

The Obedience Corner

By Jane L. Coen

“The Value of a Solid Stay”

I tell my obedience students that the “Stay” command is the easiest command to teach a dog because the dog does not have to DO anything—other than remaining absolutely still. In this case, “absolutely” is the key word. The mistake many people make in teaching their dogs to “Stay” is to set too low of a standard. Another mistake that many people make is to use the Stay command in a casual fashion, failing to correct the dog if it breaks the Stay command.

If a handler wants a dog that is rock solid on the Stay command, then the handler must teach the dog that remaining *absolutely* still is what is required and expected. In other words, no fidgeting of the dog’s feet, no shifting of the dog’s weight from one hip to the other, no slouching on one haunch on a Sit Stay, no rolling onto the dog’s side on the Down Stay, etc. What is observed far too often at obedience classes or trials are dogs on the Stay exercises doing all of these things. These dogs’ owners then wonder why their dogs break their Stays and receive non-qualifying scores at obedience trials.

It is also a common occurrence to observe handlers casually telling their dogs to Stay under various circumstances, and then ignoring the fact that their dogs disregard the Stay command and break. The Stay command should never be used unless the handler intends to correct the dog should he disregard and break the command.

Why is it so necessary to set high standards when training the Stay command and to correct the dog if he breaks the Stay command? In a word, the answer is *reliability*. If you tell your dog Stay, you want to be confident that he is going to heed that command.

Let me give you a perfect case in point. Three years ago, I was attending an agility class with my then young Golden, “Kizzie.” The dogs in her class were running courses with a dozen or so obstacles in them (e.g., jumps, tunnels, the A-frame, dog walk, etc.). As those of you involved with agility know, many courses are designed so that you have a real advantage as the handler if you can tell your dog “Stay” at the starting line and lead out away from your dog. That way, you position yourself an obstacle or two ahead of your dog, allowing you to stay ahead of the dog to provide clear direction on where you want the dog to go.

Because of her solid obedience background, I was able to leave Kizzie at the starting line at her agility class with a Stay command, and lead out to whatever distance I chose. Most of the handlers in the class were not able to do so. Week after week, many of the other handlers in the class continued to tell their dogs “Stay” at the starting line, as they walked out onto the course. Week after week, their dogs ignored the Stay command and left the starting line whenever they chose. The handlers lost control of their dogs from the very start.

In a past article, I wrote about the difficulties some of the handlers at hunt tests I attended had with their dogs at “the line” where dogs are supposed to sit quietly next to their handlers as the judge signals the gunners to release and shoot the birds out in the field. Dogs at hunt tests are not to leave the line until commanded to do so by their handler. At every hunt test I attended, I saw handlers fail to pass the test because their dogs would not Stay quietly at the line. The dogs bounced around so badly that they failed to see the bird go up and land after it was shot.

From the very first training session on the Stay command, my dogs learn that Stay means remain in the exact position you were placed in—be it the Sit, Down or Stand position. If I am

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working with a young puppy (e.g., seven or eight weeks old), I sit down on the floor, place the puppy directly in front of me, and holding the puppy’s buckle collar with my right hand, tuck the puppy’s rear quarters into a Sit position as I say “Sit!” The puppy is facing directly toward me. I then take hold of the puppy’s collar with my left hand, and hold my right hand in a “Stop” position (palm facing the puppy’s face, fingers pointing upward) a few inches away from the puppy’s face. As I place my right hand signal in front of the puppy’s face, I say “Stay!” one time only.

With a very young puppy, I only have the puppy remain in the Stay position for a couple of seconds. I then release the puppy with the release word, “Free!” as I clap my hands and encourage the puppy to run to me. Within a week’s time, I have the puppy up to 15 or more seconds on the Stay. In another week’s time, we are up to a minute. By the time the puppy is three months of age (assuming I started working with the puppy at 7 or 8 weeks) the puppy is able to Stay for two minutes—without moving.

From the very first Stay lesson, I communicate that the puppy must remain still. If the puppy begins to move a foot or shift his weight into a slouched sit position, I say, “Aah, aah!” and quickly reposition the puppy. After a couple of weeks, I begin introducing light distractions—light jiggling of the leash, very soft pulls on the leash toward me, a slow step left or right. If at any time the puppy starts to move, I give the “Aah, aah!” verbal correction and quickly reposition the puppy. By the time the puppy is three months of age, I have introduced hand clapping as a distraction, along with hop steps left and right in front of the puppy. I also begin bouncing and then rolling a ball in front of the puppy.

I repeat the entire above sequence of steps with the puppy in the down position. With young puppies, I teach the Sit and Down Stay commands within the same training sessions. What the puppy is really learning is that he must remain still in whatever position he is placed in if he is given the command, Stay.

If I begin the dog’s training when he is older (six months plus), I begin the Stay concept with the “Sit and accept praise” exercise. The dog is placed in a Sit at Heel position at the handler’s left side. The leash is folded up into the handler’s right hand, the handler stands up straight and begins praising the dog in a happy, enthusiastic manner. If the dog pops up out of the Sit position, the handler reaches across his body with his right hand to grasp the leash down near the dog’s collar. The handler then snaps up on the leash with the right hand as the free left hand quickly places the dog’s rear quarters back into the Sit position saying, “NO!” Once the dog is back in the sitting position, the handler resumes the praise.

If the handler’s reactions are quick, the dog will learn to Sit still within one or two training sessions. The dog is released from the Sit command with “Free!” I build the dog up to the point where he will remain sitting still at my left side for 30 seconds as I happily and enthusiastically praise him. Once I have the dog up to 30 seconds, I begin teaching the formal Sit Stay.

I begin with my dog sitting at my left side in Heel position. I first tell the dog to “Watch!” to make sure his full attention is on me. [NOTE: Food is used initially to teach the dog to Watch on command.] As soon as the dog looks up at my face on the command, “Watch!,” I place my left hand in front of the dog’s face (palm facing the dog, fingers pointing downward), and command “Stay.” I pivot in front of the dog to stand one foot (12 inches!) in front of the dog. Once in front of the dog, I transfer the leash to my left hand and turn my right hand so my palm is facing the dog with my fingers pointing downward. As long as the dog remains sitting absolutely still, I do not do or say anything.

The moment the dog begins to shift his weight or pick up a front foot, I instantly bring my right hand up to catch the leash to give the collar a quick snap with the word, “NO!” If your timing is

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good, within a couple of training sessions you will have a dog that not only Sits as still as a statue, but also keeps his eyes riveted on you. I begin with 30 seconds, and within a week’s time have the dog up to one minute on the Sit Stay. I add 30 seconds a week until I have the dog up to a three minute Sit Stay. By week two, I begin adding distractions such as the leash jiggle under the chin, the soft, steady pull on the leash toward me, steps to the left or right, hand clapping, and circling the dog (360 degrees).

When I have the dog up to three minutes, and he is rock solid with all of the distractions, I slowly begin backing further away from the dog on the Sit Stay. I get the dog up to three minutes before I begin moving beyond the six foot leash. By then, the dog should be very steady on the Sit Stay.

The Down Stay can be taught along with the Sit Stay. When the dog is on the Down Stay, I require that the dog assume (and remain in) the “lie down, roll and tuck” position. That means that when the dog goes into the Down position, he must roll onto his left haunch so both of his hind legs are facing me when the dog is in the Down position at my left side. I then make the dog tuck his right front foot under his body, which adds to his reliability on the Down Stay. A dog cannot creep forward or backwards if he is in the “lie down, roll and tuck” position. If at any time the dog un-tucks his right foot or rolls his hindquarters to the other haunch, I give a sharp “NO!” command and reposition the dog.

If a handler is consistent about correcting any minor Stay breaks, he will never have to worry about his dog failing to remain in the proper position at an obedience or agility trial, at a hunt test, around the house or anywhere else. It is essential that the handler correct and reinforce if ever the dog fails to respect the Stay command.

I can share a good case in point. When my Kizzie was a year old, my out-of-town sister, her boyfriend, and their two Golden retrievers came for a weekend visit. I had Kizzie and her mother, Roxi, with me down in the basement when my sister’s boyfriend (and his two Golden retrievers) came downstairs to help me set up the new tread mill I bought for my dogs. I had put my two dogs on a Down Stay. Well....Kizzie and Roxi thought they should race over to my sister’s dogs to play. I intercepted them and put them back on a Down Stay. They both broke their Stays again when my sister’s dogs started rough-housing with each other.

Now, I could have made excuses for my dogs and said, “That’s a really tough distraction for two overly-friendly Golden retrievers,” and just ignored the fact my dogs disregarded my Stay command. Instead, I grabbed Roxi’s leash, took her back to the exact spot where I had left her, and snapped the leash to the ground as I commanded in a firm voice, “Down!, Stay!” That was all it took for Roxi. She was now down for the count.

Not so with Kizzie. She was determined to join the rough-housing party going on. I intercepted her leash, firmly took her back to where I had left her, and corrected her for breaking the Down Stay. Apparently, she thought she had more staying power than I did because she broke two more times. Each time I corrected her, I used a firmer correction. After the third correction—which was very firm—she, too, was down for the count, finally having figured out there was no future in continuing to disregard my Stay command.

When I went to agility class later that day, the payoff on my perseverance was obvious. Kizzie remained perfectly steady at the starting line as I moved out onto the course, leading out by three obstacles. She was the only dog in the class that was able to do so.

In my mind, communicating expectations clearly to our dogs is what effective dog training is all about. Another thing I tell my obedience students is that our dogs will give us exactly the performance we demand. Dogs are no different than people—with the exception of the small

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percentage of the population who are Type A personalities (overachievers)—in that they will deliver the performance that will gain them rewards and keep them out of trouble.

By setting high standards and consistently requiring that our dogs meet those standards, we end up with great working dogs that are reliable and consistent in their performance. By investing the time necessary to lay a good foundation in our Stay training, we reap the benefit and value of a solid Stay performance.

Until next time, Happy Heeling!