ASK THE PRO

positive reinforcement

By Amy Dahl

LET ME BEGIN by acknowledging that some "positive reinforcement" trainers are not very appealing spokesmen for their method. They harangue us for our use of e-collars and force procedures, not recognizing the irony of trying to bludgeon us into change while claiming that positive reinforcement is more effective than force.

Okay, I'll also acknowledge that the loudest haranguers always seem to have dogs that won't come when they're called.

Although the messengers can be unpleasant, their subject has a lot to offer us. We already use positive reinforcement every day (despite our focus on force). Why do we value desire? Dogs with a lot of desire feel rewarded every time they get it right and complete a retrieve. In some areas we already use positive reinforcement so effectively, learned through trial and error and collaboration, that the dolphin trainers would be jealous. In other areas we could improve.

Modern positive reinforcement training is based on the scientific study of learning, referred to as behaviorism, operant conditioning, or learning theory. Fortunately for us,

applying it to animals in the real world is well past the speculative stage—talented trainers have already worked that out. They've shown it works. Unlike the haranguers, learning theory acknowledges that animals (and people) learn from both good and bad consequences. It tells us, in fact, how to make punishment more effective.

My point is not to propose that anyone abandon standard methods of retriever training, nor that you carry cookies at all times and constantly dole them out. It's to introduce some of the ideas of behaviorism and suggest ways to apply them to retrievers to help our dogs progress faster and with fewer hang-ups.

Let's start with punishment. Punishment is explicitly part of most retriever training systems, and by learning what behaviorism has to say about it, we can apply it more effectively, getting more progress from less punishment. We can also decide when another approach might serve us better.

Let's use the behaviorists' definition, that "punishment" is something that coincides with or follows a dog's action, which makes the dog less likely to do that same action in the future.

We usually think in terms of doing something to the dog: apply the e-collar or stick, shout, or push the dog away. These may be effective or not. Other effective punishments include stopping a dog on a whistle and holding up a training session, making the dog wait.

We are familiar with the pitfall that a dog may associate punishment with anything he is doing at the time, including things we want to encourage such as going on a retrieve. Behaviorism tells us that punishment inhibits behavior: behavior we want to inhibit, associated (desirable) behavior, and the dog's overall tendency to do anything. Ineffective punishment causes all of the problems with no benefit.

There's an easy test of the effectiveness of punishment. If it works, it works fast, and you will see improvement within one or two applications. If you don't, it's not helping.

If the behavior you're trying to correct is receiving positive reinforcement, it will recur despite punishment. If you really want to get rid of the behavior, you can't just reach for the transmitter (easy); you need to figure out what's inducing the dog to do it, and get control of that factor (harder). Chances

are he is succeeding by doing whatever-it-is, cheating or beating you to the line, when you are focused on some other aspect of the test. "Maintain Standards" so that once you decide to eradicate a behavior, you don't allow your retriever to succeed by doing it. If he succeeds one time in ten, he'll keep gambling that this might be the lucky time. If he never succeeds, he'll give it up whether you punish him or not.

There are several "rules" for effective punishments, of which I'll mention two. First, punishment is most effective if used sparingly. If a little works, great! That doesn't mean more will work better. Second, punishment works best if it "fits the crime," seeming to be a natural consequence of the dog's action. When a dog jumps on you, that's a social overture. Stepping away while expressing dismay, even shouting, is social rejection. That fits, and it works. Physical punishments such as a knee in the chest or stepping on the dog's toes don't fit so well. Alpha-rolling a dog for a failure to come when called is applying a questionable social response to a situation that isn't social (to the dog). That doesn't fit. For a high-speed cheater who tries to run around water because it's faster, a whistle stop fits, because it slows him or her down, especially if it's followed by a come-in whistle back to the proper line and insistence on the correct route.

Now what exactly is "Positive Reinforcement?" It is anything that the dog experiences coinciding with or following an action, which makes that action more likely to occur in the future. The idea is that the behavior itself is built up, made stronger—reinforced. Two obvious examples of positive reinforcement are food, used widely by some trainers, and successfully completing retrieves, which underlies what we do.

There are lots of things we can use for positive reinforcement. Attention, which most dogs crave, is good for obedience and house manners. Doing a routine the dog knows well can be positive reinforcement for trying something new. In fact any action your dog will do readily can be reinforcement for something you want him to do. This is called the Premack principle. An example is steadying with a breaking cord. This is an old-timers' method that doesn't seem to get much mention in today's training programs, but it's very effective. The cord prevents the dog from leaving until you send him, which you do only when he is steady and calm. Thus steadiness is reinforced by following it with a retrieve. There's no need to punish the dog for breaking; the cord stops him and he soon learns it's pointless.

In a similar vein, you can solidly establish the whistle-sit by using it in casting drills. Every whistle-sit is followed by a cast to a dummy, so by the time you're through with drills sitting on the whistle is ingrained.

Praise can be effective positive reinforcement. Effusive praise, of course, can disrupt a lesson. The point of praise is not to create a party atmosphere, but to let the dog know you are paying attention and you approve of what he just did. Dogs are not motivated purely by pleasure and pain. Our retrievers know they are learning and they work to get it right. They are more motivated when they get good feedback, just as we are. In my experience, praise is essential in training Chesapeakes and especially Boykins.

Learning theory tells us more than simply how to use positive reinforcement and punishment. An important principle is "work on one criterion at a time."

I think this is a difficult guideline for us in the retriever world to accept. Our dogs are smart, we want to progress fast, and especially in field work, we expect tests to have a lot of elements to them. Think, however, about the consequence of putting too many criteria into a marking test. Your dog can do exactly the right thing on one criterion, and fail the test because of another. There is nothing to tell him what he did right, and he may not try that same thing again for a long time.

Examples of applying one criterion at a time are to work on steadiness separately from challenging marks, and to develop a good "stay" by increasing duration and distance in separate sessions. We already know to refrain from nit-picking young dogs as they learn blinds. Start by developing the confidence to go, and leave the refinements—additional criteria—for later.

Traditionally in retriever training we take the approach, especially in obedience and yard work, of showing our dog what we want, and then requiring him to do it perfectly or get corrected. Positive reinforcement trainers have a very different approach. They initially accept a rough approximation of the desired action (sometimes so "rough" as to be unrecognizable) and gradually massage it into shape with positive reinforcement for better and better attempts.

When I began training I would have been afraid to try the approximation method. In obedience and yard work now, however, I find the dogs work to improve with very few corrections. I use mainly praise, good timing, and review of familiar exercises for positive reinforcement. Sloppy sits become straight and quick, slow recalls become fast, loose heeling becomes precise, and looping lines to a pile straighten out. And young dogs being allowed to go on their blinds without excessive handling learn to run straight and go in the direction sent. A consequence is that, with less correction, dogs seem more willing and less worried about trying new things.

Earlier I quoted "Maintain Standards." I have a mental picture of Mike Lardy telling us this, but don't know if he was the first. At first it seems that allowing dogs to approximate their exercises is a failure to maintain standards. I think the key is that the dogs improve when they get positive reinforcement for improving. They will take advantage of a lapse in standards, as in the example of high-speed cheaters above, if they win positive reinforcement by doing the wrong thing. I think the old idea that all training is "unnatural" and dogs will always tend to revert to disobedience is incorrect. The positive trainers are right: "dogs do what works." If we make an action work for our dog, he will do it.

One more practice I like from the behaviorists is treating behavior as behavior. It's possible to construct elaborate explanations for a dog's actions in terms of the latest fad theory. Sometimes this results in colorful suggestions like spitting in a dog's food before feeding him to simulate an alpha wolf's eating before a subordinate. If that gets your dog to take an over cast into the water at a distance when he wasn't previously doing it, let me know. I prefer to simply set up training so the dog succeeds by doing it right. No elaborate explanation needed: simply "train the dog."

In contemplating behaviorism, try to resist the temptation to identify the message with the messenger. These principles are supported by scientific research and have been proven in practice outside the science lab, with everything from marine mammals to service dogs. There is no need to discard the effective and established methods of retriever training, but if you want to expand your understanding and become a better problem solver, check it out. ∎

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