



## The Four Sins

by George Hickox

The four training sins – *variable reinforcement; free lunch; twice, twice; and correcting or rewarding the dog without his understanding why* – are an impediment for trainers. A cardinal rule of canine training is: Do not be guilty of committing any of the four sins. They will handicap the dog's advancement to higher levels of training. A dog that is repeatedly subjected to any or all of the above will need fixing, and fixing is the difficult part of training.

Canine behaviors that are learned through variable reinforcement are extremely difficult to extinguish. A dog is genetically capable of taking a hit. He is not a quitter. His ances-

tor the wolf does not always win in a battle with a moose – he may have taking a beating and gotten kicked and battered. Just because he lost doesn't stop him from trying to bring down a moose in the future. Think of a gambling addict who sits at the table and loses repeatedly. Why does he keep coming back? Because he won – once. If he never won he would not be thinking, *I lost last time but maybe I will win the next time*. Thus, the gambler's behavior was not *always* rewarded but was *variably* rewarded. A dog whose behavior is variably rewarded (reinforced) will take the hit this time in order to perhaps win the next time.

A dog that is in the process of being trained to wait for a release command before retrieving will be much more difficult to make reliably steady if he sometimes breaks and gets the bird. If the dog perceives he is rewarded by breaking, he will require more pressure later on in the attempts to correct that behavior. Variable reinforcement is detrimental to developing reliability and something that guarantees a trainer will have to use more and more pressure on the dog. Any training program that is based on administering more punishment is not a top program and will result in the dog exhibiting a lack of style and an open mind toward new learning.

A dog should earn his paychecks. If the dog is constantly getting a free lunch and does not have to earn the reward, why should he give an effort? In my training, I use a lot of rewards. I reward when the dog offers desired behaviors, particularly when I'm teaching new behaviors. When I'm teaching the "recall" command, I reward when the dog comes to me whether on command or on his own initiative. A reward is a paycheck for a job well done. If the dog never receives a paycheck for trying, he will give up trying.

But a dog that is constantly rewarded for doing nothing will not develop a strong enough work ethic. A welfare system approach to dog training does not work. It is a simple deal: The dog gives me something, I will give him something. This rule applies in the house, at the kennel, in yard training, and in the field.

The training objective is not to get the dog to eventually respond. The objective is to develop a dog that responds to the cue/command with excellence in a timely fashion the first time he receives the cue/command.

Issuing the command twice, twice will not develop a blue ribbon performer. If the dog did not comply with the command the first time it's received and there was no consequence, that is variable reinforcement. If an owner is consistently guilty of saying, "Here-Here-Here," the dog will perceive there is an option to recall and will not respond reliably. Canine training is not a democracy. There is not an option to comply. When the dog responds to the cue/command with excellence, he is rewarded with a paycheck. If the dog blows off the cue/command, there is a penalty.

A dog should never be corrected or rewarded if he does not understand what behavior resulted in a negative or positive consequence. Dogs learn by association. It is of paramount importance that we guarantee the dog links the cause with the effect, whether the result of his behavior results in a paycheck or a penalty. If the dog does not understand what behavior caused a reward, he cannot knowingly repeat the desired behavior in order to gain the reward again. If the

dog does not perceive what undesired behavior caused a negative, he will not have a solution to avoid the negative consequences in the future. A dog that is punished without perceiving he can prevent the sky from falling will become apprehensive or case-hardened – neither type will respond well to new training.

The blueprint for developing an enthusiastic dog that responds with excellence and style to cues/commands the first time he receives them is for the trainer to teach the dog with consistent repetitions, reward for the desired behaviors, correct for the undesired behaviors, and not be guilty of the four sins. ●

Check out George's video training series, available from *The Pointing Dog Journal's* Video Library. The series covers everything you need to know to take your pointing dog from a pup to a finished hunter. For more information on The George Hickox School of Dog Training for Owners and their Dogs, and their pointers and Labrador retrievers, check out [www.georgehickox.com](http://www.georgehickox.com).

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