



No Free Lunch

One of the iron rules of dog training is: *Make sure the dog knows why he's being corrected or rewarded.* Dogs learn by association, and they will associate a correction with what happened just before the correction and/or at the place the correction occurred. Therefore, if the dog did not know why he was corrected, he may associate the negative with something the trainer did not intend.

For example, if the dog were corrected where a bird had been planted but did not know why the hammer fell, he might think that bad things happen wherever there's bird scent. He has a way of solving that problem for himself – blinking. The dog purposely avoids the bird for fear of getting in trouble. A dog that becomes apprehensive from not knowing why he gets in trouble is very difficult to advance to higher levels of learning.

The other side of that is that *the dog should not be rewarded if he does not understand why.* Breaking this rule of dog training is as equally detrimental to advancing a dog to A+ standards as is indiscriminate correction.

Here's why. The dog is a pack animal, and he's constantly checking for weaknesses in the pack leader. Rewarding with treats or praising for no reason sends a message to the dog that he has a vote and that commands are an option. But dog training is not a democracy; the trainer holds *all* the votes.

Further, if the dog learns that he gets rewarded for no reason at all, he quickly perceives that he does not have

to try – he will get a paycheck whether he goes to work or not. There becomes no accountability or responsibility. A dog that gets paid for no effort is being reinforced for not trying. Not good.

Rewards are a big motivator. We want a program of incentives, so when the dog gives us an effort or desired behavior, we should reinforce it – only giving the dog his dinner after he sits, for example. By developing a program of only rewarding the dog for trying to give us something, we will develop a dog with an open mind for learning. A dog *who* tries to succeed is a pleasure to train.

The best time to instill a work ethic in the dog is during puppyhood. This is the period of time when the dog is learning what works for him. It is easier to imprint younger dogs than it is to correct learned behavior in older dogs. That said, a program of reinforcements for giving an effort is the prescription for rehabilitating any dog. Give me something, and I'll give you something. ●

Check out George's video training series (see ad elsewhere), which covers everything you need to know to take your retriever from a pup to a finished upland hunter. For more information on The George Hickox School of Dog Training for Owners and their Dogs, and Stonecreek English setters, pointers, and Labrador retrievers, check out www.georgehickox.com.

