



# What's In Your Tool Box?

By Jack Fields (USA)

*"Knives everywhere, but none are sharp"*

—A Chinese saying



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*Do you desire a well-trained dog?*

**Dog training, trainers and gods:** Ever get the feeling of being lost? Has dog training become a chore or worse yet, are you starting to dislike your dog? Perhaps you are thinking that dog training may not be your thing, or have you been advised to re-home your dog and buy some nice fish? It may be time to evaluate what you have in your tool box. It has always been easy to get lost in the pursuit of training dogs; unfortunately, today it is even easier due to all of the new

knowledge and trends in training. What makes it even worse is that one person points their finger at another claiming that he is wrong and that their particular way is better. I remember my teacher referring to "Schutzhund gods." He would laugh and say, "Just because so and so was National Champion twenty years ago doesn't make him a God. What is he doing today?" Just because a trainer may give seminars or be a judge does not make him or her a good dog trainer. That same teacher also used to say, "There are no masters. You must make yourself the master." There is a lot of truth in that statement. For me, it gave me liberty to think, to look and see what I liked and didn't like; but most importantly to discover what worked for me and my dog. I am still learning and evolving today, as should you.

I remember when I first started training dogs there was no internet, so instead it was all about the books. I read my first dog training book and when I put it down, I felt as if I had grown. I had newly discovered insights, and felt as if I could conquer the world (or at least train my dog). So with this big chip on my shoulder I went and bought my second dog training book. I cracked it open and eagerly set out to build on my knowledge base. "Wait," I remember thinking to myself. This book was contradicting the book I had just read. I remember feeling confused. Young and determined, I set out to read a third book. "Okay, something is wrong here. This is crazy," I remember thinking, as the third book contradicted the first and second books. Today, with digital media you can simply use some "Google Magic"—type in "dog training" and you will get millions of hits. Go to YouTube and it is another mass of confusion. Today, many years later, I can tell you "all roads lead to Rome." It can be a difficult journey full of potential problems depending on the quality of your trainer, the temperament of your dog, and the level of commitment from yourself and from those around you. In the end, you have to decide what works for you and how you want to travel to your final destination, which is having a well-trained dog.

I believe that our diversity is our strength. There are many different ways to train dogs and just as many different trainers who train them. Looking in from the outside, it can be a very confusing thing. Finding a good dog trainer can be a tough decision making process. It should always be owner beware. Dog training is a lot like art. Everyone can draw, whether you are a true artist like Picasso, or you simply doodle while talking on the phone. People have a broad range of skill levels. The problem is that all of those varying artists then want to give you advice. Neighbor Mike says I did this with my dogs, and the girl at the pet store says I do this with my dogs. The veterinarian said to do this or that. Remember the Schutzhund god saying? Just because someone has trained a dog, or has a trained dog, doesn't make their advice right for you. Just because I am the writer of this article does not automatically mean that I am any good at training dogs.

So how do we find success in this sea of confusion? I often tell people that it is not about finding the best dog trainer out there, because there is no "best" dog trainer. There are many dog trainers. Some are good, a few are great, and most are not much better than you are. Know the person with whom you are training, and what their plan is for you and your dog. Find a trainer whom you can trust, communicate with, and whose training methods make sense to you. The alternative is that you can also choose to train your dog yourself. Humans have been doing it since anyone can remember. In Northern Africa, there is a cave painting that is estimated to be around 80,000 years old. It depicts a Stone Age man with a spear and two hunting dogs. Even though it can be done, is it the best choice to do it yourself? I would say no, and I always recommend hiring a professional. When I go to buy a vehicle, I always take a mechanic with me. I'm just not very good or experienced at



*Have you set your training goals?*

wrench turning. I always wonder why people don't seek help sooner when raising their new pup or training a new dog. I usually hear, "Well, the veterinarian said..." In the end make smart choices and do your research.



*Are you starting with the right pup for the job?*



*If not, do you love them enough to place them?*

### **Dogs, people, and training goals:**

Okay, so we have talked a bit about dog training, trainers, and gods. The next thing we need to look at is the quality of dog that we will be training. If you already have a dog then you will need to work with what you have. If you are thinking about buying a pup, you need to make some smart choices. Lord willing, you will have your new pup for 9-12 years. Make the right choice when acquiring your new prospect. You will need to ask yourself, what are my goals for this new pup? Understand that the qualities I look for in a wheelchair assistance dog are very different from the qualities I look for in a Schutzhund dog. All dogs are not created equal! We really need to understand the game in which we will be playing. Before you buy a pup, you should do as much research as possible into what you are looking at doing with the pup. What is the scope of practice? How are the dogs trained? Is there consistency in the industry in regards to common methods used to develop these dogs? What is it that will make a dog undesirable for the venue I'm thinking about working in? Talk to people who are successful in doing what you want to do. Ask them what you should look for in a pup, but more importantly, ask them what are deal breakers in a pup? Starting with the right pup will make your life and the pup's life much easier. There is nothing worse than trying to develop a pup into something it is not meant to be. Been there, done that and not only is it a money pit, but also a real heart breaker. If you already have a dog then we need to do a scene size-up. Who is this dog that I call mine? What are his strong points and weak points? Now it is going to be difficult, but you have to be really honest with yourself and try to avoid making excuses. If you can look at it objectively, it will save you much down the road. If you have a good trainer in mind, have the dog evaluated. Listen to what the trainer is

saying, and then go have another trainer look at your dog. Are there consistencies in the findings of the evaluations? I bet there will be. Look at the weak points and find out what you can do to sheer up those weak points. You may even need to consider that your dog's weak points will make them unable to work at a level acceptable for that which you want to do. If this is the case then you are going to need to ask yourself whether it is fair to the dog to try to get them to do something that they are not truly capable of doing.

Another thing you will need to do is take an honest look at yourself. More times than not the handler is the issue. If more than one person is telling you that you are the issue, then you need to take a long hard look in the mirror. If you are the issue, is it because this is the wrong dog for you? If so, it may be time to seriously consider placing this dog where it can live as it should, and find yourself an animal more suited to your temperament and or experience level. The moral of the story here is to do your homework. Know what you are buying, with whom you are training, and take a good hard look at yourself and your current canine.

### **Everything starts somewhere:**

We like to start developing our puppies not long after they are born. We start with a program the U.S Military called project "Bio Sensor." It is a series of five handling exercises done one time per day with each puppy in the litter. It starts at day 3 and lasts until day 16. It is based off the idea that early neurological stimulation applied during the time period of rapid neurological growth will help produce better dogs. Is it a valid thing? It makes sense, and it gives us something to do with our little blobs. We also start with environmental enrichment in the whelp area from day one. For instance, our whelping box floor is changed every day and each floor blank is a different tactile experience. The real games begin at around four weeks when they are able to eat treats. We start teaching simple behaviors at that point. I've mentioned in prior articles that there is a kennel in the Midwest where the breeder starts imprinting Cadaver on her pups at around 4-5 weeks of age. It is incredible to see for the first time. I've worked many dogs out of her breeding program, and they always do very well at Cadaver Detection work. I believe in starting early. Although on that topic, I only use motivational methods with young pups. There was a famous hunting dog trainer in the late 60s, who was a firm believer in using a level of force on pups at seven weeks. He wanted a solid sit, stay and recall. He was very successful and had some nice working dogs. One of the great Schutzhund trainers once said that he buys two puppies. He then places the pups on a ranch to be raised by foster parents. He tells the new foster parents that he will be back when the pups are two years old at which time he will test them. He then keeps the one he likes, and the foster parents get to keep the other dog. By not knowing which pup



*Do you have short-term plans...*

"Rumpelstiltskin" is going to choose, the foster parents will treat and raise the pups equally. So he is a great trainer who does nothing (job-related) with his pups for the first two years. A while back, I had a chance to work a dog from a prior litter of ours. She was four years old and had never seen the protection field. We brought her out and man, was it beautiful! She was a beast, as if she had been born to do it. She worked better than many dogs that had been coming out to club for some time. Growing up in the art of dog training, I used to ask trainers what their take on training puppies was. I never got the same answer twice, although by that point of my career, unlike the early book reading, I didn't get frustrated. I now knew that "all roads lead to Rome". Again, our diversity is our strength. You are going to need to do your research and discover what works for you, as there are many valid ways to do this stuff. I think the important thing here is to know what you want your adult dog to be, set goals, have a plan, and work towards it.

**Yin and Yang—it's the nature of things:**

To punish or not to punish is the question. This is a very confusing aspect of training these days. Life was much simpler when we could just punish our dogs and not think too much about it. It was normal, acceptable and simply the way we did things back then. In the mid '80s, Positive Reinforcement emerged, and would change the way many of us would train dogs forever. Today it is becoming more and more difficult to find trainers who still use punishment. The majority of new trainers are usually purely positive in scope. Here in the States, the mega-corporation pet stores usually only endorse positive methods. Therefore, we now see a slew of handlers who have been through all of their training classes, (usually multiple times) yet their dogs can't reliably hold a down stay. These handlers are usually experiencing some level of relationship issue. The client will usually state they did training classes but dog training really didn't work for them. I try to explain that they have only experienced one aspect of training, and that there are many ways to get to Rome. I believe positive reinforcement is a really good thing, but at the same time, I think it is only half of the book. I like to refer to Positive Reinforcement as the Yin of dog training. If positive reinforcement is the Yin then Negative Reinforcement is the Yang. As I mentioned before, it is difficult to find trainers using punishment today. It is even more difficult to find literature on the topic. Just walk into a



*...and long-term plans...*

training program. I find it troubling and even a bit concerning, as the majority of dogs I see have issues which could be resolved with a few simple rules for punishment. On that



*...to reach your training goals?*

same note, too much punishment or inconsistent punishment can really warp a relationship. Conflict can ruin a good team. Today training is evolving again. What we are beginning to see are trainers who are mixing positive and negative reinforcement. Ultimately, I like this approach (although you will need to find what you like). It is the true Yin and Yang. It is a balance point. I believe whenever you find yourself out of balance there will be issues in whatever you do. If I'm too nice, I'm taken advantage of, and I'm dependent on my reward. I've got a happy dog, but I usually find myself negotiating with that happy dog. More times than not, as the dog's wants outweigh the value of my reward I have a training breakdown.

Understanding all of the rules of Positive Reinforcement and then applying them can be difficult for the best of us, let alone a first time dog owner. If I'm too hard, my obedience can take on a lackluster form. It is usually reliable, but can be flat and lacking spirit. This dog worries about its owner. Over the long term, I believe too much punishment can lead to the dog internalizing the stress, and this can lead to health issues both physical and mental. Remember dogs are intelligent and will seek opportunities to take care of themselves if you are unfair with them. They may decide to avoid you, run from you or fight you. Power is a two-edged sword and with power comes great responsibility. So you will need to look at methods and decide how you want to train. Perhaps you might even take a good look at your current training program. Is it right for you and your dog? Is it working, and are you achieving your training goals? Try not to get caught up in, "This is Joe Blow's method of dog training." At the end of the day, all methods are either positive based, negative based, or some kind of hybrid of the two. Your job is to discover what works for you!

**Same Bat time, same Bat channel:**

When was the last time you opened your tool box and took a peek inside? You should have a lot to evaluate and think about. Remember there are no real answers, but only questions if you seek the truth. You are going to need to find what works for you and your dog. Ask questions of yourself, your trainer, and your dog. Know what standard you are training for, and have the end goal in mind. In the next installment, we will look deeper into positive and negative training tools as well as examine some common handling flaws. Are your tools sharp? I hope so. If not, it's time to start sharpening them!