

The Obedience Corner

By Jane L. Coen

“What Does It Take To Produce a Good Heeling Dog?”

If your objective is to have an obedience dog that is competitive—one that will consistently qualify with good scores and have a chance of placing in its classes—then it is important that the dog learn to Heel well. By “Heel well,” I mean maintaining proper Heel position, at all times, and exhibiting the desired attitude, as defined by the AKC *Obedience Regulations*.

So what is required to deliver that type of Heeling performance? The same attributes required for good performance in any other obedience exercise: attention and response. To make sure we have a common understanding of those terms, let me define them below.

Attention – When working with its handler, the dog’s attention is constantly focused on the handler and his/her verbal commands and signals. In other words, the dog keeps its eyes on its handler, at all times, and is not distracted by smells, sights or sounds in its surroundings.

Response – When given a verbal command or signal, the dog responds instantly, with enthusiasm and speed. In other words, the dog does not hesitate before responding, and does not execute the command slowly, reflecting disinterest and a lack of desire.

If you have attended one or more obedience trials, you have undoubtedly seen dogs that would fall into both camps: sharp working dogs that Heel with enthusiasm and precision and who maintain constant eye contact with their handlers, and dogs that Heel sluggishly and inattentively, seeming to wander aimlessly around the ring. Is the difference in these dogs’ performances a function of the dogs’ temperaments or the way they were trained? Based on well over four decades of experience training dogs and instructing others to train their dogs, I would unequivocally answer that poor Heeling dogs are much more a result of their training than their temperament.

Just to clarify, let me say that there is no doubt that some dogs are more naturally suited to competitive obedience training than others. Not every dog is Obedience Trial Champion (OTCH) material. That being said, even less competitive dogs can be trained to Heel decently, if not well.

So if a dog’s Heeling performance is more a function of training than temperament, what does it take to produce a good Heeling dog? There are actually a number of key success factors.

- 1) The dog must understand attention is mandatory, not optional. I teach my dogs to pay attention to me starting with their first obedience training session. I use the command, “Watch Me!” Initially, I use a treat to get the dog’s attention. With the dog sitting in Heel position, and holding a treat in my right hand, I place the treat by the dog’s nose and then lift the treat up to my face, as I give the “Watch Me!” command. After the dog looks at my face for a moment or two, I reach down and hand the dog the treat. I slowly increase the time until the dog will look at me on command for 30 consecutive seconds before being rewarded. Once the dog understands the “Watch Me!” command, I correct the dog if it looks away after being given the “Watch Me!” command by snapping the leash as I repeat the command, “Watch Me!” I never give the dog a command unless it is looking at me.

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- 2) When I begin teaching the dog to Heel, I initially use automatic corrections, meaning quick leash snaps, when I start forward, change direction or pace. With the dog sitting at Heel, I say, “Watch Me!” to make sure the dog’s attention is on me. Eventually, the dog will glue its eyes on me automatically when brought into Heel position, without having to be given a “Watch Me!” command. My Heel command is “Dog’s Name, Heel” (e.g., Kiz, Heel!). On the “Heel” portion of the command, I snap the leash forward lightly with my left hand a split second before I step forward. That teaches the dog to move off with me, and not lag a step behind. In the beginning, when I change direction, I give the leash a quick snap as I make the turn. Similarly, when I change pace, I give the leash a quick snap as I slow down or speed up. In all cases, I am conditioning the dog to respond instantly. I never give the dog a chance to be inattentive, unresponsive or sluggish. All leash snaps are accompanied by enthusiastic praise.
- 3) I do a lot of proof training by working my dogs in environments that offer a lot of distraction. When Heeling, if the dog’s attention begins to stray, I make a quick turn in the direction opposite where the dog is looking as I give a sharp snap on the leash and say in a happy, enthusiastic voice, “Gotcha!” Very soon, the dog will not look away—even under distraction. In fact, the greater the distraction, the greater the dog’s attention.
- 4) Train don’t complain (one of Bob Self Sr. and Jack Godsil’s mottos), and for heaven’s sake, don’t nag the dog. In other words, practice makes perfect, so train regularly, and give one command only, demanding and rewarding the desired response.

Successful Heeling to a large degree is dependent on good dog attention, which requires that the dog be worked on a loose leash. There should never be any tension on the leash or collar when a dog is Heeling. If a correction (leash snap) is required, it must be given quickly when the leash is loose, and the tension from the snap must be released instantly.

Let me relate a quick story about a dog trainer that made a lasting impression on me when I was a child. As a young child, I was obsessed with dogs and dog training, and asked for dog training books for all my birthdays and at Christmas. Over the years, I accumulated quite a library of dog training books, including most of the books Bill Koehler wrote.

Thirty plus years ago, there was a Chicago land dog training club that proclaimed that it used the Bill Koehler method. I attended obedience matches hosted by that club, and would always be appalled at the abusive treatment members of that club subjected their dogs to in the name of the Koehler method. I was baffled by that club’s interpretation of the Koehler method since I had read most of Koehler’s books. When that club hosted a Bill Koehler dog training clinic, I registered and attended. In Bill Koehler, I witnessed a gifted trainer who was anything but abusive toward dogs. The timing of his corrections was impeccable. He clearly communicated to the dogs what he expected, and the results he obtained were nothing less than remarkable. He transformed distractible, obstreperous dogs into attentive, obedient ones before our eyes—in mere moments. His key to success: effective use of the leash and collar—nothing more, nothing less.

Since attending that Bill Koehler clinic three plus decades ago, I have found that I, too, can transform the behavior of uncontrollable dogs in my public training classes easily and quickly by making the same type of quick, well-timed leash and collar corrections that Bill Koehler did—the same type of leash and collar corrections that produce confident and happy, attentive and accurate Heeling dogs. With self-discipline and practice, anyone can master the techniques required to produce a good Heeling dog, providing they set high enough standards and consistently reinforce the desired behavior.

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Until next time, Happy Heeling!