

## The Obedience Corner

By Jane L. Coen

### “Setting High Standards—Pay Now or Pay Later”

Over the last several decades, I have had the pleasure of training many different dogs, and the privilege of teaching thousands of students how to train their dogs. In teaching others, I have always emphasized that setting high standards for the dog's performance is critical for success. I have found that students who set high standards consistently attain excellent results. Those students who accept a lesser performance from their dogs end up with dogs whose performances are characterized by inconsistency, inattentiveness and poor responses to commands.

It can be a thrilling experience to watch a dog that is fully engaged in its training, demonstrating enthusiasm, drive and instant responses to its trainer's commands. Such performances do not happen by chance, but instead are conditioned into the dog through the trainer's consistency, enthusiasm and effective use of high impact positive and—when warranted--negative reinforcements . My experience is that trainers who fail to achieve their dogs' maximum potential when it comes to the dogs' obedience performances, tend to be trainers who under correct their dogs, accept delayed and sloppy responses to commands, and are ineffective at motivating their dogs.

Last year, I showed my Golden, “Kizzie,” in three obedience trials for her American Kennel Club (AKC) Companion Dog (C.D.) title, and three obedience trials for her AKC Companion Dog Excellent (C.D.X.) title. She won her class at five out of the six trials, earning scores ranging from 196 ½ to 199 ½ (out of a possible 200 points). While in the obedience ring, Kiz gave me her undivided attention, and responded instantly and enthusiastically to all of my commands. Her performances at the trials mirrored her performances during our training sessions. She clearly understood my expectations of her, and delivered the desired performance consistently.

By contrast, many of the dogs in Kizzie's classes were inattentive—some to the point of aimlessly wandering around the ring during the Heel Free and other exercises. Many of the dogs' performances were sloppy and lacked enthusiasm and drive.

I am a firm believer in teaching obedience exercises in small steps, and then carefully assembling the “pieces.” For instance, when teaching a dog to retrieve, the dog is taught to hold the dumbbell, then open its mouth on command, then reach for the dumbbell (starting with half an inch and gradually increasing to arm's length), then picking up a stationary dumbbell off of the floor, then retrieving a dumbbell that is tossed, then learning to be steady at heel (remaining seated while the dumbbell is thrown and until released with the retrieve command), and then going through proof training on the retrieve. My experience is that if the dog is trained on the retrieve exercise daily, the entire process should not take more than three weeks to complete, at which time the trainer has a dog that is very reliable in executing the retrieve exercise in accordance with the AKC *Obedience Regulations*.

Unfortunately, using the retrieve training example, what too often happens is that a trainer either skips any type of formal retrieve training because “My dog loves to retrieve,” or skips critical steps in the process. In either case, the trainer ends up with a dog with a lot of bad habits, e.g., not responding to the first command to retrieve, going out or returning slowly, sniffing the floor on the way out or back, pouncing on the dumbbell with its feet, picking the dumbbell up in a slow or sloppy manner, picking up the dumbbell by the end rather than the bit, dropping the

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dumbbell on the way back or when the dog returns to the handler before it is given the command to release the dumbbell.

Does the process of properly teaching the retrieve (or anything else) take some time? Yes, it does. Is the time well spent? In my opinion, it is. With a properly trained dog, you don't have to “hope” the dog will perform correctly. You can be confident that it will—every time.

When I am ready to enter my dog in obedience trials to earn a new obedience title, I always enter a “back-up” trial; however, I rarely, if ever, need it. I may choose to go to that fourth trial for fun or for the dog's experience, but I have also been known to “blow off that fourth trial,” particularly if the location of the trial is a distance from my home. [NOTE: A dog must qualify three times under at least two different judges to earn the AKC C.D., C.D.X. or Utility Dog (U.D.) title.]

It is my great pleasure to have the privilege of working weekly with seven out of the eight puppies (and their owners) from my last Golden litter (the eighth puppy lives in Terre Haute, Indiana—too far to commute to the weekly class). Some of the owners are experienced trainers; while two of them are new to formal, competitive obedience training. What I have found, over the years, is that success in training does not necessarily highly correlate with a trainer's level of experience. Instead, I have found that the greatest success is achieved by those trainers who consistently and accurately follow their instructor's directions (assuming the instructor is knowledgeable and competent), and train regularly.

Years ago, I had the opportunity to teach a public obedience class for children eight to 16 years of age. That group of students did a remarkable job, and achieved great success. I am convinced that the primary reason they achieved such excellent results was that they took my instruction literally, and did exactly what I instructed them to do.

Being full-time students, these young people were used to taking direction from their teachers at school, and they followed my instructions explicitly. For instance, when the dogs were steady enough on the Sit- and Down-Stay exercises for the handlers to be across the room from the dogs on the Stay exercises, these young students left their dogs on my command, and walked straight across the room, without looking back, before turning to face their dogs. This relayed to the dogs that their young handlers trusted them, and expected them to perform properly. I find that when I give that same instruction to a group of adult students, I often find that the handlers leave their dogs tentatively, backing away from their dogs in an uncertain manner, telegraphing to the dogs that they are not trusted to perform correctly.

The best way to set high standards for your dog's performance is to become very familiar with the AKC *Obedience Regulations* so you know what the desired performance is intended to look like. Equally important is to go to some near-by obedience trials and watch the dogs and handlers in the ring. Be sure to spend time observing the dogs in the Open B and Utility B rings, since these are the classes that typically have a higher percentage of really nice working dogs. Many of the dogs in these classes have already earned their C.D.X. and/or U.D. titles, and either have or are working toward their Obedience Trial Champion title. Watching these “competition” dogs will help you formulate the standards that you want to set for your own dog's performance.

Dogs are not born great obedience dogs. Great obedience dogs are made. They reflect the commitment and dedication of motivated trainers who derive joy from bringing out the best in their dogs. Typically, great obedience dogs are happy and confident working dogs because they understand exactly what is expected of them, and they know how to earn their trainers' praise and rewards. And, I can tell you this—it is a lot more fun when you can go to an

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obedience trial confident that your dog will perform well and make you proud. “Flunking” a trial [receiving a Non-qualifying (NQ) score]] makes for a long ride home!

Setting high standards for your dog’s performance—and making sure the dog consistently performs to those standards—will help you produce an obedience dog that works happily and with confidence, meeting your expectations whenever you train or trial your dog. Investing the necessary effort upfront to teach the dog how to properly execute the various obedience commands in accordance with the AKC *Obedience Regulations*, and maintaining your high standards during training sessions, will pay big dividends throughout your dog’s obedience career. It truly is a case of pay now or pay later.

Until next time, Happy Heeling!