

QUALITY NOT QUANTITY

By Diane L. Bauman

I am often asked how I find the time to train 6 dogs in multiple venues (agility, tracking, herding, and obedience), teach 7 hours a day four days a week and train 4 dogs on the weekends. As I think about the answer to this question, I realize that I rely on the principle of "quality, not quantity."

I rotate dogs and activities. Some of the dogs work three to four times a week but others only train two days a week. Depending on their stage of learning and upcoming events sometimes they may perform agility one day and herding or tracking on another day. One thing is certain, there is no chance of anyone getting bored, especially me!

With very limited time, each training session per dog, is only five to fifteen minutes long at most. After all, how long is a dog asked to perform in a ring? In agility a run is usually well under 60 seconds! There is always a brief warm up of play or tricks to prepare the dog for learning. If jumping is going to be required, we play over a few jumps.

When possible, the dogs that are not being trained are able to watch the dog that is getting all the attention and is being worked with. This accomplishes many things. It assures that the dog I'm working with can perform and think in the midst of distraction and it motivates the other dogs to want their turn to come out and join me. While not all dogs learn by watching, most do seem to understand when another of their species is having fun. They sense excitement and see treats being handed out.

When dogs watch other dogs interacting with agility equipment, obedience gear or even sheep, they learn from the experience that nothing is scary. This "let them watch" approach assures me that when I reach for the next dog to train that day, she is already in a good state of mind and ready to learn.

I once did an experiment and after working only five minutes a day (I kept track with a timer) and five days a week, I taught an Afghan Hound all of the Novice, Open and Utility obedience exercises in one year. If you can devote five minutes a day, you can accomplish more than you realize.

So, what is the secret to training with quality time?

There is a concept that I call "keeping the plates spinning." Have you ever seen a clown in the circus spin plates on top of poles? The plates spin for a while, but if the clown doesn't keep coming back to shake the pole every so often, the plate will teeter and fall off. The goal is for the clown to see how many plates he can keep whirling at the same time.

As I train six dogs, I feel as if my dogs are the plates and I must continually come back to each one to stimulate them so that they "keep spinning." It doesn't take long to inspire learning (five minutes) but it must be a continuous process. Give a dog two weeks with no training and you and the dog lose momentum.

I subscribe to a belief that "less is more." After many years of experience, I have concluded that most people train too much, too long and too repetitively. They waste time practicing what the dog already knows because they are afraid he will forget how to do it or perhaps they like to watch him do it correctly. Instead, they should be teaching new concepts or strengthening the dog's understanding of old ones.

Repetition in dog training is very overrated! I have never met a dog that learned how to get into the kitchen garbage that needed to practice how to do it; nor one that would forget how to do it without practice! When a dog really learns something he deems valuable, he rarely forgets it. I have proven that dogs retired from agility can still do weave poles, even after 8 years of not weaving!!

What confuses some trainers is that dogs will often do things correctly before they know what they are doing. I describe this phenomenon as "behavior precedes learning." The trainer sees the correct behavior and jumps to a false conclusion that the dog has learned the exercise. Then, when the dog does not perform appropriately the next time, the trainer feels repetition is needed. The repetition may cause the correct behavior to appear again but the dog still might not understand the task and so the cycle continues.

When you learn how to teach a dog something and test (called proofing) to discover if he has true understanding, there is no need to ask the dog to repeat things over and over.

There are several breeds of dogs that tolerate (but do not need) a lot of repetition in training. Border Collies, Golden Retrievers and, Labrador Retrievers are at the top of this list. Many other breeds of dogs are very intelligent and easily trained as long as the methods used do not incorporate a lot of duplication. On this second list I would include Afghan Hounds, German Shepherds, Northern breeds and Terriers to name a few. For these breeds of dogs, "less is more" and "quality over quantity" is the only way to progress.

If you only have five to fifteen minutes to spend with a dog it is imperative that you have a plan of what you want to teach and how you are going to approach the training. This preparation must occur before you begin your session. Each session should have one simple goal which you may or may not accomplish. There is always another session coming up where you can continue to work towards your goal.

An example of a single goal would be to see if you can get your dog to reach one inch for a dumbbell. Or, if you are working in agility your goal might be to teach your dog to enter the weavepoles from a 45 degree angle off of one side. Maybe you want to strengthen your ability to direct your dog further at a distance away from you. Regardless of your objective, begin with a brief warm up (perhaps some heeling or finishes or rear crosses,) and then immediately focus on your goal.

Dogs and people learn best what they learn first and last in a session. In the laboratory, when people were read a list of numbers, they were more likely to remember the first and last numbers on the list. Whenever possible try to end a session just as a dog figures something out. This way there is a greater chance that the dog will retain what he has learned. Begin sessions with something recently learned from a previous work out.

In the busy world we live in, time is a valuable commodity. Skill, planning and quality training time can produce amazing results with only a small investment of time.