

What the Dogs TAUGHT ME

Motion and clarity...the keys to better performance.

BY SCOTT LINDEN

Conventional wisdom tells us that dogs are color blind. That's sort of true, but not quite. They see different colors than we see, but not simply shades of grey as we've been led to believe.

Those same sort-of color-blind eyes are also superior in another very useful way: they are built to detect moving objects more quickly than static ones. Think about Darwin-evolution, survival of the fittest doctrine and it makes sense. Moving things, prey. Motionless things, inedible. In the wild, a canid that can't tell the difference would quickly be eliminated from the gene pool.

You've probably seen this phenomenon at work. Dog, dozing in the yard. Squirrel, also in yard nibbling an acorn. All is quiet. Squirrel finishes snack and scampers for tree. Dog chases.

Knowing this, wouldn't using motion to better communicate with your dog be a good idea?

Probably by accident, I found it helpful to hail my dogs by raising a hand over my head. They could see it from a great distance, and I saved my voice for important post-hunt campfire discussions. Then, probably while swatting at gnats, I discovered that waving my raised hand got even better compliance.

My dogs and I are now happier.

When I shared the waving hand revelation with a trainer friend of mine, he offered his own success story. Young dogs retrieved with

panting, slobbering gusto when said hand was at their (low) level, opening and closing as if making a fist. He couldn't have gotten better obedience if he'd been dangling a raw ribeye.

Watch a seasoned retriever trainer long enough and you'll see him throw an imaginary baseball over and past his dog. An eager Lab follows his arm, does an about face, and streaks down an imaginary line behind him where he knows deep in his heart that a dead duck awaits his snuffling grab. Was part of that magic due to the "throw?" I believe so.

dependent thinkers. So when I'm training to a mark I'll put my hand, karate-chop style, over his head in his line of sight, pointing at the dead bird...just like the real trainers. But before I send him, I'll give my fingers a little wiggle to ensure he's looking straight down that line.

In the field when asking my dog to move left or right, I'll start with an arm overhead, then arc it down, pointing in the direction I want him to go. Young dogs get body English too—I lean, wag the arm, even step the way I want them to go. If I could

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Whether or not we know it, most of us have already used this strategy. When training a young dog to "come," didn't he recall more readily when you ran away from him? I use this trick when convincing a dog to come all the way back on retrieves, as well.

If you watch my television show, you know that my wirehairs need all the help they can get when it comes to retrieving. They are...umm...in-

give them the latitude and longitude, I would. But animated hand signals are easier.

At great distance or in the face of distraction I'll use "jazz hands"—wide open, fingers spread. Then I'll wiggle the whole hand. Sounds silly, but it works...and after all, we're looking for clear communication between human and dog, not an invitation to be on *Dancing with the Stars*.

I give talks all over the country, and a recent one at a sportsmen's show generated spirited feedback and fascinating stories of other dog owners' trials, tribulations and triumphs. The most intriguing discussion had to do with which words to use for which commands, and why. Here's my take:

In my mind simple is better. According to the U.S. Army, your pup could conceivably understand over 200 different commands. But not at my house. I give my dogs easy to yell, distinct names of one or two syllables. That way, they learn their unique signal faster. You may look and sound silly, but try out a few energetic yells of your dog's potential name. If you bite your lip or your tongue twists, save that moniker for your problem child.

Also, when training, sound-alike conflicts are a bigger headache, at least for the dog. Many of our commands can sound like names. Call your setter "Beau" and he might "whoa" when you want him to hunt on. Rover sounds like "over," a common command among retriever handlers. And "no" sounds like Beau or whoa, adding to the confusion.

I'm not advocating you adopt my command words, just that you think about what your dog hears. Would a little more clarity from your end help him understand—and obey—your directions better?

Toward that end, I strive for unique words for each desired action. Momma dog can't verbalize "no," but uses "aagh" when she disapproves... why not take advantage of genetics and use it too?

I think Delmar Smith taught us that "here" is easier to yell than "come." But "heel" and "here" sound the same, so my "heel" command is "walk." I don't use "over" when I want my dog to change direction; I use "way" as the command, often accompanied by a hand signal.

My release command can't be "okay," or there'll be more confusion.

And he might think I'm asking him to hold still... "stay." "All right" is a distinct release command, sounding like nothing else in the lexicon.

It's my theory that most times, dogs simply hear the vowel and ignore the consonants. Testing this theory on my dogs probably doesn't prove much besides that I'm a bad trainer, but it seems to ring true.

At that seminar I mentioned, one of my new friends disputes this theory and offers various command words and tricky situations where he has tested his dogs and they have learned the difference. More power to ya, Andy. But for me, simple is better.

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