



Article Reprint

South Coast Agility Team's Newsletter, The Scribe, June/July 2001
"On the Seminar Trail with Susan Garrett, Part II: Pre-agility Games for Puppies"
by Terry Long

In Part I I outlined three of Susan Garrett's guidelines for puppy training. These were:

- ✓ *Work is play and play is work*
- ✓ *Being positive doesn't mean permissive*
- ✓ *Dogs don't make decisions*
- ✓ *Punishment is only fair when there is a history of positive reinforcement*

In a nutshell Garrett's approach is that everything should fun, interactive, and guided. What I mean by guided is that you need to be in control of what the puppy learns. What I tell my students is that you can work the dog, or the environment can work the dog. If we let the environment (smell doo on the sidewalk) be more rewarding than we are (game of tug, eye contact, etc.), then we are setting ourselves up for a lifelong battle with the environment for influence with our dogs.

Garrett uses a Gentle Leader head collar from a very young age to ensure that she is not providing her dog too many choices that will interfere with her relationship with the dog. For example, she gets young pups used to the Gentle Leader and uses it to gently guide their nose up to prevent them from sniffing when she wants the focus to be on her. She then uses a high rate of reinforcement (see below) to keep the focus on her, relaxing the Gentle Leader.

So start young ... convince your pup that you are absolutely the best thing going on in the environment. Many of Garrett's games introductory handling skills are designed specifically for this purpose. Get creative, let your hair down, and rock and roll at your pup's level ... be fun.

Training Approach

Garrett mentioned several things that help in laying a foundation for pups who will be doing agility (and I would say could be used with dogs of all ages).

- ✓ *Rate of reinforcement*— When you teach a dog a new skill, regardless of the dog's age, you need to use a high rate of reinforcement. In clicker training this means you'd better be hearing yourself clicking (and treating of course) A LOT, and if you are not it probably means you have made the task too difficult and the dog doesn't know what to do.

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For example, to teach the contact obstacles, many trainers use a Plexiglas target at the downside of the obstacle. We teach this by holding the piece of Plexi in our hand, near the pup's head. If the pup even glances at it, click! Get ready because we want to immediately click again and again for those glances. If we, instead, started out by waiting for the pup to touch his/her nose to the target on the ground, we wouldn't be hearing a lot of clicking. Ensuring a high rate of reinforcement has a lot to do with breaking a task down enough so that the pup can be successful—before raising our criterion.

- ✓ *"Ah-ah is the square root of nothing in terms of training."*— This was one of my favorite quotes from Garrett. What she meant was that all the Ah-ahs and Achs and other non-words used to correct behavior are not as effective as using a high rate of reinforcement and setting the dog up for success.

Years ago, Gary Wilkes popularized "Wrong" as a No Reward Marker (NRM). An NRM is simply the opposite of clicking; it tells the dog that what s/he did isn't going to be rewarded. However, 99% of people I have observed can't say "Wrong" without turning it into a conditioned punisher, the same as "No!" The same thing has happened with soft "Ah-ahs" being taught as NRMs. Most people can't seem to see the difference between NRMs and conditioned punishers (which can result in shutting a dog down, decreasing speed, etc.), and end up turning Ah-ahs into conditioned punishers as well. As a result of this, many clicker trainers have stopped teaching NRMs to their students. Instead, we just break the task down easier so the dog "gets it" without having to come down on them with what ends up being a verbal correction. (And using corrections to teach anything is an entire subject of its own!)

- ✓ *Teach your pup to be play as well as food motivated*— There are times where you'll want to use a toy as a motivator (speed in the weave poles) and there will be times where food will be better (targeting for the contacts). Don't get stuck with a dog who only likes one or the other. Garrett's young terrier mix Decaf is a good example. Decaf is not especially food motivated and would refuse food when Garrett offered it as a reward. So Garrett used a game as a reward for taking the food. Decaf now takes the food. This approach has also strengthened food as a reward because of its association with games.
- ✓ *Use shaping instead of luring*— Garrett made the point that if we don't shape the very simplest of behaviors (sit, targeting), we will never be able to shape more difficult ones. (Shaping is one of the most efficient methods of teaching complex behavior chains.) So instead of using luring or baiting to teach behaviors (and dealing with the fallout of luring, i.e., slowing down to look for food), Garrett almost exclusively uses shaping. Teaching the dog to touch her/his nose to a Plexiglas target is a good example of progressive shaping: first you shape a glance, then a look, then a nose touch, then taking a step to touch it, then a few steps, then put it on the ground at your feet, etc., etc., until you have a dog zooming 10-20' away from you to touch her/his nose to the target.

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DASH

Garrett has popularized the concept of DASH, which is an acronym that describes the sequential stages of training she encourages agility handlers and trainers to follow.

1. **D = Desire.** "If you don't have the dog's brain, you've got nothing to train." In other words, our dogs must desire to be with us, to give us their attention, before we can start training. Think of how hard it is to teach a dog to walk nicely on a leash if the dog isn't looking at you or even slightly aware there is someone on the other end of the leash. Or how many dogs new to an agility class take down entire jumps because they are not looking where they are going or anywhere close to the person on the other end of the leash?
2. **A = Accuracy.** Teach accuracy before building speed so that your dog truly understands how to successfully perform each obstacle independent of your body position. This means weave pole entries from all angles (and she only uses two or three poles until this is accomplished), contact targets from low heights, and jumps, tire, and tunnels from every angle possible. Too many handlers push for speed before their dogs can accurately perform the obstacle. The result is usually a loss of control as speed builds as confidence and experience builds.
3. **S = Speed.** Build speed only after the dog demonstrates full understanding of a task at a particular level. For example, you have shaped your dog to enter the weave poles by using stick-in-the-ground poles. You have only used three poles, but your dog can find the entry from any angle and regardless of where you are. Still with only three poles, you will build drive to those three poles, testing that the dog can still nail the entry before you add the 4th, 5th, and 6th poles.

Another example is the A-frame. We keep it at a low height and "backchain" the behavior, first placing the dog on a table next to the A-frame and letting the dog step onto the A-frame and take only one or two steps to the target with the cue of "Touch!" When the dog demonstrates solid understanding (regardless of where we are), we load the dog further up on the ramp and shape speed to the target. If we find that the dog's speed makes them run past the target, then we go back to accuracy before reintroducing speed.
4. **H = Habitat.** This is a synonym for environment and the need to generalize all skills in different locations to be sure the dog understands that a target is a target is a target regardless of where you are and what's going on around you.

Well, no one ever said I was good at short stories. Looks like this novelette will need to be continued as Part 3 in the next issue of SCAT! Stay tuned for handling skills and games.