

DO YOU LIE TO YOUR DOG?

By Diane L. Bauman

The longer I work with dogs (now 36 years) the more I appreciate how truly intelligent and perceptive most of them are. Sometimes it's almost as if they can tell what you are going to do before you actually make a move to do it! Are they clairvoyant? Do they read minds?

Dogs are exceptionally responsive to the slightest facial expression or any minor body movement. They effortlessly read a smile when picking up a correct scent article and appear to know your mood and intentions at all times. The dogs that share our lives study our patterns and are alert to any changes in routine. I am convinced that my dogs know the day's activity by which style of shoes and clothing I wear.

It is because I give dogs' credit for being so smart that I understand the danger of lying to them. Dishonesty in dog training always comes back to bite you (no puns intended), and I refuse to subscribe to this approach.

Most people don't even realize when they are lying to their dogs. Training deceit is perpetuated in all dog sports but I will focus on agility and obedience preparation in this column.

In agility, I repeatedly see handlers struggling to get their dogs to stay at the start line. The approach many take (obviously because they have been instructed to do so) is to leave the dog on a "stay" at the practice jump and go to the other side of the jump. They prepare to release the dog (waving arms etc.), but then instead, return to the dog, praise and give a treat. Some handlers throw a toy back to their dogs. I have been informed by these people that they are trying to "reinforce the stay." Personally, I believe these trainers are lying to their dogs.

Dogs will never be fooled into thinking that someone is going to return to them on the start line in an agility ring and give them a cookie! It's a lie, an attempt to trick the dog and it does not solve the problem. Why would you want a dog to think that the reason to "stay" at the start line is because a cookie or a toy might appear? Do these trainers actually believe that the dogs do not understand the "stay" command?

Under ring conditions, the handler is never going to return to the dog. The dog knows this! He quickly learns that in a ring, his handler will lead out and then he will be released to the first obstacle. When dogs anticipate the start, it is because while they understand the "stay" command, they do not have the practice and self control needed to perform in an energized state of mind. Reinforcing a calm stay at a practice jump does not teach this.

Wouldn't it be better for a dog to learn that he must be patient and wait to get what he wants? Shouldn't he learn that if he anticipates, and breaks the start, the outcome will not be in his best interest? I believe that it is the job of the trainer to get the dog to decide that it is to his advantage to wait to be released off the start line regardless of his frame of mind. Teach and reinforce patience and self control; not stay.

The techniques used to convince a dog that it is in his best interest to wait to be released, will vary depending on the temperament of the dog. A number of dogs become more thoughtful after being removed from the ring if they anticipate a release. For others, this does not communicate the message, "No stay-no play." For some dogs, if the handler just freezes and remains motionless for 20 seconds, dogs realize that leaving the start line early did not get them what they want.... a chance to run agility.

In addition to start line issues, it is not uncommon to see dogs in the Novice Agility classes getting distracted or wandering off course. Instead of honestly letting these dogs know that they have made an error (perhaps by removing them from the ring), handlers run after their dogs, clapping hands frantically, in an attempt to regain focus. To me, applause for this incorrect behavior is viewed by the dog as approval and is most definitely a lie.

Then there are the trainers who place treats on the contacts or plastic lids immediately following the yellow zones in practice. While this may artificially cause a dog to stop and touch the contact, it does not teach a dog that he must put a foot in the yellow when there is no food to be swallowed. Once a dog begins to compete, it does not take long before the intelligent dog realizes that there are no lids or food in the ring at a trial.

In the teaching phase of any behavior it is helpful to reward a dog for small parts of the exercise. For example, when first teaching a stopped contact, the dog may receive a treat from the handler for assuming the correct position. However, once the contact position is learned, the dog's reward must progress to being a release off the contact to perform the next obstacle.

If a trainer repeatedly feeds a dog for correct contacts in practice, the treat becomes part of the exercise and when there is no treat (as in the ring) the dog is confused. This confusion may emerge as a slow decent into the contact zone or even sniffing. Many dogs subscribe to the belief, "when in doubt, look busy and sniff!" Handlers continue to "reinforce" the contact, but the speed on contacts in the ring does not improve.

Moving on to the obedience arena I find more lies. In the Utility ring there is an exercise called the "Go-out" where a dog must run between the jumps to the opposite side of the ring. While it is true that you can quickly get a dog to run out to the far end of a ring to eat a treat off of a gate, this does not teach the concept of a "Go-Out" in new places and under all conditions.

How often I have watched a dog go out in between the jumps and search for food at the back of the ring. Of course in the real trial ring there never is food to be found on a gate! The handler commands "sit" and the dog responds. Taking the correct jump, the first part of the Directed Jumping exercise is completed. Next, the handler sends the dog for the second go-out but this time; the dog stops just past the jumps and looks confused. He knows there is no food at the back of the ring so why should he continue to run out there? Deceit backfires again.

In the teaching phase of the Go- Out exercise the handler may run out to reward a dog that has performed a proper go-out in practice. (Notice that the handler has the treat and it is not found on a gate at the back of the ring.)This reward for a portion of the exercise (the go-out) must fade as the dog is expected to perform the entire Directed Jumping exercise without the promise of a cookie.

The goal of all good dog training is to make training mirror competition as closely as possible. The more consistent and honest the training methods are in and out of the ring, the less confusion and the stronger the behavior will be in competition.

In agility the reward for a correct contact performance must become permission to proceed to the next obstacle. In obedience, praise and verbal appreciation from the handler should be the incentive for accurate responses. In the case of the Go-Out exercise, the prize for doing a proper run and sit across the ring is permission to jump.

Good trainers progress to a point where they train as they will trial and trial as they train. Dogs learn the ritual that the food or toy reward comes at the end of a completed routine. This is no lie! In my experience, honest training always wins in the end so think about how you are training and stop lying to your dog!

For specific information on how to teach start line stays and Go- Outs refer to my books:

Beyond Basic Dog Training 3rd edition (Howell 2003)

Agility Start To Finish (Alpine 2008)