

Avoidance Training

Praise and biscuits are great. They make our dogs wag their tails, which brings smiles to our faces. Wouldn't it be great if a few treats and "at-taboys" would make your dog exhibit exemplary obedience and control in the field or duck blind? The reality is that gundog trainers must incorporate pressure into their training programs if they expect to enjoy any kind of control in the field.

In yard training treats can be used to teach dogs the basic obedience commands of "Sit," "Come," "Stay," "Kennel" and "Heel." Clicker training works also for teaching these commands. In clicker training the dog is conditioned to the sound of the clicker being a good thing. This conditioning is done without using commands; simply click and then follow with a treat. To maximize the dog's association that a treat will follow the sound of the click, the treat should follow the click within 1½ seconds.

Once the dog has been conditioned to the clicker, the clicker should be incorporated into the yard training. For example, with the command "Kennel," first show the dog what the command means by putting it in the kennel while encouragingly saying, "Kennel, kennel, kennel." At this stage the dog is being taught what the command means—which it must know before it can be expected to respond. Compliance to the command comes later.

Once the dog is in the kennel, give a click and a treat. After a few consistent repetitions of giving the command, showing the dog what the command means, and then giving a click and a treat, the dog will begin going into the kennel in anticipation of the click and treat. The treat is then left out and the sound of the clicker becomes the reward.

By teaching the dog the basic obedience



Consistency is the key to avoidance training, with a dog learning that by complying with a command the first time, it will avoid negative reinforcement.

commands using clicker training, a happy, enthusiastic pup will develop. The dog will be complying with the yard commands because it is getting something out of it. And believe me, a dog that is doing something for itself is a lot more reliable.

But the hunting dog is a predator, and training based on biscuits, praise and clickers is of no consequence in the field. A bird dog should be genetically predisposed to seek game and be possessed by birds. If a quail and a biscuit were placed side by side, a real bird dog would not go to the biscuit. If it did, you'd know its genetics were lacking in terms of hunting desire and drive.

We can train a dog to respond in the yard—with no birds—by using positive reinforcement. In the field we can train a dog to hunt in control, respond to commands and exhibit proper manners only by incorporating avoidance training. In avoidance training the dog learns to avoid a negative by complying with a command or cue. For example, a dog learns that if it

chases a bird, a negative will follow. If it doesn't chase a bird, it avoids the negative—and that becomes a positive. If the dog does not respond to the "Here" or "Come" command, a negative follows. If it does respond to the recall command, it avoids the negative. Naturally, a dog would rather chase a bird than come back. But avoidance training properly applied motivates a dog to return instead of following its predatory instincts to chase. Once the dog has learned that responding in some manner results in it avoiding a negative, it will be motivated to respond. It then will be responding for itself, which, as mentioned, makes compliance more reliable.

The bottom line is that if the dog is not corrected, it cannot learn from its lack of effort. We are looking for a conditioned response. We want a pointing dog that slams on point and holds it every time it smells a bird. We want a flushing or retrieving breed that responds to our sit or recall command every time, not occasionally.

The principles of avoidance training are based on cause and effect. Simply put: If a dog exhibits the desired behavior, a good thing happens. The good thing is that the dog avoids the bad things that would follow an undesirable behavior or response. For example, if a trainer were to blow a whistle command for "Sit" for a flushing dog and the dog made no effort to comply, a negative stimulus would follow immediately.

To apply avoidance training in the field, it is imperative that basic obedience work has been completed in the yard. Never assume that your dog will handle pressure without first completing this yard work. One reason is that a dog must associate negative reinforcement with a specific act and not a bird. For example, if a pointing dog that has not been taught "Whoa" were

to root out a bird, then fail to obey the command "Whoa," and then be corrected for failing to comply, bad things could result. The dog could associate the negative reinforcement with the bird as opposed to its failure to stop. This unintended association could lead to blinking—the purposeful avoidance of birds.

At the risk of being redundant, a trainer should understand that a dog learns by associating cause and effect at the place the "effect" occurred. The longer the time between the cause and the effect, the less likely it is that the dog will associate its behavior with the result. If a trainer does not understand and incorporate these principles, the dog will never be as enthusiastic as it could be. In fact, poorly timed corrections could result in a dog that stops hunting altogether.

To implement avoidance training in the field, a known command is given once. If the dog does not comply, a negative stimulus follows. This does not necessarily mean electronic-collar stimulation. A jerk on a check cord for not turning in a patterning drill or the use of a pinch collar for failing to comply with "Whoa" in a point drill are both avoidance-training techniques. If the command "Whoa" were given and the dog ignored it, and then it felt the bite of a pinch collar, the dog would associate its failure to comply with the discomfort. The key is that a trainer must be consistent and administer a correction every time the dog fails to make an effort.

Inconsistent correction following commands is variable reinforcement. Behavior learned this way is much more difficult to modify. Think of a gambling addict. Even though the majority of times the gambler loses, his occasional win leads him to think that maybe the next time he will hit the jackpot. If he had never cashed a ticket

or hit a blackjack, he would not hold any hope for an exception. The same applies to dogs. Even if correction follows most failures, if a dog gets away with non-compliance just a few times, it will continue to challenge, with the expectation that the next time its "escape hatch" (fight, flight or fakery) may work.

Therefore, as in all dog training, consistency is the key to avoidance training. To implement control in the field, negative reinforcement must follow a dog's lack of compliance every time. If a dog expects that it will receive e-collar correction for not recalling upon command, it will respond to "Here" or "Come." By responding the first time, the dog avoids the negative reinforcement.

Because dogs are so place oriented and the timing of the cause-and-effect pairing is so critical, the most effective avoidance training incorporates the electronic collar. With the development of e-collar systems incorporating variable low-level intensities, proper corrections can be matched to individual dogs. Without the use of the e-collar, it is virtually impossible to orchestrate the proper timing of cause and effect when the dog is away from the handler. The benefit of properly employed e-collar training is that the trainer can correct with the right amount of pressure at the right moment.

Understand how a dog learns, complete yard training, and incorporate the knowledgeable use of remote e-collar training in avoidance training. If more owners applied these little rules, there would be a lot more better-performing dogs in the field.



For more information about George Hickox or his training methods, visit www.georgehickox.com.

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