

Quick and effective sheepdog training

By Tully Williams

Many sheepdog handlers find training a sheepdog a long slow process, involving much repetition and often frustration. With a good quality natural working dog it doesn't have to be, provided we go about it in the right way. In this article I will discuss what I believe to be the aspect of handling with the greatest potential to increase the speed and ease of many handlers' sheepdog training.

On my DVD "[A few good dogs](#)" I featured some film of [Campaspe Bounce](#) working at about ten months of age. At that young age he was basically a fully trained sheepdog, including casting and recasting fairly long distances, driving stock away, full control of all the directional commands etc., and was quite impressive for a ten month old pup. Over the years this has in fact caused me some trouble! A number of people I have since sold pups to have been disappointed that their pups haven't been as advanced as Bounce was at ten months of age, mistakenly believing that natural ability was the only ingredient required to attain that level of competence at such a young age.

The truth is that there are TWO ingredients that are required for a dog to reach the level of performance that Bounce reached so quickly and easily. Firstly, we need very good material to work with (a high degree of natural ability with few faults, a good temperament, and a high level of keenness), but secondly we also need to train the dog in such a manner that they learn and can advance very rapidly. *The better our training techniques are the faster the dog will progress.*

So that is what this article is about. It is about what I believe to be one of the most fundamental things that many handlers do wrong (or at least do less effectively than they could), and thus the reason their training doesn't progress as quickly as the dog's potential might otherwise allow.

Keeness

Before delving into my thoughts on quicker, more effective sheepdog training, I would first like to emphasize the importance of *keenness* in the sheepdog. Without that strong desire to work livestock, we have nothing with which to work. So whilst striving for training or control, we must at all times be mindful of maintaining that high level of keenness. With some dogs this keenness can be more readily eroded than in others, so it is a matter of observing your dog and ensuring that training isn't overriding keenness.

Thus training a dog that is a bit lacking in keenness and heart must progress more slowly than it would with a keener worker. (I always prefer a keen worker with great heart, however inexperienced handlers may struggle to handle the keener worker, and may get more out of a dog not quite so keen. It can be a case of horses for courses; a beginner rider will have less trouble with a quiet pony, while an experienced horseman will likely prefer something a bit more responsive and high performance.)

Anticipation

Consider this question: what is the key ingredient to a pup or dog learning to respond to a command?

The heading of this section gives away my answer, but I believe it is that the dog learns to *anticipate* what happens *after* the command is given. I will repeat that for emphasis:

The dog learns to anticipate what happens AFTER the command is given.

That is, the command becomes a *predictor* of some follow up event. This principle is behind all of the following discussion.

A good example is the early stage of teaching pups to come when called. We can give the command while the pup is already coming towards us in the hope that this will create some sort of association, but it is not particularly effective. In that situation we are giving the command *after* the pup is already coming.

If, however, we are out walking the pups (I regularly walk whole litters at a time), I wait for when they are all heading off away from me, and then I turn in a new direction and call them. It only takes a couple of times before they respond very rapidly, as many handlers will have experienced. The command becomes something by which the pups *anticipate* a change of direction, and not wanting to be left behind they learn in this manner very rapidly. Thus we are giving the command *before* the pups think of coming to us.

This leads me to my main point in this article in order to most quickly and effectively teach our dog: the order of events when training.

The order of events

For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the command “go back” as the basic example. (I use “go back” to tell the dog to go to the far side of the sheep from us, in either direction.) This is the first command I teach a pup when first breaking it in to work stock. In a nutshell, if the pup is on the opposite (far) side of the sheep, and comes around them towards my side, I block the pup and chase it back around to the far side, in conjunction with the command “go back”.

Here we have two events:

1. The command we are teaching “go back”
2. Physically blocking the pup and causing it to “go back”

The point I would draw attention to is the *order* of these two events. A major mistake I see many handlers making is that they are prone to put these two events backwards. That is, the handler will *first* physically block the pup, and *then* give the command:

1. Physically block the pup causing it to “go back”
2. Give the command “go back”

At best, they might block and command at the same time. The pup will eventually learn to some extent in this manner, but it will take longer and be less effective. What you will find is that the pup is simply responding to the blocking, and isn't really listening much to the command at all.

What we should do instead is to first give the command *with no blocking* or other physical enforcing of the command, then give the pup a chance to respond (a matter of fractions of a second in some cases, sometimes slightly longer), and if no response is forthcoming *then* we manipulate the pup into the action we require by physically blocking it. Thus the pup learns to *anticipate* what always follows the command, and so learns to respond to the command itself much more quickly and easily.

Thus the basic three step process is as follows:

1. Give the command we are trying to teach
2. Give the pup a chance to respond
3. Enforce the command (how we do this will depend on the command in question, and on the pup's stage of training).

This applies when teaching most things, such as the directional commands, gaining control of the stop or lie down, come when called, etc. For many handlers, it can take some effort to overcome their old habits of commanding and enforcing at the same time (or even enforcing before the command is given), but the effort will be worth it. Next time you are out training your dog, take notice of the order in which you do these things: you might be surprised!

Too easy?

I suspect that many readers will read the foregoing and believe that it sounds too basic and too simple to be of great usefulness. However, take my word that if you truly understand and apply this understanding, you will be surprised at the results.

Make haste slowly

Having written the foregoing, before closing I would like to add a caution. Many good dogs have been ruined by *too much haste* and *impatience* in their training. Get your training skills to a high level so that training will be as quick and easy as possible, but don't push your dog any faster than it is ready for – go as quickly as you can, but no quicker.

Too much haste can result in a dog with bad habits that haven't been addressed in our rush, and once bad habits set in they are much harder to eradicate than to prevent in the first place. This is the main reason I do not take a dog to practical stock work (or trials, etc.) until it is fully trained. Things generally can and do go wrong in practical work, and this is a great place for half trained dogs to develop all sorts of bad habits.

No matter how good a dog is naturally, it can still be ruined by careless or poor handling. As a bit of an aside, I believe that breeding (natural instinct) puts the *upper*

limit on a dog's potential, but that training and handling often decide the *lowest* limit to which even a well bred dog might fall. *Make haste slowly.*

I would suggest aiming for high quality, effective training, *not* for fast training. If your training is indeed high quality and effective, the speed will come on its own. I never put a time limit on when or at what age I want a dog trained by; they are all different, and they will be trained when they are trained.

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