

## **Training Philosophy** *by Dan Roy*

When training your dog, do keep in mind what it means to have a good agility dog. A good agility dog is confident. They enjoy being with you. They look forward to training with you. They are in good physical shape. They are emotionally stable and have little or no fear of other dogs and people. They have focus balanced with intensity. They have skill and fortitude. They love to show how good they are, especially in front of other dogs and people. They like the competition ring with a mind single to the task before them. Yes, I know, it's an idealistic goal, but each dog can reach his own, personal level of expertise with good training.

Every dog will be born with certain aptitudes and strengths that are different from the next dog. Specific breeds will have traits which have been selected and passed down through genetics. These genetic gifts can enhance a dog's athletic abilities. Nevertheless, you will still have to nurture those attributes to reach their full potential. I personally believe that the most important part of what makes the dog, or what the dog becomes, rests mostly in the training they receive from you, the trainer. Above all, major emphasis should be put into the building and maintaining of a healthy mental attitude in dog and human. Here are some things to remember:

***Build a working relationship.*** A working relationship is simple - the dog first does what you want before getting what he wants. The most common example for my dogs is: Before the dog exits the house for a walk (something they want) I take the opportunity to ask for a sit (something I want). What begins to happen? An increased desire on the dog's part to perform tasks upon request. Why? Because they will have the foreknowledge, that by so doing, something grand and exciting will happen next. You can think of many examples on your own. Try them!

***Lay a solid foundation.*** Paying attention to details early on will make it more enjoyable for you and the dog in the long run. It is much harder to retrain than to get it right the first time. The little things I'm taking about are expressed in this example - ask the questions of yourself: Your dog is sitting \* did he go into the sit quickly \* is he watching you \* is he alert \* are his legs straight \* what do his ears look like, both down, both up, one down and one up? Etc. Have a vision of what you want your dog to become. That's where it starts. What you reward is what you will get!

***Plan training with simple to achieve steps.*** Your dog's understanding of what you are teaching comes in small bite size pieces. You shape behaviors by dividing them into little, conquerable parts. Every time your dog gets a step correct, he gets rewarded - a cookie, praise, a walk, toy play, or whatever the dog enjoys doing. At this point, when talking about rewards, it would helpful if I mention the "Premack Principle". Rewards are anything the dog enjoys.

***Increase the difficulty gradually.*** When you see that your dog is grasping the concepts which you have set forth, it is time to increase the difficulty. Do it in such a way that they are being challenged, but not overwhelmed. It is an art! You have to make your own decisions on this. Hopefully, you will also have an experienced instructor to help. Still, don't be afraid to move forward in the process. Remember, you have developed a working relationship with your dog. Little mistakes are common in training. It is unavoidable. Rethink it and work through it.

***Maintain your objectivity.*** When training a dog, you will learn that some days are very productive and other days are not. Believe me when I tell you - your dog is still learning on those days that don't seem productive. They are assessing, digesting, regressing, and at the same time learning how you, their trainer, is reacting. Trainers' frustration are normal, but when it leads to trainer anger, whether directed at the dog or something else, then it becomes counter productive. I have found the best way to combat these feelings and maintain my objectivity is to keep a journal. In my training journal, I will write down 3 things which I really liked in training and 1 that needs more work. You see, the trainer's attitude is just as important as the dog's. By keeping a log, you chart your progress. Knowing that you are making headway will keep your spirits up and this ultimately will be reflected in your dog.