

## **Clean Play = Clean Learning**

When I talk about “clean” training I am referring to the process, or technology, that does not load the burden of effort onto the dog. The extreme example of dirty training was the traditional protocol of punishing all the undesired behaviours and leaving the dog to work out what was desired. Many did not.

Even with “positive training” there can be some sloppy or careless processes that make it harder for the dog to learn, such as poor placement of the rewards, later timing of the marker, excessive variation to the cues, too many changes in one session etc.

## **Play is learning**

There should be changes and growth in every session. A single lesson may consist of 3 or 4 sessions, of 3 or 4 minutes each, or 5 runs for the toy in one session. Each session will focus on one aspect of learning we are aiming to achieve.

Just because we use the terms “play” and “toys” does not make it any easier to learn or achieve success than “proper work”. Never feel guilty that we are “just playing games”. The dog does not know that and they will put as much effort into learning a game as learning an outrun or gather.

Playing clean is about setting the dog up for success, or failure, which can lift the dog’s desire to be more successful. Dogs are learning about the contingencies, (conditions) where success and failure live side by side. They will monitor our patterns of behaviour, learn them, and discriminate between the outcomes that represent success or failure.

You may be eating a biscuit that has been dunked in tea and, oops, the wet half drops to the floor for the dog to eat. Next time you begin this pattern they will be more observant and notice that a dropped biscuit occurs when you are also watching TV, or on the phone. Not getting a drop treat will not be regarded as a “failure” simply as an outcome not in their favour. Their input into the process was one of observation. They may choose to stay awake, and move into a more advantageous position to catch that drop – particularly if others dogs are around that may steal that opportunity.

Setting a dog up for “failure” is about giving them the information to be successful should they choose to.

With the ball kicks, we can make it easy, or hard and all the variations in between. How easy or how hard will depend on their stage of learning, their skills and whether the slightly harder will be regarded as a challenge or an impossibility. This is often a measure of confidence.

Looking for this confidence, and gauging how hard to make the conditions is your art as the engineer of their learning (along with your own skill of semi-accurate kicking!)

## **Avoiding the Dirty**

To keep the dog fully engaged and a confident participant in the games we need to arrange the activities that are within their scope and align the learning with instinctive responses. When they are more advanced we can counter these responses.

Certain activities will make it harder for the dog to repeat success. One of these areas is coming inwards towards you and the ball. The zone of success should be further out.

Try to avoid all activities that bring the dog inwards.

A dog fetching the ball back for a kick will run after the ball thinking “collect and return”. We want them to think “stop ball, drop and watch for the next”.

If they are too close, turn 90° look > kick a belter > force them to chase out.

BEFORE they have time to return, a second ball should be coming in towards the “goal of success”

(Imaging they are standing in a goal)

This should be repeated as often as the number of balls you have, to demonstrate to them the greater chance of success by being at the distance.

If you have a habit of inward progress, then a few sessions of real beltors should see a reluctance to come in towards you.

The dogs have often learned to position close because of the unpredictable nature of the kicks gave them a better chance close to.

Clean kicking to the goal of success, when at a distance, is your aim. But you must be clear with your movement pattern to turn and face the area you are kicking to, and allowing the dog time to move to the new position, before you kick.

This will be a critical teaching pattern as this is how we shall add the flanking cues when the dog is reliable responding with good form.

## **Kicking when not ready**

After the dog has given chase, they may need to parade around with their prize. We can usually see that they are enjoying the moment by deliberately avoiding eye contact to you.

They are not seeking another chase until they turn to face, come to a stop, preferably release their current sheep, and roll their sleeves up to focus on you.

Giving them this space and time to prepare is an important element. Especially with young or novice dogs. This is their moment to de-stress, relax, a little, enjoy the success, before the next challenge.

Always monitor these parading or self-breaking moments. If they are increasing it is usually an indicator that the stress is build up and the dog is not managing it well. Stand quietly and wait for them to tell you they are ready for go again.