

Problems?

Part V

One of the most common complaints dog owners present to me is that their dogs are continuously getting under their feet either in the home or when they take them out for walks. Why is this so? The answer is quite simple. As usual the problem lies with the owners. From the time they have purchased the puppy and taken it home, they have avoided treading on it and have carefully walked around it. The puppy has been very quick to realise this and doesn't see any reason why it should move out of the way of the owners' feet.

One of the first exercises I show people is to learn how to walk in a straight line with the puppy walking freely on the full length of the leash. It can walk on either side, in front or behind. The leash can be held in either hand in order to guide and control the puppy's movements. Within a very short time the puppy will realise that its handler is consistent in walking in a straight line and, having turned around on the spot, returns on the same straight line. The handler should never follow the puppy nor start stepping all over the place to suit the puppy. Remember, you are the boss, watch carefully and communicate with a calm voice. If you have to correct a large, heavy, strong dog pulling on the leash, always place one foot well forward, lean back on your other foot, say, 'Steady' jerk back on the leash, slacken it immediately and stand still, then quietly praise. So you see how that correction can be achieved by placing your feet correctly and making full use of the weight of your body. Don't have feet together and lean forward, otherwise you'll end up in a heap.

In the home walk in a straight line across the room and if the puppy is in your way, say, 'Out of the way' and lift the puppy to one side with our hand. It will soon learn that phrase and respond accordingly every time it is uttered as you approach. Remember to praise upon its response.

When teaching your puppy in the initial stages of walking at heel, you have to create much self discipline in being able to walk straight. Never walk into your puppy especially when you teach it to 'Sit'. By stepping into it you will make it afraid of your clumsy feet. That will cause it to walk wide, which will also cause wide stands, sits and drops. I advise all obedience dog club instructors not to train classes by walking them around in circles. When revolving in an anti-clockwise direction all the handlers are walking into their dogs. Classes should be conducted with handlers and dogs walking abreast of each other in their own straight lines. Handlers must be made aware of keeping their feet straight. Many handlers tend to turn into their dogs, often with the left foot under the dog, because they have bent from the hips instead of bending at the knees in order to keep straight and their body weight over their feet.

From the sit position, say the dog's name and 'Heel' and step straight forward. Most instructors tell handlers to step off with the left foot first. Personally, I never make a hard and fast rule about which foot should take the first step. Handlers have got enough to think about as it is. It is far more important to keep their eyes on their dogs. I tell people to please themselves which foot they move first, as long as they walk straight and not too fast. A fast speed is likely to excite a dog and make it walk too far ahead. Many judges asked me why I sometimes stepped off with either foot. I told them that I get my dogs to obey my command. I think they must have thought that I was trying to pull a fast one. But I wasn't

Footwork is very important when doing turns. With the right-about turn, pick your feet up and return on the same straight track, so that your dog will be confident about keeping close to you. Be careful not to do a U-turn, whereby you will be walking into your dog and causing it to be afraid of your feet and develop wide turns. Make right turns neat by pivoting on both feet together, and then proceed in the next straight line in order to get the best attention from the dog. Avoid turning right gradually, otherwise your dog is likely to carry on and not realise that you have turned right. This will result in a wide right turn. With the left turn, having said a quick, 'Heel', spin on the ball of your left foot to the left and your right foot will come across in front of your dog. In turn the dog will turn its head in that direction and go with you.

Footwork is also very important in recalls. Often when a dog comes to its handler it will veer slightly over to one side, let us say to the right of the handler. As soon as this is noticed the handler should side step to the left with both feet. When this has enticed the dog to come over in that direction, the handler should walk backwards and as soon as the dog has straightened up the sit should be given. Conversely, if the dog comes slightly to the left, then the handler should side step to the right. I guess it is human nature that most handlers will side step to where the dog is going in order to get it sitting in front of them. But if they do that, then they are giving in to the dog, and thereafter the dog will expect that to happen. Remember, you are the boss. Another important point in this exercise is that when getting your dog to sit in front of you, don't take a step forward to do this, otherwise your dog will become afraid of you stepping on its toes. This will cause the dog to sit too far away from you in future. It makes sense, doesn't it?

When doing heelwork in the street and you sit your dog at the down kerb, it always pays, before crossing the road, to note a particular landmark on the opposite side which you need to aim for in order to keep straight and not walk into your dog. There's no harm in walking very slightly to the right when crossing half way down a road or at a T junction.

It may interest readers to know that loud shoes can also make a dog heel wide if it has a very high hearing sensitivity. I recall several decades ago many people wore metal studs on the heels and soles to save shoe leather. Some of the guide dogs we trained in the UK had high hearing sensitivity and if they were allocated to blind people who wore shoes just described, the noise would have an adverse affect on the dogs. Once the bits of metal had been removed and rubber soles and heels put on, the guide dogs were quite happy. I saw a similar thing happen from time to time in UK Obedience Trials when held indoors on concrete or wooden flooring. When working highly sensitive dogs, understanding handlers would change their shoes for plimsolls before entering the ring.

It may also be of interest for readers to know that the occupations of handlers, their social activities and sports in which they have participated, actually have a great bearing on their good footwork. You will usually find that men and women who have served in the armed forces, police and fire services have very good footwork. They have all received the necessary training in marching, and that strict discipline lasts for the rest of their lives. This can also be seen in dancers, actors and young people who have taken up callisthenics. The way they move, have great coordination and excellent timing certainly puts them in good stead for training dogs. I have also found that many people cannot walk backwards in a straight line when teaching their dogs the recall exercise. But people who have played in various sports, like netball, basketball and similar games, in which they have to

run backwards, don't seem to have any trouble. I have found it to be a fascinating study over the years, however, more about that some other time, eh.

In summary, bad footwork can cause many problems in dog training. Handlers need to try to put themselves in their dogs' position. If and when they can do this, they will develop a deeper understanding of how their dogs view them. Good footwork will give every dog every chance of performing well. We all owe this to our dogs. Good luck and keep your eyes on your dogs.

Michael Tucker