

Academy Life at the San Francisco SPCA

By Dan Roy

A friend recently showed me a video of a 98 year old man performing in a National Obedience Competition. He and his dog worked side by side in unison and with precision. They made a memorable team. I wonder if I could ever be like him, at his age, still training and competing in dog sports. I am already 52 years old, the mid-point in my life, so ignoring a few minor details while assuming the best possible outcome; I should last until I am 104. I could certainly use another 52 years to put to practice what I now know about dog training.

Up until this point most of my training experience has been within the context of agility. Aside from addressing the common behavioral issues like motivation and focus, I lacked the expertise to effectively tackle the more difficult ones like fearfulness and reactivity. Those dogs have “bigger fish to fry” and require remedial training and conditioning before they can fully benefit from an agility program. It was important for me to have a comprehensive training program.

- 1) Train dogs from puppy through adulthood to have excellent pet skills and social prowess.
- 2) Further build their abilities to become successful canine athletes and competitors.

Before I could consider such a curriculum, I felt it important to acquire additional knowledge and hands on experience. I needed more tools to be a successful trainer and instructor.

When I began searching for dog training schools, I considered taking online courses or college classes in animal learning theory. My hunt uncovered many options and a host of quality training facilities. It was after speaking with other dog professionals, who had been through various programs that one school boiled to the top of the list. My final decision came on a recommendation from my dog insurance agent. The school was relatively close, only six weeks long, and had a reputable list of instructors. It turned out to be an academy, an academy within an institution, and an institution with no small reputation – The San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers.

The Academy is known as the Harvard of dog training schools. Doctorates who have been through the program, say that it was “one of the most emotional and educational times of their lives.” Let me go against my nature and be humble for a moment. I am no PhD! I studied Music and Electrical Engineering in college, not Behavioral Science. I knew the Academy was going to be difficult. That turned out to be an understatement. Alas, it would have been easier for me to be a contestant on the TV series “Survivor.”

The Academy was founded in 1999 under the direction of Jean Donaldson. Jean is well known for her formidable book The Culture Clash. Its publication in 1996 made many of us realize that, as far as dog training goes, we were living in the dark ages. It was in 1998 that a member of the Agility World Team, who was doing a San Diego seminar, first suggested that I read “The Clash” and another book, Don’t Shoot the Dog by Karen Pryor. Over the years these books have stood the test of time and have truly revolutionized the way we train dogs. As standard works they drive home the idea that effective dog training and the science behind it are well within our reach. My attendance at the Academy in Oct/Nov of 2009 confirmed that Jean Donaldson and the other Academy staff remain at the top of their game and on the cutting edge of dog training.

Each student at the Academy was assigned a project dog every two weeks. These dogs had been abandoned or recently rescued from the streets and were brought to the SPCA for adoption. They were a motley crew, not the keenest canines around. Oh, they were street savvy, but had no idea what basic manners are. In the two weeks that we had our project dogs they learned behaviors that would eventually help them become adopted and lessen the likelihood of them being returned after adoption. We not only taught them compulsory behaviors like Sit, Down, Stand, Stay, and Come when Called, but a few more sophisticated ones like, Crate, Go to Mat, Fetch, Loose Leash Walk, Leave it, Wait, etc. All behaviors were on cue, or stimulus control. From this experience I learned some very potent training techniques. I would like to share a few of those with you and how they are used in agility training today.

“Behavior is a tool that animals perform to produce consequences.”

This is *Operant Conditioning* in its simplest form. It was our primary system of training while at the Academy. Behaviors were first *backward planned* and broken down into *approximations* of the final behavioral goal. These approximations formed the *criteria* by which we judged when our dogs were being successful and therefore could be reinforced. These details were written down on a planning sheet which was at our side during each training session. At anytime during a training session we could precisely articulate the current criteria and the number of successful attempts our dogs had made at that level.

The dogs were highly food motivated. Their desire to consume was not an issue. We controlled the top reinforcer. “Dog training is a leverage or control the motivator game.” The dogs were on a *closed economy* and were only being fed during training sessions. We worked fast, with hungry dogs, and with a lot of small pieces of food. These treats consisted of natural balance, cheddar cheese, chicken, sardines, and sometimes dried squid - Yum! During a half hour training session I once counted 200 treats delivered. Multiply that by 4 sessions a day.

Don't worry, the dogs were not starving. Criteria were adjusted for a *high rate of reinforcement*. The optimum rate of reinforcement is about 10 per minute.

We used a variety of methods to get the dogs initially to respond including *prompts*, *lures*, and *free-shaping*. Also we could *capture* a behavior happening. None of these methods are mutually exclusive and could be used in conjunction with one another. Each time the dog correctly performed the predetermined criteria, they were given a *reward mark* like "good", followed by a treat. You could also click and treat. If their response did not meet criteria they heard the *no reward mark* like "oh oh" and were set up for another try. When they got 4 out of 5 attempts correct they were pushed to the next higher criteria. If they got 3 out of 5 attempts correct they stayed at the current level. And if they only got 2 out of 5 attempts correct we made it easier by dropping down. Counting helped us keep record of our dogs' progress. It made us experts in observation, attuned to the fine points of the behavior and in noticing minute leaps in progress. Hence, we were less likely to fall into the trap of training by feel. We trained using rules. In the end this turned out to be very efficient.

This kind of *reinforcement schedule* is called a *Fixed Ratio (FR)* and is especially useful when training a new behavior, when rates of reinforcement need to be high. In our case we used an FR1 schedule which means that every correct attempt was rewarded. There are other schedules of reinforcement that build a behavior's fluency and *resistance to extinction*. As an example, we trained our dogs to down/stay on their mats for 2 minutes. We started with a *Fixed Interval (FI)* schedule, delivering a treat every 1 second while the dog remained in position, then every 2 seconds, 3 seconds, 6 seconds, 10 seconds, and 15 seconds. We then switched to a *Variable Interval (VI)* schedule, where the interval between reinforcers is random. Here is an example of a VI60 schedule measured in seconds (20, 5, 17, 2, 33, 60, 14, 8, 51, and 11). You could bounce tennis balls over the top of them and they would not budge. Until we trained a release cue you had to pry them off their mats. They simply would not move.

All these things had a profound effect on the dogs. They were transformed from wild, seemingly immutable dogs, to believers in the training process; from hardly being able to take food from our hand to eager receivers of it. They became proficient at performing a repertoire of behaviors. As a side effect, they developed a *Positive Conditioned Emotional Response (CER+)* to the trainer. They were fat with happiness, bounding when they saw us and focused while working with us.

The same CER+ occurred in reverse as the trainers felt the spell fall upon themselves also. Even though having a “bond” with a dog is not a necessary prerequisite to training them (they mostly want the food), it became a natural byproduct of the training process. No matter how much we tried to remain professional, an emotional attachment was inevitable with these quadrupeds.

The most difficult part came when we had to give our project dogs back to the adoption center. The thought had crossed my mind to adopt one for myself, especially Cody, the Chihuahua, who would have made a superb agility dog. But, Cody was destined for someone else and surely has found a warm dwelling in San Francisco. Our only relief, from letting them go, was in knowing that the skills which they had learned would help them flourish in their newly adopted homes.

In agility training there are many behaviors that our dogs need to learn and be masters of. Solid Start Line Stays, Contact Performance, Tight Turns are a few of the many skills that make an agility dog competitive. Just like training the project dogs, agility behaviors are best learned by:

- 1) Following a plan with incremental steps that leads to a final behavioral goal.
- 2) Keeping a high rate of reinforcement so the dog stays gainfully employed during learning.
- 3) Putting them on a reinforcement schedule to build fluency and resistance to extinction.

What I digested from my Academy experience is that from employing the aforementioned training procedures you will have a dog that adores you, is a believer in you, and will look forward to working with you. You will be able to accomplish more during each precious training session and the dog will inevitably develop a CER+ to agility that will last throughout their entire career. Your success is measured not so much by what your dog can do for you, as by the methods you use to achieve your goal; not so much by the qualifying scores your team earns, as by the way your dog views being in the ring. “At its very best, given the best trainer training the best dog, animal training will greatly **alter the probability** of behaviors occurring on correct cues.”

Dan Roy, SF SPCA CTC, is a graduate of the San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers. He earned his Certification in Training and Counseling, with honors, under the tutelage of Jean Donaldson, Janis Bradley and John Buginas. He has been training and competing in San Diego agility since 1997. Contact Dan at danroyctc@gmail.com or visit his website at www.performancedogtraining.com

Update: After 10 years of operation the last Academy class was held at the SF SPCA in Oct/Nov 2009. Jean and Janis have since started their own Academy for Dog Trainers. More information on their new training program is forthcoming.



Cody the Chihuahua



Dan and Cody



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