

Positive reinforcement

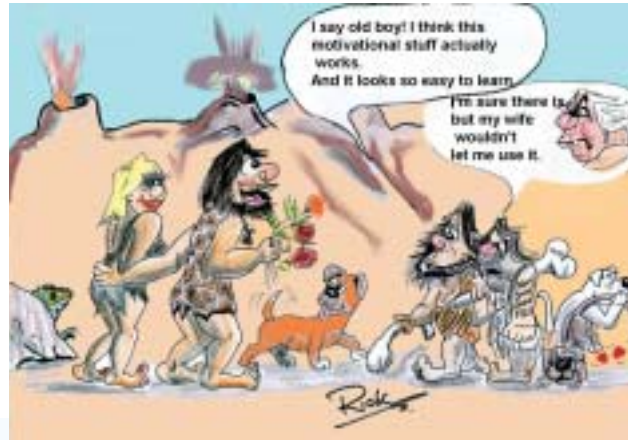
Often referred to as a new, breakaway from traditional animal training, positive reinforcement training still carries a certain stigma and is so often referred to by the traditionalist as bribery. Well nothing could be further from the truth, new it certainly is not and when applied correctly the food, favourite toy or ball becomes a tool which prompts the animal under training to work out that it is profitable to do one action and non rewarding to do another. One very important aspect of this training is that; whatever the motivator you are going to use, it must be GIVEN not just shown. The dog or goldfish works out for itself that if I do this I get something good, however if I do this I might get to see the good thing, but I don't get it! Taking away something, good! (negative punishment) That's right he gets nothing, nothing good or bad. No shout, no smack, and definitely no sharp jerk of a leash, no matter how much the trainer or handlers delude themselves into thinking that the dog understands what the lead correction is for.

It is an unfortunate trait of human nature that control through pain or discomfort is so satisfying. They say that without this traditional means of correction, the animal shows no respect to the handler. Perhaps this use of reward and none-use of positive punishment (roaring "NO!" and tagging the dog) is seen by some as a weakness. "There should be more 'bops' with the lead." Is the cry!

Translate that into sharp heavy jerks of a choke chain. Perhaps this is a manifestation of the same behaviour which causes some spouses to belt up the very person who provides home comforts and delicious meals every day. I always found it strange that the group who sang the song 'Macho Man' with such enthusiasm were not singing about themselves but something they desperately needed. Wife beaters of Australia unite and sing your song!

The first well documented use of food as a behavioural reinforcer occurred in Russia in the 1880s. In the 1920s a doctor was asked by the Russian State to help rehabilitate expensive circus animals that had been trained with cruelty and were given up by traditional trainers as a lost cause.

Some were considered too dangerous by most trainers to even think of working with them. The majority of the of the treated animals responded well, much to the disbelief of many trainers of the day.



This doctor continued his development and expanding his understanding of the proper use of food as a reinforcer up to the Second World war and then for a short period after. On his death, his daughter and long time assistant also a doctor, continued promoting her father's work.

The part of behavioural studies

which lead to Operant Conditioning is credited to American psychologist J B Watson. But it is the continuation and expansion of this science carried out and publicised by B F Skinner (1904-1990) that brought about the training used today. Much more widely known exponent and author Karen Pryor has been working with all kinds of animals and humans, demonstrating behaviour modification with great success.

Even in the land of ultimate discipline Germany, operant conditioning is now displacing the pinch collar and other harsh means of training of negative reinforcement training.

Around the clubs and trials you may find those who declare that the use of food as a motivator doesn't work, as the dog will not work without the food. True! But only where the handler gives rewards without a modicum of timing.

I have watched handlers, who are supposed to be using positive reinforcement, demonstrating their idea of this method, scrabbling across the training ground, bent over, looking back and down at their dog, clutching a tiny morsel of cheese held between the frantically waving fingers of their right hand, yet never once giving anything to the dog. No wonder their interpretation of the system doesn't work. And no wonder these highly intelligent animals have so little respect for someone who constantly teases them with a promise of a reward that's never given.

I have found that too many do not know the difference between food leading, which is luring, and shaping. They try and teach an action by demanding the finished product before any real build up of success, reached by luring or food leading, and paying up with GOOD and food, or click and treat on attaining the first step. Then they should be prompting the move with an empty hand, paying up with good and food. Step by step they can shape the performance by using feminine guile, asking for just a little more before paying up. With good and food? What? Oh yes, of course, we are talking about the dogs.

The word 'good' or an excited 'Yes' alone is not enough as a learning tool. It is essential to link the word with the food or toy, which are the primary reinforcers. Soon the dog will be so intent on this training game, that he



does not need this primary reinforcer for every move, we can ask for two moves for one treat to progress along a path of guaranteed success.

Guaranteed success?? Only Perfect Practice makes Perfect! There are still many pitfalls on the way. Back to the laboratory for a moment: If any reward is given at a regular interval and set pace for too long, our super smart dog cottons on to what is happening, resulting in a performance drop. Not only because the subject is sated, but because of the lacking stimulation!

Only one close relative (Uncle Bill) would spend all afternoon sitting at a vending machine because he thought he was winning. The others prefer the Pokies where there is a little bit of a chance of the occasional win, because a sure thing is like death, sure it's sure, but it's so boring.

We use the 2 for 1 and then up the ante for 3 for 1 in our training, for a little while, in order to accelerate learning. Both, for the dog, who is frustrated by giving a move and it NOT getting paid, so therefore he will give greater effort next time, (Extinction Burst) and it accelerates learning for the handler, who needs to learn not to reward every time, but on a system! Every gambler has a system, so let's build on this principle!

Once the handler has learned this much, the Instructor can switch his class of handlers onto making the rewards more variable! Not only in what is used as a reinforcer, cheese, or ham, or Frankfurts or maybe kibble, but variable in the



number of sits or down or steps prancing at the heel position we ask for! Heeling?? Reward when the dog is at his best, and when he is only a beginner, we pay up with good and food or click and treat after 2 steps, 5 steps, 3 steps, 7 steps, 5 steps, 10 steps, oh so very variable! The dog never knows WHEN he gets that click and treat or 'Good' and food, but it is gonna happen, next time, maybe next time as my other half, the Germanic one, would thankfully never say. Or would she?

Whether we are shaping a heeling performance, or a supersonic recall, apart from being variable, we also learn to become very discriminative in that we reward the better moves, the faster sits, the straighter sits, the straight recall, the speedy Recall. What we do not do, is work on several aspects at the same time with our beginner! When

the dog is learning to give a fast sit, we PAY UP on the faster sits, and simply give him a chance to improve the move if it should be slow. If the dog understands that we are shaping for, and heavily rewarding a lightning fast sit, and then don't pay up because it is ever so lightly crooked, we have shifted the parameters, and the subject might give up, not understanding what we are after! Work on one criterion at the time. After working on fast – have a break. THEN work on straight, and soon the dog will throw straight sits at you, begging to be rewarded for his precision sit! When the dog understands both aspects, and knows that very slow and very crooked does not get paid, you can one by one, shape for greater speed and accuracy and then eventually combine the criteria by asking for both.

In all of this, the dog never has his behaviour physically or verbally dampened. He gets positive reinforcement if he's right, and if he's wrong?? Sweet Nothing! So, he'll try again, next time!

HONEY GROSS-RICHADSON