

Attention and Control fundamentals in the Schutzhund Competition Dog:

Attention Training & Heeling

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In my last article I discussed some training techniques for enhancing all around control in a beginning Schutzhund competition dog. In this article I wish to deal directly with competitive heeling. Competitive heeling refers to heeling with attention and displaying a picture of enthusiasm, correctness, and control. Good heeling is a thing of beauty, a partnership between trainer and dog.

Good attentive heeling is so important to a competition dog because it sets the tone for all of your work, and I mean all. It helps to control and focus your dog, before tracking on your approach to the scent pad, not to mention it is present in virtually all of your obedience and protection exercises. There is no reason for poor heeling, yet we observe it all the time. I will attempt to share with you some techniques I have employed for teaching competitive heeling. I want to make it clear that I have borrowed ideas and techniques from many other trainers and have used them in a way that suits a given dog's particular temperament. I have learned a lot from other competition trainers I have known, watched and read, and I owe them a debt of gratitude. Many of these techniques I will discuss have been around a long time, and have been refined by those that have used them. In this article I will describe some techniques. A technique is useless if it is not applied with a proper understanding of timing (of both rewards and corrections) and when to move on to the next step, after proper time has been devoted to repetition. Additionally, you must use your own creativity as a trainer to make adjustments during the process to help your dog achieve the picture you desire. Thus, what I present here are some guidelines, as the trainer you must make the recipe your own based on what you know about your dog's strengths and weaknesses.

I cannot emphasize enough, that to be a good competition trainer, one must understand how dogs learn and process information. A thorough understanding of the processes of operant and classical conditioning is very important. It always amazes me how many people join a training club and do not make the investment to read and learn about what they are doing. If you wish to be competitive, you must be a student of dog training before you will be a practitioner. Areas like learning theory, behavior, and methods are important foundations for the aspiring trainer.

Canine Requirements

I prefer the dog to have both high food drive and high object drive (I like jute rolls rather than balls or other toys), but you can get away with only food drive if that is all your dog displays. What if he has neither food nor object drive? Find a new competition dog. All kidding aside, our goal is to mold an attentive picture of driven work, no drive, no driven work, that simple.

I break my heeling training into 2 parts: the attention phase, and the drive phase. In the attention phase, we teach the dog what attention is, and then we teach him that this attention is mandatory. When we are finished with this phase, neither the food nor our toy are required as "attractors" to the dog for his attention, meaning that they are not necessary for the dog to be attentive. We need not rely on the dog believing the ball is in our coat in order for him to be attentive, because we teach him that attention is mandatory. Yes, attention is also rewarded, and inattention is corrected. I will deal with the motivation vs. compulsion question at the end of this article, although I have never had a problem with a dog showing very high drive in heeling despite the mandatory nature of the training.

In the drive phase, once we have taught attention and then established the mandatory nature of attention, we increase the power of our reward, moving from food to a jute roll as a reward. Since I began in Schutzhund I used a jute to reward my competition dogs. However, it was not until I met my friend Rich Pastucka of Holzland Kennels (trainer of Uras vom Haus Anja SchH 3, world team member), that I learned how a jute can be used to achieve unbelievable results. I have never seen anyone work a dog in obedience with faster hands, better timing, or more remarkable technique than Rich.

Why a jute roll? It complements our protection phase for obvious reasons, but also, it keeps the focus on the handler. The reward is not thrown away from the handler, like with a ball, and the dog is taught to focus and drive into the handler for his reward. It allows us to reward, and keep the continuity of the exercise. We can also build frustration by making the dog miss the bite on the reward, ultimately giving it when the dog is most highly driven and attentive. Once given, the reward and the dog stay in the vicinity of the handler. There will be more about the drive phase in the next installment.

The Attention Phase:

Food training gets a bad rap sometimes, mostly because people who give it a bad rap don't know how to do it properly. If food is used as bait, i.e. it is always visible in hand or in a pouch, the dog comes to associate the presence of the food with his work, and in the absence of the food, it may show less drive and enthusiasm, this is simple conditioning. Food must be switched from bait to a reward system as quickly as learning permits. Teaching the dog he must perform first, and trust us that he will be rewarded, regardless of whether he perceives an imminent piece of food. And further, rewards must be moved to a variable schedule as soon as learning permits.

At this point I like to teach the dog to catch the food from my mouth, this is not necessary, but makes the dog focus up to your face and not look at your hands all the time, ultimately our goal is to have the dog looking up at us. Catching is facilitated if you toss it up in the air in front of him first a few times to teach him to time his eye-mouth coordination. Then put him in the front position, and drop pieces to him, right over his mouth. Do not let him go to the ground ever, ever, not once to get a dropped piece. Keep your leash short, and make him try harder to time the catch, not take the easy way out.

I will assume he can catch food dropped from your mouth to his as we proceed from this point. This takes time to master, but keep at it. Now, let's define our training procedures in terms of goals for this phase of the heeling training.

Goal #1: Attention while standing still: "watch means: look up at me."

If your dog cannot pay attention to you while standing perfectly still, he will not be able to do it when you are moving in a consistent way. Now, when I say attention, I mean looking up at you until you release him. Attention has a beginning and an end: command/release. I teach my dog an attention command, like "watch" or "look" separate from "Fuss" at this point. I want a command that means look at me, separate from the heel command. Why? Sometimes I want to be able to ask my dog to look at my face without him being in heel position to do it. I will later chain the "fuss-watch me" commands together so that "fuss" will mean he must be watching my face, but this will come later.

We begin with the dog in heel position. Always start in perfect heel position, make the dog know from the beginning that we want it all a certain way. Straight in position. Command "watch" and take a piece of food from your mouth with your hand and take it down to his nose, let him nibble on it, and then draw it back on a line from his nose to your mouth. Then repeat again, back to his nose, very slowly, as he watches the food, and let him nibble on the piece, then draw it up to your mouth again. If at any time he loses focus, wave the food under his nose and draw his attention back to your face. As soon as he re-focuses on your face, take the food on a line from your face

to his nose and let him nibble it and release him, with an “ok” or “free” release command. This is done in a non-distracting teaching environment so you set the dog up for success right from the start.

If he tries to jump at the food, use the sit command to keep him in place or use your leash to keep him in the sit at your side. He should know what sit means before you attempt to heel with him.

After a few sessions, try dropping the food reward from your mouth to him. Since you already taught him to catch this transition should be easy. Get away from using your hand to bait him as quickly as possible. This is the transition to reward from baiting I discussed earlier. Vary the frequency of the rewards, in other words don't time the drops every 10 seconds, vary it to keep the dog's interest high. Make multiple drops in a row sometimes. Critical: If at any time he loses eye lock with your face, draw his attention back to your lips, by making some lip smacking noises, or using your hand to pull out a piece and wave it in front of his nose and back to your face. Avoid using your hand if you can to keep the focus off your hands. As soon as he looks back to your face, drop the reward to him, and release him, move him out of heel position, as you pat and fuss over him. There are no corrections given yet. When, in this low distraction environment, he keeps focus on you consistently, and you only have to reorient his attention infrequently, you are ready to move on to the next step.

Goal #2: Attention while standing still. “Watch means: you must look at me.”

You will need a pinch collar (preferred) and a short obedience leash. Place the pinch high on his neck, and position the leash running from his neck when he is in proper heel position, so that the leash looks as if it is running up the outside seam of your pants, into your left hand, which will give the attention correction. I mean, almost no slack at all, so the correction will be almost instant. The correction will be given for looking away from your face once the watch command is given. The jerk should be made up toward your face, along the seam of your pants, not backwards. Watch your body position, keep correct posture, face your body forward, and give the dog the picture of your body you want him to come to know.

When you make corrections, timing is critical, I teach my students to pay close attention and read their dog. I want to make this correction as the dog is in the process of looking away, not after he has already turned his head away. Intervention as the dog is just beginning to look off will teach him quicker, before he gets focused on the distraction while he still remembers what he was doing. The most effective corrections come at the instant the dog chooses to behave improperly. (another ex: correct your dog's stay as he is in the process of getting up, not after he has moved). Pay attention, very close attention.

As soon as you bring the dog into heel position you should be ready (food in the mouth already), and immediately give the watch command. Reward him as usual, with variable reward food drops, but if he looks away now, we will correct him with a sharp leash pop up toward your face. As soon as he responds to the correction by looking back to your face, drop a piece of food and release him, praising big. You may have to finesse the first few corrections, to get the dog to understand the meaning of the correction. He already has experience with being redirected from inattention back to your face, now the correction will serve to motivate him to keep from looking away. When he is comfortable with this sequence: inattention - correction - refocus -reward & release. Then start demanding he continue watching without a release after he is corrected for inattention. Now you can begin to demand longer and longer periods of attention. Remember your routine of heeling is long; he must be able to focus for at least that kind of duration. Build slowly, always varying the lengths of attention, some long, some short, so you don't bore him or you.

Now you can start adding more distractions, new places, etc. slowly to generalize this attention behavior. Remember, use minimum force to motivate the dog to respond, but be ready to increase the level of the correction when distractions come into play. When the dog learns to look

back at you after a correction, and when you see him working to avoid a correction when distractions are available you are ready to move to the next step.

Up to this point we have done nothing spectacular, but teach the dog a command, and teach him how we enforce his compliance with that command. Teaching phase, correction phase, proofing phase. This should be very standard stuff. In the teaching phase, no corrections were given, just help. In the correction phase we teach the dog that compliance is mandatory. In the proofing phase we teach that compliance occurs in all contexts. This is where the dog learns to generalize the behavior. Don't forget that this part is critical (see part 1 of this article in the May issue). Many trainers mistakenly think the dog knows something before it is generalized.

Goal #3: Attention while moving. "Fuss means: watch me while we walk"

The dog is in heel position, looking up attentively now, and you are ready to start moving. Remember now, this is a brand new context for the dog. We must go back to helping him. The correction we have taught him is for looking away only, however it has been in the context of standing still. When we start moving the dog may or may not want to look where he is going. We don't want him to drop his head when we start.

a. Begin in slow motion, except for the first step.

With the dog beginning in proper heel position, take food from your mouth with your hand, but keep it near your mouth. Talk to him. Verbally pump him up, bend your knees a little, as if you are going to spring forward. Lower the food to his mouth let him nibble on it, and while he is nibbling, command "Fuss-watch me", (This begins the process of chaining the watch me command with the fuss command), and over-exaggerate the motion of stepping off with your left foot. As you do, simultaneously draw the food up and forward from his mouth then back to your lips as you heel just fast enough to keep him going forward, and focused on the food. You can remind him to "watch" to keep him from looking off. Go only a few steps, release and reward him. Try not to correct him if he looks away the first few sessions. Try to refocus him by lowering the food to his mouth, and then drawing it back up. This is a new context, so try to help him before administering corrections.

Now, the first couple of times will be a cluster of bad timing and mistakes. Don't worry, just start over. When he seems to get the idea and draws his attention to your face following the food, and keeps focused on your face as you step off then you can reincorporate the correction for watch me. You will also want to stop using your hand holding the food to draw him forward.

b. Step off with him looking at your face, no hands.

Start in heel position, show him some food between your lips, drop it to him for a few catches in heel position. Then show him another piece, and repeat the step-off, over-exaggerating again, giving him "Fuss-watch me" as the command. If he comes with you properly, looking at your face, staying in position, reward him with a drop. You are going in slow motion here so he should be able to catch it. If not you can halt first, giving the sit command and dropping then releasing. If at any time he looks away, use the correction we have taught him: correct the attention, then immediately reward and release. Then move to the following sequence: correction - refocus - continue heeling with some verbal praise acknowledging his proper response.

c. Generalize

Now your dog is heeling attentively! But only for a few steps. Your job now is to slowly increase the number of steps, until you can heel 20 - 30 paces straight without him looking away. Then do this under more distraction, just 20-30 paces at a time, no turns yet. We will discuss heeling skills in the next installment, turns, halts, etc. As you work with him, don't forget to praise warmly when

he is heeling correctly with attention, looking at you. Talk to him, use your voice to reinforce him, not just the food.

These are the first steps in the attentive heeling program. Nothing earth shattering, many of these techniques are used by other trainers in one form or another. I think the key point here is that we have taught motivationally, allowing the dog to become comfortable in the learning process, yet we have set a standard for compliance. We have made the exercise clearly mandatory to the dog.

Motivation, Compulsion, and Competing Motivations

There has been a movement in dog training to motivational training, and a recent excellent article in DSM by Deborah Palman explained the virtues of training motivationally. However, I think many novice trainers believe that you are either a “motivational-method” trainer or a “compulsive-method” trainer, and there is nothing in between. Many trainers are making lots of mileage out of knocking any method which demands compliance, by maintaining that it causes the bond to suffer, or makes the dog nervous, or many other criticisms. What I think gets left out is that there is more to conditioning behavior in dogs than the teaching process. In fact, while I believe that the teaching process, i.e. where we introduce the dog to new behaviors on command cue, should be completely free of compulsion, I do not believe that a dog can be trained completely reliably by motivation alone in most circumstances. Detection training comes to mind, but here we stack the deck in our favor, selecting only those dogs who have few competing motivations to retrieving.

What do I mean by competing motivations? There are many things that motivate your dog to act, food, sex, biting, playing, prey behavior, defensive behavior - to name some. When training motivationally we try to pick a reward that strongly motivates the dog so he will work to attain it. (Ball, jute, food, etc.) It is however important to realize that the dogs motivation for this reward will vary in the presence of competing motivations.

Here is an example: My first Schutzhund dog refused to “out” of a slipped sleeve. “Out” off the man, no problem, but “out” off the sleeve in his possession? Forget it. Another trainer suggested that I take a piece of hotdog and whip it under his nose to distract him off of the sleeve, then I could reward him for outing the sleeve with the food. Now, as novice as I was, on its face I thought this suggestion was foolish. Even though that dog would take your fingers off for food in a normal situation, I pretty well knew that my dog’s preferences ran something like this: Bitework, breeding, food, toys, etc. I knew he would not let go of the sleeve for food, he liked the sleeve better. Needless to say it didn’t work. But straight compulsion didn’t work either, I didn’t want to fight him for the sleeve, so I changed the rules of the game. After the helper slipped the sleeve, instead of requiring an out, I said, let him have it he wants it so bad. He ran around blinds, up and down the field carrying it, then I realized he liked the fight better than possessing the sleeve, so I taught him to bring it back to the helper after running around with it, then outed him off the helper. Problem solved: I could reward with a slipped sleeve and not get into a dominance fight. I solved this problem without force by using the concept of competing motivation to my advantage. He liked playing with the helper better than playing by himself.

Often we train obedience with food motivation or a toy as motivation. Suppose a competing motivation appears, like another dog (I see this one all the time in my clients obedience dogs), or a new person they want to greet, or a squirrel, or for a Schutzhund dog, a dressed helper. You cannot expect the promise of a food reward alone to hold the dog’s attention, if for that dog it cannot compete with the distraction! A correction can usually compete with these competing motivations however. We can change the intensity of the correction to match the situation, when we often cannot do the same with enough flexibility with motivations. Teaching the dog limits on his decision-making power is not a bad thing! I don’t want him thinking he can make the decision to break a stay and chase a car. Teach him he can make decisions in the learning process, he can learn from wrong decisions. But we must demand compliance to learned behavior if we are to be competitive in Schutzhund. There are dogs who are so handler focused, so biddable that there

is little compulsion needed to proof them. Terrific, if you have that dog, but most of us do not.

By teaching the dog that exercises are mandatory, we set limits on his behavior. It does not mean that the dog will be lower in drive, unhappy, or will resent you. If applied properly, when the dog understands the exercise, and we have taught him that he may not make the decision to disobey, there is no reason for him to be "ruined". In fact compulsion is a natural force in his environment. Momma will use negative reinforcement, the pack would use negative reinforcement, and nature itself relies heavily on it. Use common sense, and don't be afraid to enforce commands. If your dog is too weak to accept discipline, he may not be strong enough for competitive Schutzhund. And further, by teaching him that he can bounce back from a correction, he becomes stronger in character. This is your job as a trainer, not to hold a grudge, but to discipline then forgive and move on. This can make the bond very strong in fact (See the book, The Man who Talks to Horses, by Monty Roberts). This is a very clear component of pack behavior, as anyone who watches dogs knows well. Discipline must imply acceptance, always.

Next Time: Finish up heeling