

Back to Basic Position in Obedience

by Jerry Bradshaw
President, Tarheel Canine Training, Inc.

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Judging a dog sports event provides an interesting perspective on training. Having been a competitor for 10 years or so, I have seen a lot of competitions, from AKC obedience to Schutzhund, to the more recent and very difficult K-9 Pro Sports League, and even surprise scenario obedience and protection tournaments. But judging each competitor forces you to reckon with certain themes in training and showing.

In this article I wish to deal with a simple but critical issue in showing: attentive basic position. No matter how nicely your dog can heel or how fast his recall, the set up of the exercise, in most sports, involves a basic start position. Answer this question: Can you begin at a starting point with your dog straight in heel position, and giving you attention? And, if he is crooked and inattentive, can you adjust him to be straight and attentive?

In order to get a good start, you need an anchor position, and a way to adjust the dog. If you begin with the sit in basic position, attentive dogs will likely crab out a little, so you need a way to adjust the dog backward and in. If you don't, your first step in the heeling will be crowded, and possibly your forward progress will be impeded, or you might even trip over your dog. Being straight and attentive goes hand in hand: get attention first, and then get the dog adjusted properly. 1[1]

I saw trainers begin their heeling pattern by telling their dogs to heel, at the moment the dog was looking away, which made the dog have to react and catch up. Some dogs reacted to the command and crashed into their handler's leg, because they were unaware how close their handler was as he stepped away. The solution is an attention command while stationary, to demand attention, so your heel command is followed immediately. Realize that dogs whose attention wavers during heeling have been trained improperly; meaning that even though the trainer tried to enforce attention, the dog has learned he can look away. This is a subtle issue: Correcting a dog's attention requires reading and reacting to his body very quickly. You must correct the inattention, before the dog actually physically looks away, as he begins to turn his head, or preferably when he is thinking about looking away! You must be a student and study your dog. Does he cut his eyes before he turns his head, or does he react to sounds by looking away? You must anticipate the inattention in training, not react to it, for if you only react after the fact, he will learn a sequence as follows: distraction-look away-return attention within 1-2 seconds. Anticipating his inattention may involve giving corrections when he is still looking at you, but you think he is about to look away. You will sometimes correct him when he hasn't or wasn't planning to do something incorrect. In this case the dog "takes a little one for the team". This, however, will produce a learned sequence that keeps constant attention, and a permanent head turn and lift while heeling, and *inhibits* him from looking away at all.

Teaching adjustments in basic position starts from attention first, using a "look" or "watch me" command. Once he is attentive, you need a command to "get back". I usually teach this command once I am well into my heeling training program. It involves teaching the dog to "jump back" on command with his rear end tight to the heel of my foot. I start with the dog set up straight

in heel position, with a pinch collar and short thick leash in the left hand, the correction is given straight backwards, in contrast to the attention correction which comes straight up the seam of the pants.²[2]

I get the dog looking up at me, and in a fast motion pop directly backwards as I jump backwards along a semi-circle. If you are looking at me from behind, the dog is on the left, I am on the right, and I go backwards and to your right. If I continue on repeating this move, I will travel backwards in a circle. As I jump back, and correct the dog rearward, when he lands in proper position tight in and attentive, and in proper heel position, I will reward him with food or a jute roll. I like to use food the first few sessions, as it allows better concentration without breaking position to enjoy the reward. This command allows me to adjust my dog when forged in basic position, by turning my shoulder back into the dog and saying, "get back".

These are two simple but important training issues that can dramatically increase your scores and the overall flow to your showing. One other piece of advice: remember to breathe!

1 For an in depth discussion of attention, see my article, "Attention and Control Fundamentals 2" published in DSM April 1998.

2 Many of the competitors give the straight back correction for heeling attention, which makes teaching the get back correction this way harder. I believe corrections using the leash should be directional when possible.