

## Problems?

### Part III

Last month I wrote about having control of your dog on the leash. From the time you put the slip-chain collar on the dog to wherever you take it on the leash, it should always be remembered that the collar and leash combined is your equipment of control. That is one of the basic principles in dog training. There is, of course, a right and a wrong way of using that equipment. That means every handler needs to be shown how to use it and given the reasons why.

I have often seen handlers holding their strong pulling dogs on very short leads. Because of that, those dogs become frustrated in no time. Then many of them start to growl and snap at other dogs which come near. It is one of the root causes of aggression. It is made worse when handlers bend down to their dogs, put their arms around their dogs to restrain them and finally, in sheer desperation, yell into their dogs' ears words of reproof. This chain reaction also affects the handlers who very quickly become tense or nervous about what their dogs might do next. In consequence, they get extremely annoyed with their dogs. In short, all these things have, unfortunately, been caused by the incorrect way they have attempted to manage their dogs. They have not adopted the correct stance and posture in order to carry out an appropriate physical correction with a quick jerk on the leash. They have continued to hold the lead tight instead of relaxing it immediately. They have not used their voices in the right way. They have not maintained a calm yet firm composure. They have not been observant enough in reading their dogs and have not developed the art of 'correct timing'. That all sounds rather demoralising doesn't it. However, the good news is just around the corner. It can so easily be corrected provided one has a positive attitude.

I'd like to take one recent example where a young lady brought to me her two-year-old German Shepherd Dog which, unfortunately, exhibited all of the above traits mentioned. She had been advised to walk her dog on a fixed leather collar. So, I immediately asked her to change it for a slip-chain training collar. (By the way, I have never liked them to be referred to as 'choke collars'. They are not meant to choke dogs, but correct them.). Having done that, I showed her how to free walk her dog on the full length of the leash, which was of an ideal length — four feet long. That gave her dog, what is known as, a greater area of independence. If that area is diminished by the handler pulling the dog in so close that the length of leash is only a few inches between handler and dog, then the dog will feel so frustrated that it is highly likely to become aggressive. To make matters worse, if the handler bends down close to the dog's face, the dog will become more protective for its handler. And if the handler shouts in the dog's ear, that will have a most disturbing affect on the dog. So let's see what can be done in a completely different way to put everything right. It's not hard. In fact, it is quite simple when you know how.

First of all the leash should be held slack. If the dog pulls, the command, "Steady" should be given quietly, followed by a quick corrective jerk on the leash. In doing that, the handler should lean backwards to make use of body weight and stop still with one foot forward which acts as a prop to prevent the handler being pulled over. The leash must be slackened instantly the jerk has been given. If it is held tight, that will make the dog pull forward and the problem will continue. The moment the dog has responded, vocal praise should be given quietly and slowly. Then the dog should be invited to proceed again with a quiet, slow voice, "On you go" with similar praise as it

responds, "Good dog." All this should be done in order to keep the dog calm. Furthermore, the handler should remain upright to give the dog the impression that the handler is the boss.

I took her dog to show her all this while she walked at my side. The dog responded almost immediately, and the young lady was quite amazed to see how her dog behaved so well. She could see the transformation within those few minutes and I explained the reasons for doing all those things which she was ready to understand. It would have been no good if I had just told her what to do and how to do those things without explaining why I did them. It was also necessary for her to know how the dog's mind works in the process. The old saying, 'seeing is believing' is true, but simple explanations and reasons for why we do everything must be given so that every handler can readily understand.

My next task was to get the owner to do it for herself. Naturally, it was difficult at the start as she had got into some bad habits over the last two years in the dog club. Having seen me handle her dog correctly, it gave her confidence in knowing that her dog was capable of behaving well. After a while and under my close tuition she worked hard and achieved good results. She told me that she valued watching me demonstrate with her dog, which was quite different from the club instructors who just told handlers to keep on working on the problems, but never actually borrowed a dog or two to show the handlers how to do everything. So, instructors please take note and you'll achieve much.

So, how did the problem start? One may well ask, 'Was it the fault of the dog? No. Was it the fault of the handler? No. Then whose fault was it?' The fault plainly lied with the club instructors, or, if you like, the instruction given. That was no surprise to me. I have witnessed it many times. As a matter of interest, I asked her how the dog was corrected and rewarded. Fortunately, it was not a food reward. You can imagine how I breathed a sigh of relief. Instead, if the dog went wrong it was motivated with the use of a toy to attract it away from other dogs of any other distraction. Sadly, correction was not given. I was not surprised when she told me of this. I told her that there was no need to use toys to motivate a dog. All that was needed was to show the dog exactly what was required in any exercise, praise it sincerely on every favourable response and give appropriate corrections if and when necessary. In addition to that basic principle, she should have been told not to hold her dog in tight, bend down and shout in its ear, "No."

People underestimate the potential qualities and learning abilities in dogs. The German Shepherd dog in particular can do many more different types of work than any other breed in the world. That is not an opinion, it is a fact. Many books explain that and give a list of all the different tasks for which the dog can be trained, e.g. a sheep herding dog (for which it was originally bred and hence its name), police dog, guide dog for the blind, avalanche rescue dog, drug detection dog, explosive detection dog, dead body finding dog and the list goes on. The breed can work in the most extreme climates, from very cold to very hot. That young lady's GSD was no exception. Now that she can see how adaptable her dog is to training, how she should handle it and understand the reasons given for everything, I believe she has every chance of getting the best out of her dog with the minimum effort and above all to be able to enjoy every moment of owning such an affectionate companion.

I sincerely hope that what I have explained will be of help to handlers, trainers and instructors alike. More problem solving and prevention next month. Till then, take care.

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