

Control & Attention Fundamentals in the Schutzhund Competition Dog (Part 1)

by Jerry Bradshaw
President, Tarheel Canine Training, Inc.

I recently attended, as a spectator, a local club trial. Although I saw some well-trained dog and handler teams, I also saw a multitude of mistakes, which point to poor fundamental preparation. Many of the dogs entered for the "BH" were really not ready to show, and could have benefited from better fundamentals, and more distraction training.

In the next couple of articles I want to concentrate on some of the basics. I also want to talk a little about showing, and how trial preparation must become an integral part of your everyday training work. One of the most common problems I witness when I attend a trial, especially with the BH and some SchH1 dogs is how many handlers have a hard time controlling their dogs in the report to the judge, the critique, and between exercises. Many handlers spend lots of time working on the trial exercises themselves. Failure to prepare for coming on and going off the field can set a bad tone for your whole routine.

Context-Specific Learning

In schutzhund training, two of the most important fundamentals are attention and control. Your dog must be attentive to you, and you must be able to exert control. To me, the down is the ultimate control command in schutzhund. Your dog must be able to down quickly and be steady during obedience, and especially in protection. Holding a down in the presence of helpers on the field, in crowds, on and off the field is crucial. It is important to remember also that dogs learn in context. If you never train your down in the context of a critique, he may not do it. (At the trial I attended I watched a handler give his dog no less than 8 Platz commands that were not heeded. His dog was watching a helper get dressed for the protection work).

If you never demand attention from your dog coming on and off the field, chances are he will not display it during the trial. Many times, in club trials, obedience critiques are done next to a blind, or your dog may see a helper getting dressed just outside the fence. You should be sure to expect your dog can hold a down under these conditions, so therefore you must train it. Often you hear handlers say, "oh, he thought he was going to get a bite, that is why he was not holding his down!" My reply is, "so what? Are you saying that your dog isn't able to be obedient when he thinks he is going to work protection!" The dog should and must be able to be under control. Look at the published trial results for the BH sometime. Why do people fail this in general? Obedience. Do you think that these dogs didn't know the trial exercises before the handlers made the decision to show? I'm sure they did know the exercises. Why did they fail? Most likely due to a lack of attention and control because their training concentrated only on trial exercises and not the process of trialing, i.e. the context in which you must display the trained behaviors matters.

Four Stages of Learning

In the book Excel-Erated Learning by Pamela Reid, Ph.D. the canine learning process is broken down into four stages: (1) acquisition; (2) fluency; (3) generalization; and (4) maintenance. The acquisition stage is where the animal first learns how to position his body and make the association between the command word or signal and the desired action. This is like learning the vocabulary to the new language. In the fluency stage, the dog can perform the behavior without "thinking" in essence the action becomes well associated with the command, and is an automatic

response. The vocabulary of the new language is memorized. In the third stage, generalization, the dog learns to perform the command in a variety of circumstances and contexts. To continue with our language metaphor, the dog learns the grammar (context) of the language. In the fourth stage the dog learns to incorporate the behaviors as part of his own repertoire of behaviors. The language is understood and can be spoken in any variety of circumstances, in any context.

I bring this up because, many handlers believe their dog "knows" a set of commands, but really the dog is only into the second stage of learning: fluency. What I refer to as context, or the generalization and maintenance stages of learning, have not been worked through, and what we see in the trial (a new context for the BH or schH1 dog) is the old "Gosh, my dog has never done that before!" Well, the surprise your dog gives you in the trial by acting, what you may consider to be out of character, is simply the lack of generalization of the behavior. This is key in understanding when you should go to a trial and show.

Working toward Generalization & Maintenance

In order to get the responses you desire in any circumstance, you must understand the context that a trial presents, and think about how you can expand your training program to include similar situations in practice. Then you must demand the kind of response you desire in such circumstances in order to generalize the behaviors.

The very first impression the judge gets of your team is when you report for tracking and the temperament evaluation, and then when you report for obedience and protection. The picture I like to present, even in a BH, and especially in a SchH routine, is an attentive heel onto the field, a calm platz or sitz during the critique, and an attentive heel off the field. How many dogs do you see come onto the field a bit out of control but once the dog starts up the field for the 40 paces of heeling settles in? Also, how many young dogs do you see who heel better off leash than during the on leash portion of the routine? This all goes to context. When you hold a six foot leash in your hand it is a contextual signal to your dog, he may revert back to the kind of heeling he first performed when you first taught him! You must practice occasionally with that trial leash, and show your dog you demand the same standard of attention in heeling whether the trial leash is on or off.

Another important thing to remember is that depending on where you will be showing, you might have to heel 100 yards just to report in! Suppose you are going to show in a regional championship, in a stadium. You will have to be under control, heeling through a parking lot, past spectators, to the middle of a football field. You must train for these situations, lest you are caught off guard, and if your dog is a high drive dog, your routine may be over before you even start!

If you report in to the judge with your dog heeling attentively, just as if you were heeling up the field for your first 40 paces, it presents a picture to the judge that you have done your job well, and you take your training seriously. It also shows the judge that you understand the emphasis on presenting a public picture of schutzhund dogs that demonstrates absolute control. Watch the top competitors closely at the next trial you attend. You will see dog and handler teams that show that they are there to work, because these trainers have taken the time to generalize the attention and control work.

The Basic Control Exercise

When I start a dog in obedience, the first exercise I work is the long down. Why? Because it is the 10 easiest points in schutzhund, but if not done right from the start can haunt you for the rest of your career. Think about it, a good down command is so essential. Your down comes into play in tracking at the articles, in obedience with the down with recall, but also with the send away, and in protection, on the disarms and escape bites. Lay this foundation well, and carefully.

I see so many dogs in the BH and schutzhund 1 lose points because of the down. This should never happen. Here is one scenario: you are in your first trial situation with your dog, you put him in the long down and take your position, only to discover when you glance back that he has slinked to within 5 feet of you. Oh my God! How did that happen? Maybe you have been practicing the recall from the down position too much. (Think of how the long down in a trial could look like a set up for a recall!) Stop that until he is perfect in the long down. Or maybe the whole trial situation is so new to the dog he is a little nervous and wants to get near you feeling safe. (This can happen with a weaker nerved dog, or a really strong dog who is a little too young to be trialed, not mature enough, not schooled long enough in the basics of control). Another familiar scenario is a beautiful send-away, but the dog doesn't down quickly (or half in a sit) or doesn't down at all! Maybe you have failed to generalize the down to distance and/or on strange fields well enough.

The long down itself is a complex exercise, truth be told. You have to heel to the proper position. Remove the leash while in the basic position and Platz him without body language. When the judge signals you, you then return to him, count 3 seconds, and sit him. Then attach the leash, and heel to the judge to report completion, or heel to the start flag to do your routine. He must stay calmly, and not anticipate the sit at the end, yet do the sit very quickly.

Here is how I teach the long down. Prong collar on the dog, and a long line. Lets assume you have taught the dog to stay fairly well in non-distracting circumstances. Take him to a blind, preferably one in the middle of the field, either #3 or #4. Back tie the dog to the blind, loose line, and place him in the down. You can also set a line out already back-tied to the blind, and heel to this place, and switch lines. He can never, ever, learn to come to you because you never give him the opportunity. If he breaks, you can correct immediately with a verbal reprimand when he is in the act of breaking the command. If he moves toward you go toward him, he will give himself a correction because you have back-tied him. This also helps if he gets the idea to go after another dog doing a recall, or reacts to another handler's HERE command. Context is everything in dog training. You will do your long down under distraction near a blind in every club trial you go to. Teach him that a down in this context is always absolute. He never moves until you return to him and sit him from the down. Then, continue to generalize this behavior under any circumstance you can think of that may be relevant.

Practice the sit from the down separately, and don't add it in until he is rock solid on holding the down.

Until then, return to him and release him and play. Sometimes, after putting him in the Platz, return, and calmly stroke him while in the down position after a couple of minutes, then leave again. Remember to practice the long down for 15-20 minutes upon occasion, and then up to 30 minutes. You might get paired up with somebody who has a limp and a 16 year old Rottweiler, be prepared!

A great time to practice this command is when you arrive at your training field. Get there early, put him in the long down (always back-tied!) while your friends are arriving to the field, and coming out to practice their obedience. Get closer to him if someone is going to practice a recall past him. Expect him to make a mistake so you can be in a position to immediately correct. And never, never, take your eyes off him in training. I was in a club once with a trainer who would put his dog in a down, and start jawing with friends and realize only after someone brought it to his attention, that his dog was already up and sniffing around. Bad training for which there is no excuse.

Some Intermediate Level Control Exercises

Here are some other, more advanced scenarios for practicing your control down work, and generalizing your training. Remember that there is no substitute for traveling to club trials (many clubs will allow you to use the field after the day's competition is over), or visiting new fields and taking opportunities to train in these realistic trial-like situations:

1. Suppose you are next up to work protection with your dog. Wait until the person ahead of you is just about done with their routine, bring your dog out of the truck, and platz him. Enforce your command no matter how much he wants to go to the decoy. (This requires the foresight of putting the training collar on the dog before you drive to the training field, so when he comes out you don't have to fiddle with putting on the collar, and defeat the purpose of enforcing control).

2. When he is good at this, and while the person is still finishing up their routine, sit him from the down, heel him closer, and down him again. Make him be calm and quiet in the down (this will feed into your escape bite, and your disarms also being under better control). The idea is to teach the dog that he gets to work protection at your behest, not his. That he must demonstrate control to work protection.

3. Also, remember to practice reporting in to the judge as you enter the practice field. Look over tattoos, and have a 2- second chat, so this also becomes an expected routine for the dog. Make your dog be obedient during this time. I practice checking tattoos before my protection routine, too! (I can hear them now, "My dog would take off the judges hand if he was in bite mode..."). Either he is obedient to you or he is not. Period. If he will tolerate his tattoo being looked over before protection, he will do it before tracking without problems.

4. When your session is over, do you always let your dog leave with a sleeve in his mouth? Try leaving without it one time before you trial, what you see may surprise you! (He may not allow you to leave the field without it, and break heel position to keep coming to the decoy). Try practicing going to the critique position and holding a down after he has had a few bites. You may notice that you have some work to do before the trial!

5. Another useful exercise is to do some obedience while the helper is in full dress standing on the field. My protection routine always starts with some obedience first. Typically, I take my dog out of the truck while the person ahead of me is finishing. I work a down under this distraction. I heel to the gate, and sit my dog in basic position demanding he look up at me, and not the helper. Then I heel onto the field, and do some group heeling, with the helper in the group. I heel out of the group, going up the field, demanding attentive heeling all the way. (A future article will deal with attention heeling). Only after a little preliminary obedience do I set up for my protection session, heeling to the pole, or to the field position I want.

My first schutzhund dog was a very high drive, dominant, Malinois, and I was a very green handler. He would want to come out of the truck and bolt onto the field to work. Many a training session, I spent 15-20 minutes heeling just up to the gate to the field. Also, I practiced heeling over sleeves laying on the ground, and around dressed helpers. If he did not heel onto the field under control, I did not allow him to work protection. Over time, he learned that his obedience was the key to him getting to play in protection. Many a session, he went back into the crate without a bite. He learned that obedience started at the tailgate to my truck, and that the heeling onto the field, and the downs in the parking lot were part of the overall routine.

Many handlers I see, take their dog out of the crate, and get pulled onto the protection field. This is fine at the very beginning, but as soon as your dog knows how to heel, and especially if he is a high drive dog, you must start making him obedient before the dog works protection. Of course, if you are working through problems with motivation for the protection work, you can back off on the control work. Use common sense at all times. But this obedience will also build anticipation for

the work ahead and increase the dog's drive to work, and often bring a little more focus into the dog.

Many clubs get into the habit of doing obedience en mass before protection, but not during the protection session. This is too rigid. It does take extra time, but there is no substitute for the practice of obedience under the distraction of bitework. Your dog should expect to be obedient as soon as he comes out to work, before each phase. Start enforcing control and attention as soon as your dog comes out of the crate, before each phase. You will see a marked difference in your dog's work ethic over time, as the attention and control become habit (generalized) to the dog.

Try some of these exercises for control, and see if they don't polish up your work, making you and your dog look like the serious competitors you want to be. Critique your own training program by thinking about where your dog is in the 4 learning stages, so that you don't attempt to show before he has had a chance to generalize the behaviors you have taught him. And, when your dog surprises you on the field, look to your own incomplete training rather than being upset with your dog. Until next time, work 'em hard, and work 'em smart.