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Repetition – Your Key to Training Success

Last month I wrote about training so as not to confuse your dog. This occurs when the handler or owner is inconsistent in the use commands or corrections. Repetition goes hand in hand with preventing confusion. The only way a dog is not going to be confused is if the handler, trainer or owner repeats the exercise enough times, using the same words and/or commands, so the dog understands what his expected response should be.

For example, if I am teaching a dog an automatic sit from the heel position, I take about five to ten steps forward, slow down, stop bringing my left foot to my right and command the dog to sit. I do this repeatedly until the dog is beginning to sit before the command is given. At that point I stop saying the sit command and just stop, knowing that I practiced enough for that session, that the dog knows he must automatically sit. When I am teaching a new exercise like the automatic sit, I do not teach anything else during that session. I eliminate the chance for the dog to think about any other exercise except for sitting when I stop walking. But not only sitting, sitting in the correct position for the automatic sit.

Eliminate Distractions

My training center is not big, by any means, but it is big enough to work a dog without distractions. When I am teaching a new exercise, I go in my back training room, without any distractions (visual or audible) and train the new exercise. This is where I also go to work on problems.

Dogs can not learn when they are (a) distracted or (b) in too high of a drive. So, my training room works out to my advantage. I break down exercises into small segments; I work on the segments and then put them together so the complete exercise is done. I will work on one segment a training session. Once the dog performs that segment flawlessly, during my next training session I will introduce the second segment and add it to the first, once again when the dog is flawless, I add the third segment to the first two.

Distractions

Once my dog can complete an exercise without flaws, I add distractions. I will go to a shopping center or my training field at my club and put the exercise together. But this is after working on the segments for about three to four days without distractions.

Most of you know that I compete in both AKC and Schutzhund; most recently, just Schutzhund. Schutzhund consists of three phases; tracking, obedience and protection. When I run into a problem or find a problem that I need to address during a trial, I go back

to my training room and break the exercise down into segments. Often I spend as much as two weeks working on a problem before I ever do it on the field again.

But, each and every time I reintroduce that exercise back to the field with the distractions of people, other dogs and protection when my dog is very high in drive; my dog understands what I want from him and behaves as if he and I were all alone in my training room. This is only because of the repetition that I do in the quiet of my training room.

Taking your time

I don't test my dog with distractions before I have done all of my homework. I don't test with distractions until I am 99.9% sure of how my dog is going to respond. If there is any doubt in my head that the dog is still confused or not flawless during practice in my training room, I do not add distractions.

This is a gut feeling that you have to go with, i.e. determining when your dog is ready. It takes more than repeating the exercise 5 times and then testing, five days before adding distractions. Remember, it takes humans 30 days to make or break a habit; there is no way your dog is going to understand an exercise after practicing a few times.

If your foundation for training is strong, problems are going to be easy to overcome. The only way to have a strong foundation is to (1) break the exercise down into segments and (2) repeat each segment often before putting the segments together. The greatest thing about working in segments is that you can always go back a couple of segments and not have to start the exercise from the beginning.

It is easier mentally on the dog to work in segments, because each success is a quick win for him. If you do the complete exercise, and your dog makes many mistakes; the corrections for each mistake will discourage your dog because he never has success.

Conclusion

I am firm believer in laying a strong foundation when training and the only way to do that is to repeat segments over and over. It may take a little longer to get where you want to go but I will guarantee that you will never have to start from step one when a problem arises and I guarantee that your dog will overcome problems, distractions and obstacles easily if he has a strong foundation for the training for that particular exercise.

Beth Bradley

Beth Bradley began studying animal behavior and dog training at 12 years of age. She became a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer in 1986. Beth graduated Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice. Throughout her schooling, Beth worked and studied under many well-renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. Beth formed her own company in 1989 and has made dog training her full time career since 1995. Beth is also a writer for the *Animal Companion*, she has produced CD-ROMs and DVD's on training and is author of a training book titled *Real World Dog Training*.

Beth is a member of the German Shepherd Dog Club of America, the German Shepherd Dog Club of America – Working Dog Association, the United Schutzhund Clubs of America, and she is Secretary and Training Director of the Greater Philadelphia Schutzhund Club. Beth actively competes in both American Kennel Club and Schutzhund Trials both in the United States of America and Europe. Beth is a certified Canine Good Citizen Evaluator for the American Kennel Club. Beth can be contacted via the web at www.dog-trainer.biz or her business (201) 247-8472.