

The Quest for Balanced Training

By Danny Thomason

More families own dogs than ever before. We bring dogs into our homes and lives for companionship, sporting and working partnerships. Because of this, never before has training the family dog been of more paramount importance and the advice of “experts” in training dogs been so sought out. Family dog owners are realizing that good dogs rarely happen through osmosis. The responsibilities imparted through dog ownership require the dog to be a good family member they can enjoy and be proud of. As a dog trainer and advisor, I have never witnessed these “experts” falling into such realms of divisiveness, regarding methodology, which leads often to heated debate.

The heart of the debate is centered around the various methods, theories and equipment. New technologies and advances in behavioral science offer a staggering number of adaptations and choices. Trainers struggle with when, where and to what degree they can implement new learning with the knowledge and methods they currently possess. Individual trainers come up with their own mix of methods, theories and opinions. Opinions are fueled by emotions; revolving around the way in which we treat and train animals and to what degree we use rewards and corrections in the training process. These issues and opinions have polarized much of the dog training community. The result is forming a divide between trainers and leaving little common ground on which to stand.

An obvious and noticeable split has formed in theoretical, practical and idealist opinions that pits trainers marketing themselves as “Totally Positive Trainers” against their more “Traditional” counterparts. The Totally Positive Trainers (TPT) often construe the Traditional trainer’s use of corrections or aversives as being abusive. The more traditional trainers maintain that a dog cannot totally understand the reward based system without occasionally using a correction for unacceptable behavior at some time during training.

Although a segment of Traditionalists may focus on correction based methods, the body of such trainers labeled as “Traditionalists” have not stood still in allowing their methods to evolve. Positive motivation and the use of rewards have been implemented to varying degrees with the vast majority of all trainers. While virtually all trainers agree that rewards are important and the first choice in behavior modification, traditional trainers will not shrink from carefully using a mixture of methods to achieve dependable results.

Traditional trainers often cite the fact that one effective correction is kinder than a more long and drawn-out method that may not work. Training results that are time efficient and dependable under distraction are the goals of most traditional training programs. Such trainers believe that a mix of methods is the best route and often use many of the methods embraced by the TPT programs.

On the other hand, the Totally Positive Trainers believe, to some extent, in correction. The extent of their belief is to emphasize that the correction be in the form of not rewarding any wrong behaviors. They feel the correction is not giving the dog what he wants or expects. Although the TPT’s are not theoretically totally positive, the omission of any physical correction or aversive has resulted in the adoption of the “Totally Positive” name.

Every dog, trainer, owner and environment is different. The traditional trainers believe they need to be able to call on a wide range of techniques and equipment to aid in raising and training a dog to become the companion and partner the owners require. However, they are finding themselves having to defend their philosophies, theories and methods due to the TPT’s insistence that training can be achieved with only positive methods. TPT advocates often imply that anyone not using totally positive methods must be using heavy-handed domination, which is an untruth. The implication is being unfairly used as the main illustration to spawn the market and sell TPT to the established trainers, the public and to the new trainers entering the profession.

Many of the new trainers entering the profession are being drawn to the methods of Totally Positive Training and the perfect dream it appears to offer...correction-free training of a dog. The magnetic charm and idealism has numbers growing rapidly with an influx of well intentioned, although often inexperienced new trainers. Almost like a blossoming cult, these new trainers study the works of TPT experts and gurus which profess that all behavior modification and training can be managed or eventually overcome by using only purely positive methods.

Some experienced trainers have “crossed over” to the philosophy. They have the zeal of being “Born again”, and often preach, rather than teach their new mindset. The TPT’s major arsenal of reasoning is that it is more fun and much easier to teach with food rewards and that owners are at less risk of obtaining incorrect end results. Many of their techniques are marketed as new, somewhat magical elixirs to training and problem solving. While many open minded traditionalists also employ many of the same techniques, they do not believe TPT to be the magic potion for all ailments. They prefer a larger range of methods and approaches from which to select and utilize. There is little

doubt that rewarding good behavior, while ignoring undesirable behaviors, has merit and value. It can be used productively with some dogs and in some situations and can achieve results. However, the premise that it is a cure-all for every dog is not scientifically substantiated.

The Totally Positive Trainer often has strong feelings and objections to the use of some conventional equipment such as chain or pinch collars. Discussion of electronic equipment often creates such opposition that it seems a war is forthcoming.

In many instances, proponents of TPT embrace the use of head collars, which are similar in appearance to the halter commonly used on horses. The tradition based training community often cites this as inconsistency in the TPT theory. They counter that a head collar is a management device that borders on torturous and can be very dangerous to the dog both physically and mentally. Misuse of any equipment can produce these results. Head collars are viewed not as training aides, but as the same heavy-handed domination methods the TPT trainers accuse pinch collars to be.

Attempts to counter balance and generate tolerance and understanding between these two extreme views has created even further division in the industry. The two diametrically opposed sides, each deeply convicted, have left a small and ever-shrinking middle ground on which balanced dog training can survive. While the debate rages on, there has been the drawing of lines and an increased lack of willingness to understand and communicate between the differing sides. Trainers often find themselves pigeon-holed into one side or the other because of an opinion or method. What unfortunately has been lost in this heated battle is the crucial and rational importance of "Balance."

Dog training has paralleled child rearing with a new age of psychological influence and liberalization. Child rearing theories of yesteryear that embraced permissiveness are being replaced. The philosophy now swings back to setting limits and boundaries and employing a vast array of appropriate corrections when applicable. While TPT's are touting reward only training, based in human psychology, they are in essence dragging their paws in historic child rearing ideologies which have proven debatable in their effectiveness for children.

A growing segment of trainers and instructors have become concerned with this division. The desire of this group is to emphasize the importance of a balanced approach, utilize the many tools and creatively tailor them to individual scenarios. These are the open minded traditional trainers with methods not based in heavy handed domination and punitive focus. The balanced, eclectic trainers believe in being able to apply all techniques based on individual needs. The term "Balanced Training" has been coined to express the desire to meet in the middle of the opposing philosophies.

Balanced Trainers must have practical application knowledge of all learning theories. Such trainers must be able to tailor, demonstrate, instruct and explain the flexible combinations offered by a balanced approach. Balanced training embraces positive motivation, appropriate rewards and knowledgeable use of aversives and correction - all on an individual, as needed basis. Balanced training acknowledges that no one method will work best on any dog or in any situation. It allows the flexibility of using both positive and negative reinforcements and balancing the two factors in a way which will emphasize helping the dog learn and retain the required lessons.

As the dog training profession grows in public recognition, we also have our opposing factions engaged in battle. The call for balanced training has emerged from the turmoil now plaguing the industry. There is a need for understanding and respect. There is a need to agree that we may, at times, disagree, but that we need to stand together. There is no benefit in denigrating and condemning another trainer's methods provided they are humane. Yet, in the term "humane" lies the emotional conflict, as one trainer's idea of humane is another's definition of inhumane.

Trainers and instructors have professional obligation to produce reliable results. For those of us deriving income from training and instruction we are ethically bound to give the client what they are paying for. The motto for trainers on both sides of the divide appears to be the same: "Do no harm". The common love and dedication to dogs should never be in doubt. Why, therefore, are trainers entrenching themselves in ideologies and being forced to defend their positions? A balanced approach and open minded perspective can bring rewards to the good of dogs, their owners and the profession of dog training.

As with any philosophy, the truth is rarely found at extreme ends of the spectrum. The truth is out there. It can always be located somewhere close to the middle. That is the only place balance can exist.