

INCORRECT



CORRECT



ASK THE PRO

communication between dog and handler

By Luann Pleasant

HAVE YOU EVER WISHED you and your dog could hold a conversation? While actual spoken dialog is impossible, we do communicate with our dogs in other ways... probably more than we realize. By concentrating on and improving your dialog with a dog in training, the end result can be a vastly improved understanding of the two-way communication during an event. But, you must be aware of and practice ways of improving your own half of that conversation: this involves paying attention to your intense focus, your body language, your body position and your tone and state of mind (excited, fearful, angry, uptight); all while reading your dog's pace, momentum, confidence, attention and intent. Only through patterning and repetition can this two-way conversation become clear.

Have you ever noticed how some dogs never really look you in the eye, while others seem

to gaze deep into your soul? I have run dogs that, the minute I took my eyes off them on the way to a mark or a blind, something went haywire: a pop, a change of direction, etc. I call this the "rubber band" effect. Don Remien told me years ago, "Don't ever take your eye off the



back of your dog's head." This is our job – we must practice remaining present and attentive the entire time our dog is working, from the time it's off the truck until we return, including during warm-ups and cool-downs.

Communication is an art too many of us don't use to its full potential. Learning to "read" your dog is so important! How is his health today? Is he tired, bored or stressed? Does he have aches or pains? Your dog's health, both physical and mental, should be your number one concern. Only a truly healthy dog can learn and perform to his full potential. All dogs communicate to us in some form every day; we just need to stop, look and listen to them. How good are you at observing your dog's condition?

The relationship between dog and trainer is enhanced largely through proper repetition. We spend a large amount of time trying to teach our dogs to go straight. If we desire this straight line, though, it is vitally important for us as trainers to be consistent and offer a clear picture from the beginning. How can we expect our dog to go straight to the bird if we

don't pay attention to how we line him up?

How often do we work on a Wagon Wheel, and I mean really work on it, not just hurry through? Where are our feet pointed? Are we doing all the work while moving? Do we present uncoordinated positions as the dog just sits there wondering what we're doing? And, perhaps most important, do we ask someone to observe us during practice? In helping my clients learn to work better with their dogs as a team, I place both on 24-inch round boards glued together. This Wagon Wheel is where "push" and "pull" are perfected, and allows for lots of repetition. Many other things can be learned here also, if you as the trainer are focused. Sit, don't head swing to the next bumper. Focus, as the handler; don't watch the bumper, watch the dog. Is he straight from the bottom of his spine to the tip of his nose and eyes? Which bumper is the dog looking at? Are your toes pointed to where you want him to go? Is your body straight or are you leaning? All body parts of both dog and handler must be on the round board.

Quick: which way does your dog turn when stopped on a whistle? If you have to stop and think about it... you don't know, which indicates you should pay closer attention to your half of the conversation with your dog. Just imagine how much better you will calculate when to blow your whistle on a blind if you know whether the dog turns right or left. Many dogs turn right, but a fair number turn left. When you know this information you can better time your stops, knowing that he will either turn away from the line, putting him further off line, or turn into the line, allowing you to let him go a little further while knowing he will turn toward the line. Have you noticed that this turn is consistent in the water, along

a shoreline, in front of cover? Does he turn towards or away from the factors? Think about it and look for patterns that allow you to improve your part of the dialog.

Do verbal cues like "way out," "easy" or "leave it" mean anything to your dog? Have you taught these phrases on drills and not just in the field? Drills that allow repetition (such as the Wagon Wheel) are a great place to start and ultimately refine your communication with your dog. Recently a client ran one of the dogs on my truck in training. While showing the marks, he said, "way out" while the dog was looking elsewhere. The dog immediately scanned the field and locked on the long bird. Was the action of this dog simply repetition, or did it indicate deeper understanding of the consistent use of this cue in drills, every time, in that situation? Also, the "leave it" command can be taught in drills so that, when said on a poison bird or even when the dog looks at a bird you don't want him looking at, the dog will look away at something or someplace else.

Pace and momentum are tools for communication as well. How about slowing everything down? How often do we allow a situation to speed up because things aren't going as planned? As a result, our casts become too fast and our dog fails to understand what we are asking. Try slowing down. The dog and you will both relax. Then, you can give a cast the dog will see and understand. I give a three-count to my clients between whistle and cast, although most claim to be ready at a one-count.

Another important element is consistency: consider your posture from the dog's vantage point as you "communicate." Remember factors like wind, terrain, other falls, scent, etc., because it is your job to anticipate and trans-

mit the needs of the situation to your dog.

Okay, now how about two-sided dogs? Wow, what a fabulous addition to your collection of communication tools! Most people make this too complicated. My two rules are these: always consider which side the last bird falls on, and which side is the flyer. There will be deviations, but they are the exception, not the rule.

As you consider your part in the dialog with your dog, know that you need to communicate right down to the "nth" degree. Only then can you feel you have done your job so that you can hand over the reins and let your dog do his part. Whatever you say, whatever you do, and however you do it, be consistent and keep it simple. Decide what works best for YOU and stick to it. Your dog will understand your efforts by their consistency, and you will both enjoy the rewards of clear communication for years to come. ■

Red Rover Retrievers Luann Pleasant

Luann Pleasant of Red Rover Retrievers began her professional career training retrievers in 1988, having been an amateur for several years. In 1998, Luann moved from Southern California to Oakdale and purchased 20 acres to develop a training facility. In Field Trial training, she has been responsible for making seven Field Champions and competed in two Canadian and three US Nationals. She also has finished over 20 Master Hunters. Visit Luann at RedRoverRetrievers.com

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