

The Right Start

BY GEORGE HICKO



How can anyone not fall in love with a new puppy? No matter how many puppies you've had, the excitement and anticipation of getting your hands on a new hopeful never diminishes.

As we all have come to understand, it all starts with genetics. A puppy from a family tree that has produced a multitude of champions is the first place to begin. A pup whose dam and sire and granddam and grandsire on both sides of a blue-ribbon pedigree have demonstrated they can be trained to a high standard has a much better chance than a pup from a poor gene pool.

However, genetics alone will not produce a dog that will excel in the woods and water, handle to voice and whistle, exhibit breathtaking style, and display stellar manners. The proven formula is a trilogy of great genetics, proper training and top-tier nutrition. Without incorporating a sound training program and superior nutrition during the life of the dog, it is impossible for the young pupil to maximize his genetic ability.



Establishing a Few Rules

The pup is a sponge, and in the early stages of learning what life is about, it is imperative that bad habits are not reinforced. The age-old adage that preventive surgery is better than surgery after the fact certainly is applicable to the young pup. Anyone who has remodeled a house will tell you it is much easier and less expensive to build the house from the start with a good set of blueprints. The young pup is learning what works for him. It is up to the owner/trainer to be a mentor and guide the protégé to become the dog he can be. The right start to shaping the canine pupil's behavior and personality begins with a few rules.

At the top of our list of not to be broken rules is "Do not correct or reward the dog if the canine student does not know why." Additionally we do not want to be guilty of variable reinforcement when we correct the dog for a behavior we do not want him to continue to exhibit. Included in our foundational premises of training we never want to give the command

or cue more than once, and we do not want to offer a free lunch program. We identify the dog's behavior while the behavior is occurring before rewarding or correcting. This is, in our opinion, the correct prescription for minimizing training problems down the road and for developing a confident and happy puppy.

Dogs learn by association. It is imperative that the dog makes the association the trainer is attempting to cement. If the dog does not comprehend why he was corrected or rewarded, the trainer has opened the dog up to form an association that makes future schooling more difficult. It is impossible to say to the dog, "Forget it. I did not mean that." If the dog forms an association of cause and effect strengthened by a very positive or very negative effect then it may only take one repetition before cause and effect is established.

The dog does not have a crystal ball, and it is impossible for him to know what the trainer is thinking. Repetitions of a reinforcer perceived by the dog as a positive following a specific behavior strengthen the specific behavior. Lack of repetitions and positive reinforcers weakens a behavior. If the dog does not know what behavior (the cause) resulted in a paycheck (the effect), then he is not motivated to repeat the desired behavior or response. The owner/handler must ensure the dog knows why the effect occurred, whether positive or negative, in order to prevent the dog from forming an association that may be difficult to degrade or extinguish.

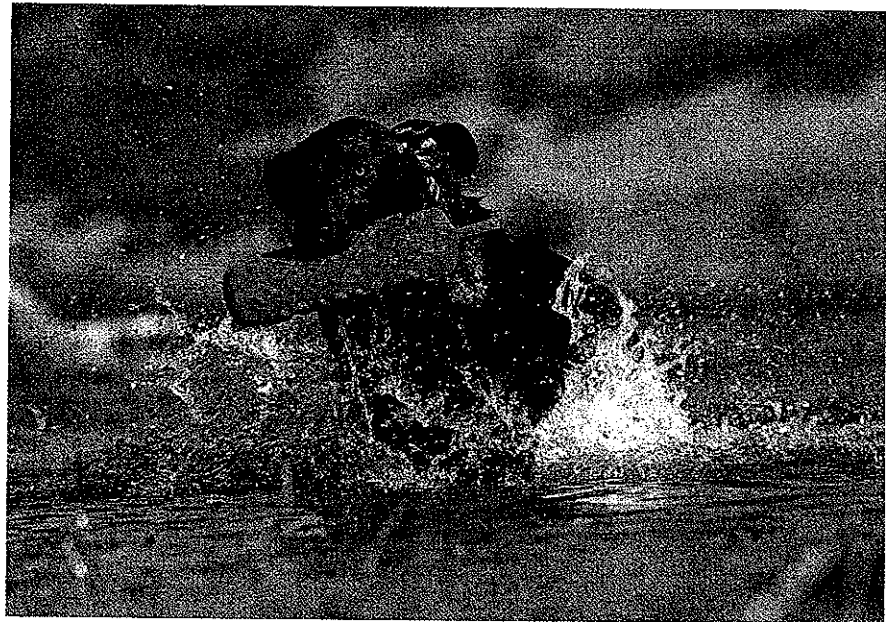
It is difficult to degrade a behavior if the dog receives variable reinforcement. Think of the gambling addict who goes to the table, yet loses and loses. Why does he continue to go back? Because once he won. If the dog begged at the dinner table and was rewarded for his efforts by a tasty piece of steak, he would likely beg the next time. So the owner corrects him for the unwanted behavior. Eventually with enough corrections the undesirable behavior degrades. However, if down the road the dog is once more rewarded for begging with a morsel of food, the behavior will come roaring back with a vengeance. The dog perceives that even though he was corrected the last time perhaps his efforts will be rewarded the next time. Variable reinforcement will ensure that the dog will have to be corrected more often. Any training program — even if given inadvertently — that demands more correction is not a good one. Style and confidence will never be the outcome of a program based on more correction.

Another rule is "Do not say the command twice." The objective is not to get the dog to eventually respond. The goal is to teach the dog to comply with style the first time he receives the cue or command. Once a second command is given the dog cannot learn to respond on the first command. The

second command whitewashes the first command and will make learning for the dog more difficult.

Our initial yard training begins with clicker training. The clicker notifies the dog of the behavior he is offering at that exact moment that will result in a reward. The dog is not left in limbo as to what specific behavior he exhibited that resulted in a positive for him. In yard training, we first get the behavior, and then identify the behavior by clicking as the behavior is occurring, and then rewarding.

Once the dog is reliably offering the behavior in order to receive a reward we introduce the command. Clicker training will develop an enthusiastic dog



that learns quickly and looks forward to going to school. If a dog is apprehensive when he enters the classroom, new learning is handicapped. We do not subscribe to a free lunch program. We require the dog to offer us a behavior before giving a reward. Do something for us, and we will do something for you.

Giving rewards without asking for an effort does not motivate a dog to try to succeed. I also believe the undesirable behavior that the dog is exhibiting must be identified to the dog before a correction. If the dog was in the garbage, I would say, "No," before correcting. By identifying the behavior as it is occurring, the trainer guarantees that the dog makes the proper association of cause and effect. ❀

A professional trainer and handler of pointing and flushing dogs, George Hickox conducts four-day and one-day training schools for owners and their dogs. For more information on the George Hickox School of Dog Training, or Hickox's two training DVDs, "Training Pointing Dogs" and "Training the Upland Retriever," please visit www.georgehickox.com.