

Real Expectations

By now we have made it through the holiday season and are into the new year. The beginning of a new year or a new task is a great time to set goals or align expectations. This should include our expectations and our goals with our hunting companion as well. The trouble with training your dog to be a well behaved obedient companion dog or a well trained hunting companion is that in theory explanations are simple. In practice, however, it becomes more complicated and so most dogs are not trained and poor behavior is accepted and many times even expected.

With the exception of about 10% of the dogs in this country, the training of a dog is less than ten commands or tasks which you need to do over 500 times each. Once you have mastered this you are on your way to a trained dog. Many of us living in 2003 are caught up in what I refer to as the "Mastercard mentality," 0% down, no payments for 15 months, go now- pay later, don't save up but have in now. Dog training doesn't work that way. It is like making deposits into an account, small regular deposits, over and over and over again. Years of small deposits are the training sessions that will pay you back twofold.

You can make withdrawals as long as you don't take out more than you have put in. Deficit spending does not work in dog training. What will work is many small deposits and occasional withdrawals. In other words, train-train-train and enjoy some small successes in the beginning but larger more comprehensive payments of positive behavior as the dog matures. This practice is the key to success in dog training.

The next train of thought will not only burst your bubble, but will hurt your feelings as well: Your dog does not do good things or behave well because it loves you or is bonded to you. If it has done good things without training it is because it felt like doing the act at that time, or because you were lucky.

As a pro trainer many, many dog owners will come here and show me what they have trained their dog to do. When I go hunting with different people they are also excited to show me what they have done with their dogs. Unfortunately, the dogs' behavior does not meet their expectations in the situations. It seldom unconditionally obeys the owner, and yet when I step in I get the desired response (without exception).

The question I ask all of them is: "Why does your dog listen and obey me (a person the dog does not love or has not bonded with) better than it does to you?" My answer is two-fold: First, I give the dog a clear command such as, "Buck come." I do not expand and say, "Buck come, come on boy, Buck get over here, Buck you know better than this, Buck, Buck, Buck, please come, Now Buck, COME! Come on Buck, we really need to get going, now come."

I do not elevate my voice and scream out of control because it serves no purpose. The dog hears you just fine. People react in this way out of frustration, not understanding at that moment, once you have already lost control of your dog, no amount of talking, reasoning, and yelling will make him obey. Persistent training and clear, concise commands will keep your dogs' behavior in check. Training for good behavior and having realistic expectations and consequences keeps your dog healthy and enjoyable.

The second thing I do that allows me to be successful in dog handling is that I do whatever it takes to make the dog comply. Yes, at times that does mean discomfort to the dog, but more often it is emotional discomfort to the owner. We have developed into a very polite, fluffy society and have come to believe out of self-importance that the dog should comply, especially since my dog loves me so much and has bonded with me. However, just as a parent has a

responsibility in child rearing, we have a responsibility to our dog to take the necessary steps in training and handling to protect our animals. We need to provide the safest environment and to exercise control over the animal to train it to be a good citizen. Until it is mature and trained to a degree that it obeys unconditionally it is your responsibility to do whatever it takes to keep your dog out of harms way. As my wife always reminds me in reference to our children, "I am their parent and their teacher first, I am not their friend. Someday I can be their friend, but for now I have a responsibility to them and I will follow through on that because I love them." End of story.

Another example of this situation is that on several occasions I have hunted with others. They have commanded (more like pleaded or begged) the dog to do something. They continue with the stream of requests and 9 times out of 10 the dog blows them off. When I make the owner aware of what is happening the most frequently asked question is (often in a defensive way), "Well you're the dog trainer, what should I do now?"

The problem is not what to do now, it is what should we have done before. This dog is only doing what it has been trained (allowed) to do. We need to go back to the leash, check cord, E-collar or maybe a little physical correction with the dog. If you train your dog to do what you expect of it and then you follow through with the expectation and then a consequence for noncompliance you are behaving in a truly responsible, and yes, loving way. Consistent clear commands followed by consequences for non compliance (not to be confused with punishment) is the key to successful dog handling.

Unfortunately, most people will start with repeated voice commands followed by louder, faster, more confusing commands, followed by screaming or whistle blowing. The dog knows the routine and that the next step will be that the owner will simply give up and the dog gets to continue to do as it wishes. The owner has trained the dog that the WORDS MEAN NOTHING- without action.

The reason on paper sounds simple-make many deposits of training and correct the dog no matter what when it disobeys. Follow through with a leash correction, check cord, E-collar, or run the dog down (without saying a word!), or go in the water when it is fooling around with a duck and won't come to shore. You should see the look on a playful retriever's face when a fast moving 225 lb human is closing in on it when it is out playing in the decoys. I have done this many times and yes, I get wet and cold but I also get the peace of mind that with this continued activity on my part I will have a dog that will be under control and therefore safe. I expect a behavior and am prepared to do what I need to do to get the behavior in order to keep my dog and myself safe. In this way of training and handling a dog it knows there are consequences to its action or lack of it and it complies because of this, not because it loves me or is bonded to me.

To get back to the original point, don't expect your dog to learn obedience in the hunting scene. This year, for example, my Grouse, Woodcock, and duck season were all short lived. We had extreme heat at first combined with 40% decrease in birds due to spring rain and cold. Add to that an injured back, a week of the flu an unexpected problem with the duck boat and an early winter. How could you enjoy a short season if you are busy chasing and yelling at your dog?

You need to go into the season, short or long with a dog ready to perform. You need the basics way before opening day-train, train, train.

As you have this break over the winter think about training and then do it. Start today with short obedience sessions and as soon as April come train three sessions a week until October and you and your companion will out do your expectations.

Good luck and great hunting,

John

at Kirby Mountain Kennels

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