you will be able to praise it immediately on response, correct it where and when necessary and encourage it where and when necessary. If you have not got your eyes on your dog, you are failing in your duty. Remember, your eyesight is your number *one resource* you have in training. I have had many handlers, who have been training at dog clubs, attend my school with various faults and problems. I only have to watch them for a few minutes to see why and how the faults have developed. The handlers walk along with their eyes looking constantly to the front. That is what the instructors have told them to do. Because the handlers are not watching exactly what their dogs are doing, faults go uncorrected. Quite simply, in cases like these, the trouble does not lie with the dog, nor with the handler, but sadly with the instruction given. However, all is not lost! All these faults can be corrected and very quickly too I am happy to say. I have more to tell on similar topics next month. In the meantime I trust these points I have presented will make people think, and the advice I have given will be of great benefit to all.

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