

Training and Trial Preparation

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The key to success in a trial is effective training. It seems so obvious and simple. But misconceptions, “shortcuts,” and inconsistency somehow still manage to crop up in training. Often, these problems arise because handlers are so focused on teaching the skills for the trial that they lose sight of the training “basics” of consistency, right timing, and appropriate reward and correction.

Motivation, Rewards, and Corrections

Motivation comes down to two simple questions:

How can I get what I want?

How can I avoid what I don't want?

For many dogs, the exercises—especially the running, grabbing, and jumping exercises have built-in motivation—they are FUN! And all training involves interacting with you, which is also something your dog enjoys. So your dog wants fun and he wants to interact with you. What he may *not* want is restrictions and rules on how and when he runs, jumps, and interacts with you.

Dogs are opportunists. Given the opportunity to play by their own rules, they will. That's why we train. In order to motivate your dog to obey, even when he would rather not, you need to employ rewards and corrections. When he plays by your rules, he gets something he wants (a reward) and avoids something he doesn't want (a correction). It's a win-win.

Rewards reinforce obedience and build good habits. Some people use food for reward; I use a toy. Can I use a toy in a trial? NO! But by using a

toy reward in my training, I establish good habits. By the time I get to trial, the correct response is the default response. My dog has responded appropriately over and over again in anticipation of a reward, so the appropriate response is almost automatic.

It is important to vary the timing of the reward. In the early stages of teaching a command, you will reward more frequently. As your dog progresses, you should vary the interval so that he is constantly working toward the reward. Since he is never sure which or how many commands will produce the treat he hopes for, he will stay focused and obedient.

Training should always have a reward. Sometimes it may be as simple as a pat, or a verbal signal to acknowledge obedience. For more difficult work, use a high-value treat or toy. Make sure you keep rewarding good behavior, especially as you get closer to trial. While working with you has intrinsic rewards that will motivate your dog, you should continue to give that high-value reward for particularly difficult exercises or outstanding responses to commands.

The correction should immediately stop the disobedience. Remember, dogs are opportunists. If your dog thinks there is an easier or faster way to get what he wants—whether it's your attention, more running, or that treat or toy—he will take the easier way. Correcting disobedience demonstrates to your dog that there is no other way. If he does not obey, he not only doesn't get what he wants, he also gets corrected. If he immediately returns to the wrong behavior, then your correction was not meaningful enough. If a strong verbal correction stops the disobedience and your dog does not return to the disobedient behavior, then there is no reason to physically correct. But if your dog does return to being disobedient you didn't make a big enough impression on him. Use the level of correction

necessary so that your dog responds, respects, and learns from the correction.

Learned disobedience occurs when your dog realizes that he can get a reward or avoid a correction without actually doing the work.

Have I mentioned that dogs are opportunists? Your dog will quickly learn if sad eyes and a tucked tail will get him a reward or avoid a correction.

“If I act upset, confused, or shy, she won’t correct me.”

“If I look helpless and do nothing, he will help me and then reward me after basically doing the exercise for me.”

“If I act like I can’t possibly perform under this stress, I will get bribed, comforted, and fussed over.”

The only way a dog learns disobedience is if you teach it to him by not correcting when he does not obey. You know your dog. You know which commands he knows. And if you are reading this article, you are obviously thinking of trialing, so I would hope your dog knows the commands being rehearsed. If you give in to the big puppy dog eyes, you will only reinforce the idea that your dog is, indeed, helpless under stress. A dog that can’t handle the stress of a new situation is not prepared to compete in a trial. You will strengthen your dog’s confidence if you correct disobedience and reward *only* obedience because you are showing him that it is business as usual.

PAC: Prepare. Anticipate. Consider.

Although each dog is unique, there is a common approach that all handlers should use as the foundation of their training: **PAC**—Prepare. Anticipate. Consider.

Prepare. Right timing is key to successful training. Always be prepared to administer the correction you use for your dog. If you are using an e-collar,

make sure you have the remote in your hand and poised for action. If you correct with a leash-and-collar “pop”, make sure you are holding the leash correctly for an effective pop. If you have to fumble for the remote or gather up the excess leash, the timing will be off and the moment for correction will be lost. So before giving any command or starting any sequence of commands, make sure you are prepared to respond instantly if your dog does not comply.

Anticipate. You know your dog. You know which commands get an immediate and solid response and which commands get sluggish or sloppy compliance. Anticipate likely mistakes so you are not debating with yourself in that moment whether the slow response should get a correction or fumbling for that high-value reward if your dog gives a good response. If you have to take the time to think about it—your dog’s brain has already moved on and any correction or reward you finally give will be confusing and ineffective.

Consider. You can’t solve the problem until you figure out where the problem comes from. Have you been inconsistent in correction in this area? Are you sure your dog understands the command? Is your tone of voice or your body language sending a message contrary to the command? Are distractions causing the problem? While some problems may originate with you, “considering” does not mean that your dog gets a pass. Rather, it means that once you identify the cause, you can address the problem more effectively to avoid mistakes. For example, if your dog moves so fast that he has trouble switching gears, maybe you can help him avoid overshooting a target by giving the command just a hair earlier. If your dog responds erratically because he becomes easily distracted, address the cause by incorporating additional focus work in your training sessions and

training in more varied environments to decrease his sensitivity to new stimuli.

And speaking of distractions. . .

Some dogs have problems in new areas even when there don't appear to be any distractions. But keep in mind, from your dog's point of view (and smell) *every new area is a distraction*. Unfamiliar scents, sounds and things all call out to your dog "Explore me!" Some dogs are more affected by distractions than others, but all dogs should be trained in new areas to firmly establish the habit that obedience is required whenever and wherever a command is given.

If your dog is prone to distractibility, start with baby steps in a new area. You may have to "spoon feed" your dog until he learns to stay focused in new areas. Start with simple commands that you know are solid. For more complex exercises, train as if he has not learned the exercise before. Break the exercise into its component parts. Setting your dog up for success is better than allowing a mistake to happen. Once your dog is proficient in that area with distractions, move to another new area. Once again, take baby steps. Over time, you can gradually increase the difficulty of the work you start with, but do not move so fast that you cause mistakes. Yes, this means going to a lot of new places, but if you are not going to a new place to train at least 2 times a week, you shouldn't even be considering entering a trial.

No matter how well your dog progresses, don't let a new area tempt you to "test" him with a "mock trial." Remember to prepare, anticipate, and consider. Be prepared to correct; anticipate where your dog is most likely to make a mistake so you can immediately short-circuit and correct misbehavior. And remember, considering how to avoid mistakes doesn't

mean they go uncorrected. (In fact, inconsistent correction often is the cause of mistakes.) If you allow your dog to get away with a mistake one time in training, you can bet your life he will do it in the trial. The only test should be during the trial, under a judge...not in your yard or at the park or in class.

There is no “Tri” (or Try) in Training.

You may be tempted to try a skill or set of skills with no corrections or rewards to see how your dog will behave in a trial situation. Don't. Training is training and trials are trials. Too many times, I have heard handlers say they are not rewarding or correcting because “I can't do that in the trial.” That is why it is called TRAINING. Training builds good habits and dogs are creatures of habit. If you indulge in “dress rehearsals” when working with your dog, and your dog lags, moves during the stand, breaks his stay, or has a slow recall then you have planted the seed in his brain that sometimes he can get away with that. He will certainly try again. Probably during a trial. Continue rewarding obedience and correct every instance of disobedience right up to the moment the trial begins.

Don't forget to train yourself!

You and your dog are a team, so make sure you are holding up your end of the work.

Keep a log book of your practice sessions. For each practice session, record what you trained, where you trained, how long you trained and what problems occurred. Jot down any possible reasons you notice that might have caused problems—was there a distracting group of kids playing soccer nearby? Did an attractive bitch catch the eye of your intact young male? Once again, these are not reasons to excuse your dog, just facts you need to keep in mind as you plan your training.

You don't have to practice the whole routine each time you train. In fact, I don't recommend it because your dog will get bored. Keeping a log helps you remember what you've already practiced so you know the next time you train what your problems were the previous time. It will help you determine which skills just need a quick review and which should get more focused practice. It will also help you notice which skills are inconsistently good, so that you can look for reasons your dog sometimes "tanks" on an exercise he obviously knows. A log book is helpful also so that I can review what you have done and provide guidance based on specific information.

Know your job at the trial. Before you trial, make sure you are clear what is and is not allowed. If you make mistakes on technicalities in the rules, you are losing points for your dog. Similarly, don't let your nerves cause you to take extra steps or communicate non-verbal signals that will confuse your dog.

You and your dog will doubtless feel the adrenaline of competition, but stay focused and convey down the leash that while this is exciting, the rules haven't changed. Continue to correct disobedience. And whether you use an electric collar, pinch, nylon or chain, don't remove it till you walk into the trial.

The Trial is the Test

Remember, the trial is the only time you should "test" your dog. Your job, up until that moment, is to train. Training for a trial is a huge investment of time and effort. Don't waste that time and effort on just training to specific skills. You owe it to your dog and yourself to do good training that builds good habits, clear communication, and a strong bond with your dog. Of

course, even if you have done everything right, there may be problems at a trial. Even the best athletes may have an off day. But if you have been thoughtful and consistent, then that good training and those good habits should lead to good outcomes at the trial--and beyond.