

Identifying the Behavior

by George Hickox

It's imperative to understand that a dog is an associating machine. Association – the pairing of at least two occurrences – is something all dogs do, and dog training is based on ensuring that the canine student makes the desired connection between cause and effect. That's also why it's imperative that the dog understands why he is being rewarded or punished.

When the trained retriever receives the cue/command of a whistle blast, he sits. When he sits, he is rewarded by avoiding a correction and perhaps with a bit of hot dog or a retrieve, which makes him more likely to repeat the desired behavior. Punishment as the sole training method is not an effective program to develop a dog that responds reliably with excellence and style – he also needs positive reinforcement.

For the dog to know that the specific behavior he's exhibiting at that exact moment will result in either a reward or a punishment, notification must be given while the behavior is occurring and not after the behavior has ended. Think of notifying the dog as taking a picture: The picture captures the exact moment that the dog is exhibiting a behavior that will be followed by something good in the case of desirable behavior and something bad in the case of undesirable behavior. If the picture is snapped at the wrong time, the canine will perceive that what he was doing at the exact moment the picture was taken caused the positive or negative. However, the same notification cannot be used to identify both good behavior and bad behavior – it should be clear, distinct, and understandable to the dog that a reward or correction is forthcoming, depending on the behavior being offered.

To identify a desired behavior, I use a clicker. The word “yes” could be used,

but the clicker is distinct, unique, and carries no emotion with it. Unwanted behavior could be identified with the word “no” or “bad.” What is important is that the identifier is consistent so the dog can understand that the reward or discipline that follows is caused by the behavior he is doing at that exact moment.

Once the behavior is identified, a reward or punishment must follow. For example, if an owner said, “No!” and no punishment followed, the dog would perceive the, “No!” as a bluff (crying, “Wolf!” is not a smart training tactic). Likewise, if a driver were doing 60 miles an hour in a 35-mile-per-hour zone and the police cruiser's blue lights came on, the driver would probably immediately slow down to 35 miles per hour – but he'd still get a ticket. The blue lights were the notification that what the operator was doing right then was what got him in trouble; the behavior he offered after the notification did not prevent the ticket. The same holds true in identifying a desired behavior: The correction or reward must follow the identifier.

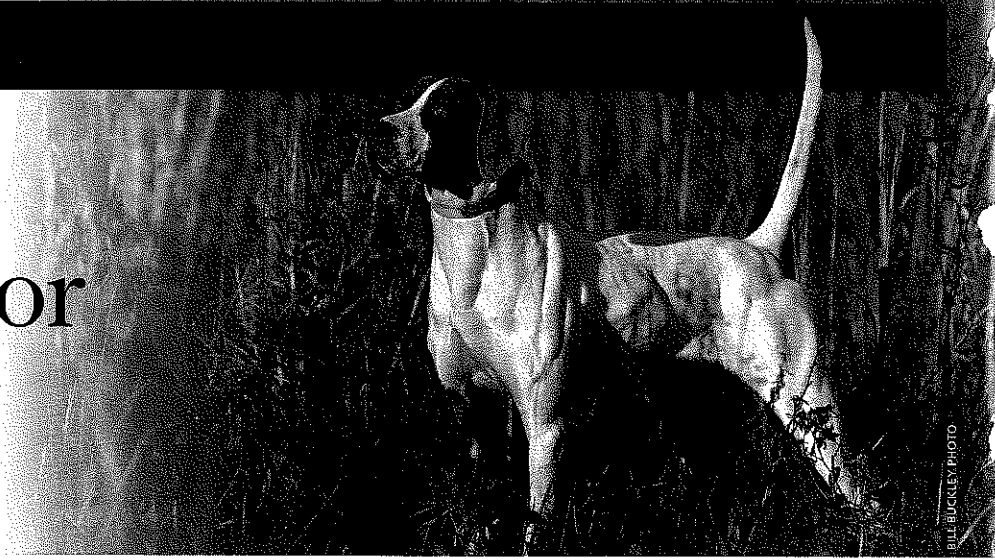
I also use an e-collar for notification. The D.T. Systems 2420 and 1830 series has a jump mode I can set to the stimulation level I want. I can also set my momentary and continuous stimulation separate from the intensity in jump mode. In e-collar introduction and conditioning, I establish the lowest level the dog feels (for more on this, our training DVDs explain introduction to the e-collar in depth). This becomes my notifier in the nick/momentary

mode. My correction is the jump mode. Any e-collar system that lets you send a low-level identifier and follow up with a higher level of stimulation can be used.

As an example, let's say that an individual dog can feel level 1. If he were chasing a deer, he could feel level 1, but it would only be a tingle, and the dog would not perceive this level as a correction. I press the nick button set at level one. That is the notification that the behavior the dog is exhibiting at that point in time is bad and a punishment is going to result. I then press the jump button, which is set to a higher level that the dog will perceive as punishment. The behavior was identifiable, and the identifier was immediate. The punishment was inescapable.

I believe this offers a big advantage in training to ensure that the dog makes the intended association. Also, by identifying the behavior before receiving the correction, the dog has time to process and more clearly understand that a correction is going to follow and is better prepared for it. He is much less likely to remain apprehensive if the behavior is identified before the punishment is meted out. ●

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 Stonecreek English setters, pointers, and Labrador retrievers, check out www.georgehickox.com.



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