



Realistic . Expectations

BY GEORGE HICKOX

The only short cut to training a dog is to do it right the first time. As the saying goes, preventive medicine is better than surgery. By pushing a dog too fast too far, trainers often find themselves in the dilemma of having to fix problems. Fixing is a whole bunch harder than developing a dog on the dog's timetable.

Using benchmarks and realistic expectations is of paramount importance. In order to mold a dog into a partner that complies with excellence and tail-wagging enthusiasm, a number of repetitions are required. A successful trainer cements desired behaviors with repetitions. When you think the dog has it, repeat, repeat, and then repeat again.

When a trainer skimps on repetitions, the dog is shortchanged. A trainer operating under the philosophy "That is good enough" will inevitably

end up putting more pressure on the dog because the dog will fail when he has not had enough repetitions under guidance to ensure success. No dog will look stylish and confident by being corrected more. Any training program that ensures the dog will receive more corrections is not a blueprint for blue-ribbon success.

In our training schools I hear far too often owners stating that their dog is only 10 months old (or some young age) and the dog is almost finished. There are no 10-month-old National Champions. A 10-month-old dog could not have had as many repetitions as a 4-year-old dog. In my opinion this would be an unrealistic expectation. There is no badge of honor to have the youngest dog ever trained. The badge of honor is earned by having the best dog ever trained.

An advantage we have as canine trainers is that

we do not have to graduate a dog to the next grade until he achieves an A+ in the current grade. In the public school system, students move to the next grade although they had a C- in the previous grade. If we were to take that approach in dog training, our dogs would inevitably fail because there would not be a solid foundation established to support more advanced training. A knowledgeable and successful teacher of dogs does not graduate the canine pupil to the next level of training until the dog has earned an A+ at the current level of learning.

Dog training is a building-block approach. The new behavior or response is built on what has been previously learned by the dog. Each exercise being taught should help the dog learn the next more advanced task. The approach of hammering a square peg into a round hole does

not work well in developing enthusiastic canine learners that look forward to school and approach new learning with an open mind.

Learning should begin early in the dog's life during the imprinting stage that occurs through the first 20 weeks of the dog's development. During this period the dog is learning what life is all about and what works for him. This is the time to guide the dog down the right road. Unlearning learned behavior is difficult, and trainers are much wiser to not be guilty of rewarding a dog for unwanted behaviors and rewarding desired behaviors.

In pointing breeds, the behavior of standing should be the default behavior. By default behavior, I mean that when in doubt the dog stands. When Pupster stands, he is rewarded with a treat. I am looking to develop the pointer who stands because this behavior gains him a treat. In the beginning I am not issuing a command. I am simply trying to develop a dog that offers the behavior of standing because it works for him and not because he has to stand.

I use clicker training in the foundational stages. During the initial stages of training, I implement positive reinforcement for the behaviors I am seeking to establish as default behaviors. By incorporating positive reinforcement and marking the desired behavior with the clicker, we are able to teach a dog that he can earn a paycheck by trying. A lack of effort results in no reward.

Once the dog is offering a desired behavior of standing reliably, I say the command "Whoa" as the dog is offering the behavior. I will only say the command one time. Because I said the command as the dog was offering the behavior, I have guaranteed the outcome. The dog will be rewarded. I will then give the command to whoa. If the dog whoas, he is rewarded. If he does not whoa, the paycheck is withheld. Again, I do not repeat the command if the dog does not whoa the first time. The objective is not to get the dog to eventually whoa, but rather to get the dog to

whoa the first time he receives the command.

Earlier I said we incorporate benchmarks. When I outlined the creation of stand as a default behavior, benchmarks guided the approach. If the dog was not reliably offering a specific behavior in order to earn a reward, I did not start teaching what the command whoa meant. I said the command "Whoa" as the dog was offering the behavior that he had already been offering reliably.



My next benchmark is the 80-percent rule. When the dog responds to the command eight out of 10 times in yard training, I incorporate avoidance training. In avoidance training there is a consequence and correction for noncompliance the first time a command is given. I do not believe that rewards alone or the withholding of the treat alone will develop a consistent response to a command under all circumstances.

We train bird dogs. A bird dog is possessed for birds. The withholding of a piece of food if the dog roots out or chases a bird will not develop a dog that will whoa with a bird in front of him until

the cows come home. It just is not going to happen. Generalization and proofing to a command must be trained. Generalization means the dog responds to a command everywhere. Proofing means the dog responds to the command even though subjected to major distractions.

The bird is a major distraction for a genetically possessed bird dog. If the dog will not stop upon command with no birds involved, he absolutely is not going to obey the whoa command in the field when birds are involved. This would not be realistic. If the command whoa has not been generalized, then commanding whoa to a dog around birds may lead to blinking. Blinking is when the dog smells a bird and purposely leaves the area in order to avoid the possibility of a correction because he believes getting closer to the bird was the cause of a negative consequence. It is critical that the dog knows not stopping was the cause, not the bird.

In the case of teaching a pointing dog to have immaculate bird manners and stand game with style, it is imperative the dog has a number of repetitions of responding to the whoa command before being taught to point birds reliably and not creep in on the birds. Repetitions take time. The more repetitions the dog has, the more reliable the dog will be. Any dog! No matter what the task or commands a trainer is seeking to teach the canine student, the prescription is to take the time to do repetitions, be realistic about expectations, and follow benchmarks. ■

A professional trainer and handler of pointing and flushing dogs, George Hickox conducts four-day and one-day training schools for owners and their dogs. For more information on the George Hickox School of Dog Training or Hickox's two training DVDs, "Training Pointing Dogs" and "Training the Upland Retriever," please visit www.georgehickox.com.