

Puppy Heelwork

By John Johnson (England)



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Some of you will know a little about me from my last article, where I wrote about the recall.

For me, heel work is one of the most important things that I have to teach my dog. It is one of the exercises that genetics does not play a part in, apart

from the way the dog moves. Other than this, it is an exercise that is completely alien to the dog, as there is never a time in a dog's life that he will need to walk along tight on his owner's side looking up at him or her for any amount of time. It is with this in mind that I believe this is an exercise that needs teaching from the beginning right through to the end result. I would start a puppy as early as possible; I do not think eight weeks old is too young.



As always, I take my puppy to a place where there are no distractions. I use food, as I believe that at this age, this is their main drive. At this early stage I am only trying to get the position that I want, which for me is with the head up and with the dog driving mainly from the back end, which usually creates a stylish frontal movement, something like a dressage pony. To achieve this, I hold food in my left hand at arms' length away from my body, just above the dog's head.



It is important that the hand is not held too high so that the puppy can reach it if he lifts his head. I like to use cheese or something that the dog finds very tasty and allow him to take the treat from my hand. I remain still until he has grasped where the food is coming from and once he has worked this out, I then move forward, encouraging the puppy to follow, and feed him several treats on the move. At this stage I do not use any commands as I am only shaping the puppy for the position I want; i.e., upright and powerful. I always keep these first few sessions very short, as the puppy is still developing. I only do straight lines, always trying to end the session before the puppy tires. Once the puppy is starting to be able to hold the position for a longer period, I will start to do right hand circles, as the puppy has to work harder to keep up with you. It is also a good way to stretch the puppy's gait.

All this is done with the puppy away from my side out at arms length. This helps him to balance and get to grips with a comfortable heel position.



I tend to stick with this for some time, developing the puppy's hand target using the food and also allowing him to grow more powerful in his movement.



The next stage is to wean him off food in the left hand. The way I do this is by putting my hand out as if I am going to do the follow exercise and the puppy will expect there to be food in my hand and touch it with his nose. At this point, I will click immediately and reward him with some treats that I have either in my pocket or in a pot on a table nearby. I usually use my right hand to feed him. He very quickly learns that the left hand may not have food in it, but touching it does bring the desired treat. I extend this until the puppy is touching my hand and holding his nose there waiting for the click without breaking contact. At this point, I will then start to move the puppy, still keeping him off my leg but following the hand in straight lines, then right circles.

Only when the puppy can hold this position without tiring, and he may be as old as eight to ten months before this happens, I will then bring him into the heel position using the hand target that he will now be familiar with. I also want my puppy to be able to



follow my hand without food in it until I click and reward. The way I do this is by going back a step and holding the treat in my left hand. Using it as a lure, I guide the puppy into a close heel position on the left side. I use my hand like a boat uses a rudder, keeping the puppy in the position I want by steering my hand in the required position. Once I have a position that I like, I will add a heel command to it and click and reward. At this level, the puppy is now being cued for a position he is already in. All this is done with both the dog and handler stationary.



Following on, I will then throw a piece of food on the floor away from me and encourage the puppy to chase after it and eat it. Whilst the puppy is doing this, I will assume the heel position with a treat in my left hand. Once the puppy has eaten the morsel on the floor, I will call the puppy using the heel command and if necessary, use my left hand to guide the puppy into position. Once the puppy has come back and adopted the correct position, I immediately click and reward.



As soon as he has learned this exercise, I will begin to stretch this so that the puppy can stay in the heel position

for longer periods of time before he is clicked. Only when he is confident doing this will I then wean them off the food in the same way as I did for the hand target off the leg. If you follow

this practise without cutting corners or moving on too quickly then the puppy learns that he must keep the heel position to get the reward. If this is taught well, you can tease him with a ball in your right hand and the dog will remain in the heelwork position until clicked to get his reward.



This is training I do with my puppies. As they get older, I wean them off the hand target and onto a face target. I also move them from food onto a toy. However, even with an adult dog I will often revert back to this training, because as I always say if something is going wrong in your routine, always go back to where it was going right and build again from there. These are the foundations that, if done correctly, will be strong and last for your dog's whole life.

Greetins from England,
John Johnson

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