

Component Training

Competition Obedience Skills

By Jerry Bradshaw



For many who are new to competition obedience training, the only exposure to obedience will have been what was presented in their basic pet training school. That normally consists of a very traditional negative reinforcement and positive punishment process of teaching obedience exercises.

The dogs are forced into position, usually with a choke collar causing discomfort, and the discomfort is released and the handler is instructed to praise the dog once the position is achieved. The result of all this compulsion is to create a dog that is not so happy about doing obedience behaviours. Many competitors and handlers will echo that their dogs were over controlled when young, and early training in obedience was done more compulsively rather than through reward.

Competition style obedience in general, whether it is for obedience trials, or a phase in a protection sport such as IPO, Ring Sport, or PSA, is expected to display a happy working relationship between the dog and handler team. Heeling will be with attentive eye contact, recalls will be fast, and positions such as motion exercises will be quickly demonstrated.



Jerry with his dog, raptor

Handlers who start with dogs with high drive for protection sports, for example, often get bit during obedience as dogs react to the compulsion aggressively. Handlers fail to realise that dogs react to "unfair" compulsion defensively. While on the other hand, many young dogs are shut down by compulsive obedience training and as a result are afraid to express their drives and be independent. The dogs are slow in executing commands, and often not very reliable.

It is time for a paradigm shift in obedience training across the board. A paradigm is a model or thought process to describe an approach to something. Reward-based component training is a relatively new paradigm that has to replace the old paradigm of compulsion-based teaching of obedience. If you see the state of most competitive IPO and obedience trial work at the top levels, you see rewards being used to great effect.

It's not just rewards, but also how those exercises are taught in small components. By breaking exercises down into component parts, and understanding how to develop each part, rewarding performance for each part, and finishing the teaching process by employing a variable reward system, top trainers are able to achieve a better overall performance, with a happier more enthusiastic disposition in their dogs.

The Process: Heeling with Attention

If I am heeling and my dog is giving me good attention, I will reward him. The reward (food, a ball or a tug) is presented to the dog immediately after a trained signal that marks the behaviour, I am rewarding (some trainers call this verbal marker a 'bridge' or a 'secondary reinforcer').

The trainer can also use another neutral stimulus such as a clicker to mark the correct behaviour instead of a verbal marker. This verbal signal is the word "yes" or "ok" followed by the presentation of his toy for him to play with. I have now signalled to him that a specific behaviour will get him something, so it is a good idea to repeat that behaviour.

Component Training by Deconstructing Obedience

If rewarding the dog is a good idea to

increase the quality and responsiveness of his obedience, then I need to know when to reward him. The answer is not entirely simple, but suffice it to say that anything I want him to do well should be rewarded. Let's take the heeling pattern for example. What mini-skills or components are in a simple heeling pattern?

The start (step off into the pattern), position at heel, halts, left turns, right turns, about turns, fast pace, slow pace, normal pace, down and recall to heel, gunfire neutrality, and the figure 8 to name most of the skills. In order to develop high quality responses, you must reward the dog for each component often enough that he knows about a good effort will likely result in a reward for the behaviour.

The proper approach is to employ a variable reward schedule in the elements of your routine. First, look hard at your dog's strengths and weaknesses in his heeling. For example, does your dog lag at the start of the heeling pattern, or does he crowd on his left turns, and lag on his right turns? If so you have some things to work

on, and you need to come up with a training plan to address the issues.

Example: Getting a Better Start to the Heeling Pattern

Come to the start line and ask the dog to get into heel position. As soon as he takes heel and I mean as soon as his but hits the ground, mark it and give him a quick, energetic reward bite on the tug, or present his ball. Give the verbal bridge and then present the toy in a fluid motion.

Tug with him, play with him, let him enjoy it, and then out him, and hide the tug, and then and quickly ask for heel again. He should come to heel faster in anticipation of the game. Tell him heel, and step off forward quickly. If he comes off the line fast as you step off reward him again. Start over again and reward him three steps into the pattern, and then start over and do 5 steps in, and then end with a reward at the very beginning just as you did the first time. Then put him back in the car. You are going to do about five, five minute sessions, instead of one twenty five minute session. As he improves your sessions will be somewhat longer and you will do fewer sessions.

Reward Placement

How you place your rewards in your training is critical to maximizing performance. You will strategically place a reward for the first step of the heeling pattern, and then a few paces into the pattern, and then a few more paces in, and then back at the start. This variable placement increases your dog's drive to get the reward, as your dog thinks it is equally likely to come at any point, and he will stay fast and focussed if he believes there is a good likelihood to get the reward.

You can elongate the time between rewards as his attitude and behaviour



Jerry working on a, Rottweiler

improve to what your standard is, and then you can return to numerous rewards again. Varying the placement and frequency of rewards is the key.

Example: Rewarding Turns

Suppose your dog's heeling is nice and clean on the straight legs, but he lags on his right turns all the time. First, you must figure out why he is lagging. Is it because you are speeding away from him when you turn to the right, taking him by surprise and leaving him in the dust? If so you need to work on your footwork.

Stepping off hard right and jerking the leash will induce an opposition response, and you are likely to create more lagging than you solve. Good footwork that allows the dog to see where you are going and a little focus from being rewarded while heeling will help keep your dog with you through a turn. But even better, reward him for the change in direction. If he stays with you upon executing a right turn, pop out his tug and reward him. Do it often.

Set up a pattern with 5 right turns only. After the first turn, if he is with you up to your standard, reward him. If he lags on the first turn then pull out the tug and just tease him ("look what you could have had if you were up here!") and put it away, then do another turn, if he is with you, reward him, if lagged, tease again. If your dog is driven for a toy, you will see him want to get in a position to get the toy, and the lagging problem will go away over time.

The key is to reward the skills individually and often. Then vary your rewards as the general proficiency of the skills increases. Don't expect to solve a problem you have created over months or years in one session either.



Jerry with a working dog

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Variable Reward

Suppose now that your dog is heeling the straight-away legs well and is now driving for the reward on the right turns. In fact you have worked on each identified mini-skill to get the performance picture you want. To keep the level of performance high, you must variably reward each of the mini-skills in the heeling pattern. You do not need to reward every step or every turn, but rather, reward strategically.

Example: The Heeling Pattern

Now that you have developed each of the individual skills you identified by deconstructing the heeling pattern, you can now string the behaviours together and variably reward the dog's heeling pattern. You call your dog to heel

position, and reward at the start with a nice play session. You out the dog, and call into heel again, tug tucked inside your belt in the small of your back. You then heel forward. Evaluate your dog.

Let's assume he is in good position and showing some attention and you go for a number of paces while his enthusiasm is still high, and then turn to the right, and BAM! Give a reward on the first right turn. Play and out the dog. Back to heel position, and BAM! Another reward is given, tug and quick out this time. Back to heel position and forward again, and while on the straight away, pull out your tug, and turn in a fast circle right, make him miss it, and put it back behind you and continue straight.

Frustration will increase his drive, and you make a right turn which he drives into, and you continue straight for another 15 paces, and BAM! Another reward is given. Play and tug, and let him enjoy, and then out the dog. Get the dog back to heel. Go forward and now do your change of pace. You have already individually worked on rewarding each pace transition from fast to slow pace with reward separately, and then slow back to normal, or whatever transitions your certification asks for.

Now within the context of a heeling pattern, reward one of the pace transitions. If you step off into a fast heel from a normal pace, and he stays with you, BAM! A reward is given. Play and restart. Go straight again, and go fast pace, and if you see he drives to keep with you, recalling the last reward, and then shift to slow. You look for the quality of response. Does he slow himself without leash help? If so, then BAM! Reward that transition!

When you deconstruct a larger exercise, you work the components, and then put

Creating a standard of behaviour is critical in good obedience training. If you set an expectation, and hold your dog to it with both correction when he performs below standard and reward when he meets or exceeds the standard

it together into a sequence of behaviour and make sure you variably reward the skills you developed individually. It takes some pre-planning, but the outcome of an obedient, fast, flashy, and most of all compliant dog is well worth it.

Balancing Reward with Compulsion

Creating a standard of behaviour is critical in good obedience training. If you set an expectation, and hold your dog to it with both correction when he performs below standard and reward when he meets or exceeds the standard, you will likely get a performance that meets or exceeds your standard each time you ask for obedience. But you as the handler must set that standard and stick to it, with both reward and correction.

Allowing behaviours which are below standard (leash pulling is sometimes allowed because the handler is being lazy enforcing the heel command when the dog is running toward the kennel to get fed, for example) will signal to the dog that when there is something he really wants to do instead of obedience, he can get away with it. So don't get mad when he decides to blow you off on certification day. You created the permissive atmosphere.

Once you create the standard, ask for it, enforce it clearly, and reward the good behaviours variably. This looks like more work than, say, just jerking on the leash when he gets out of position,

after all the reward process does take time to get the toy out, and play with him. I would rather take that time, than have a lifetime nag-war with my dog, or see him go low in drive when we do obedience, or worse see him get over on me when I need his obedience most.

You can see I am not suggesting a completely motivational approach here. What I am suggesting is a balanced approach. Set a standard of behaviour. Expect it, and do what is necessary to get it every time, no matter what the context. Whether you developed behaviours motivationally from the start or used a compulsive method to train the obedience it doesn't matter. From today forward let him know there is light at the end of the compliance tunnel. Reward signals to the dog there is something in it for him.

Jerry Bradshaw is a renowned Dog Trainer and the CEO of Tarheel Canine Training Inc. He is the author of 'Controlled Aggression' and a forthcoming book, 'Commonsense Pet Training'. Jerry's experience and progressive training methods have made Tarheel Canine an industry leader in training and services. Jerry is also the co-founder of the civilian protection sport PSA (www.psa9.org) and the Police K9 Certification organisation known as the National Tactical Police Dog Association NTPDA (www.tacticalcanine.com). Jerry and his trainers have appeared on CNN, Good Morning America, and in many regional and National print publications.

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