**BALABANOV METHOD OF TRAINING DOGS FOR COMPETITON**

There are 3 basic methods of training

1. Compulsive where physical discomfort is placed on the dog. This leads to avoidance behavior which has an undesirable effect on the dog as it creates a poor picture in competitive work. The dog is constantly in an anxious state creating conflict for the dog which is NOT conducive to learning or good performance.
2. Shaping behaviours eg Clicker training. Inducive training creates a good picture but it is not reliable in competitive work.
3. Combination of both. The most popular method used today.

Ivan Balabanov’s method is inducive. His method is structured around intense motivation through play/clear communication with your dog in teaching him how to achieve his goals in order to get the reward/ and teaching the dog to switch from Active to Passive to Active. He prefers to use a bitebar as it is easier to immobilize against the leg.

**CLEAR COMMUNICATION** with your dog must be established.

Clear communication relies on the handler giving signals to his dog weather it is on the correct course of action in order to get the reward. He uses an encouragement command using a soft praising voice to mark the correct behavior and a NO command to guide the dog and mark the incorrect behavior.

COMMANDS TO BE USED

1. The OUT command
2. The RELEASE command – Okay/ Free/SCHoo
3. The ENCOURAGEMENT command eg good
4. The NO command
5. The ACTION commands eg Sit/ Down/Stand
6. THE OUT COMMAND

The dog must learn to release objects on command. To train this, the dog must learn that **releasing the toy does NOT equate to losing the toy**. He must NOT resent giving the object up. Balabanov does not like playing with 2 toys as this creates conflict when snatching up the dropped toy. The dog must **want to bring the toy back to the Handler** in order to have a GAME.

The OUT is a cue telling the dog that the GAME/Reward is available.

Possession does not intiate play. If the dog refuses to let go of the toy then the handler does not touch the toy’s handle. When the dog is calm the Handler tells him OUT and immediately rewards him with a game. If the dog tries to grab the toy while you are holding the bar hold it tight against the leg so that he cannot grab it. The OUT must always be thought of as a temporary state only to be rewarded with a game.

1. THE RELEASE COMMAND – Okay/Free/Schh

This command MUST be used CONSISTANTLY. This serves to mark the desirable behavior which leads to the reward. The food or toy acts as the reinforcer which strengthens a behavior. The release command marks the behavior prior to the reward. It is imperitive that the dog is doing the exact correct behavior when this release command is given. Often in Heelwork when food is used there is head dipping and the breaking of focus Dogs always tend to move towards the signal that the reward is coming which creates forging or crabbing. This is due to the Handler marking when the dog at the wrong moment. The OKAY must only be given if the dog is perfect otherwise NO him.

THE RELEASE COMMAND IS A MARKING STIMULUS:- the dog then knows that

1. The exercise is completed.
2. The reward is unconditional and must never be cheated out of it.
3. The behavior marked by the release command is what earned the reward.

This Release Command creates a Bridge – a stimulus that closes the gap in time between the marker and the presentation of the reward. The timing of the reward is then not so crucial. (The dog can run and pick the toy up off the ground or chair). The release command becomes the secondary reinforcer that leads to the primary reinforcer (the toy). The release command gives the dog time to prepare to catch/bite the toy which also helps avoid conflict in the dog. When a dog is surprised by the toy suddenly appearing he becomes preoccupied looking for signals when this may happen again and again this is conflict within the dog.

1. THE ENCOURAGEMENT/REASSURANCE COMMAND eg good/clever/super

A soft pleasant command that reassures the dog that the reward is coming.eg when doing the down in motion – He is reassured that he did well to do a quick down without having to stop the exercise and can then continue moving forward to do a recall. When a dog is learning a new behavior/exercise reassure him when correct and NO him when wrong to mark the exact correct/incorrect behaviour. The reassurance command creates a bridge assuring the dog that if this correct behavior continues the reward is imminent.

NB The Reassurance command leads to the Release Command which leads to the Reward.

1. THE NO COMMAND

This must NOT be a threat. It is simply a non reward marker for incorrect behavior. The NO is a secondary negative punisher. The NO gains impact by withholding the reward. By guiding the dog with a NO or Good it leads to less conflict in the learning process unlike the clicker method where the dog can stress by having to keep trying a variety of behaviours till it finds the right one. Balabanov believes that the dog is less frustrated by being guided verbally as it is the faster route to the reward. The NO in fact helps the dog.

NB The NO is a terminal signal like the release signaling the end of the exercise BUT there is NO reward as there was an incorrect behavior which was marked.

NO AND FIRST COMMANDS. The NO demands that the first command is responded to. If the dog did not respond correctly first time move him away and restart the exercise. The penalty is in having to repeat the whole exercise over

NO prevents the creating of gray areas eg doing a recall and the dog anticipates – then NO the anticipation and move forward to take the dog back and do not let the dog complete the exercise as you cannot punish a good present position! The dog learns exactly where he went wrong in the exercise.

1. ACTION COMMANDS eg Sit/ Down/Stand

These are discriminitive stimuli that tell the dog what action will lead tot the reward.

NB Always break an exercise down into small sections.

Eg Heelwork is keeping position to the left leg and secondly is keeping focus on the handler. Balabanov teaches these two skills independently and with different commands- Heel & Watch. He wants the dog to know whether he is referring to the dog’s position to the leg or whether it is the focus that is faulty or correct.

Retrieve – has 2 commands Fetch and Hold. Fetch means bring it back and hold means keep a calm firm grip.

CLARITY IN COMMANDS AVOIDS CONFLICT timing and consistency of commands are vital.

To achieve clarity the handler must convey exactly what is being asked of the dog eg the release command must be given for the correct behavior. If this is not clear then this creates tension and conflict within the dog which manifests in several ways eg teeth chattering, bouncing, spinning, rolling, chewing, rebiting. These behaviours come about through ambiguity. The best dogs are easily confused.

By using encouragement and the NO commands at appropriate times it avoids conflict in the dog. By 5 months of age the dog should have a good understanding of your method of communication and should trust you implicitly.

THE TARGET BEHAVIOUR IS IDEAL OBEDIENCE.

We must have an exact picture of the goal of the training. Read and familiarize yourself with all the rules and regulations of competition before you start training.

The dog should be intensely concentrated on the handler but be totally fluid and relaxed.

The dog must be able to explode from calm into action.

ACTIVE v/s PASSIVE – OBEDIENCE SKILLS

All obedience skills are either active or passive. Active eg front position, sit or down positions, retrieves and send aways. The dog begins in a state and ends in another.

Balabanov considers heeling passive. It is a skill of movement. The dog must learn the correct position to the handler and maintain it in every movement of the handler. The handler must be able to move forwards/ backwards/sideways/run on the spot/ wave his arms around while moving.

THE TRANSITION –ACTIVE/PASSIVE/ACTIVE

The handler has to master the ON/OFF switch which he believes to be the fundamental skill to top competitive obedience. The dog has to learn how to control himself and to maintain calm behavior and then be able to channel his energy to explode into work to achieve a goal which leads to his winning his reward.

THE BASIC STEPS

1. Establish intense motivation through play
2. Teach the dog to channel his motivation from 1 behaviour to another to reach a goal
3. Teach him to transition instantly and powerfully from active to passive and back to active. Switch ON and OFF.

**THE GAME**

Obedience should be exciting for the dog. One has to teach the dog to switch from Active to Passive with ease when training the dog to obey.

RULES FOR THE HANDLER AND THE DOG

To earn the trust of the dog the handler has to act within laws and be consistent.

RULES FOR THE DOG.

1. The dog must never initiate play, without permission. Only when cued by the release command.
2. Release the toy on the first command –OUT.
3. Respect the hands and clothes of the handler – not bite carelessly but govern himself. If he makes a mistake NO him and stop the game.

RULES FOR THE HANDLER

1. Never allow the dog to initiate play without permission. Okay release command IS the permission.
2. Immobilise the toy prior to the OUT. – The toy ceases to be alive. The game stops Lock the arms to stop any tugging at the toy.
3. Never pull the toy from the dog’s mouth or snatch the toy up.
4. Never whip the toy away after the dog has released it or even try to hide it away as this creates a breach in trust( the dog loses it). Don’t even block the ball with your arm in the the way, The dog must learn through making errors that they don’t result in rewards. The handler should hold and move the toy and if the dog tries to gab at it without the release command then hold the toy still and NO tugging.
5. Use the NO command if the dog bothers the toy. If the dog tries to grab NO and keep the toy still.
6. Reward the OUT with the release and by reanimating the toy. Eliminate resistance There is only one path to reward. The opposite of reward is NOT punishment it is NO reward!

THE BASIC GAME - 2 phases

1st Play is genetically inherent – prey drive.

2nd The dog has to engage target behavior in order to earn a reward. He has to learn that only correct behavior leads to reward. The goal is not mere possession of the toy but to engage in vigorous play with his handler. The OUT is just a brief interruption to the game.

THE OUT

Play with the dog off leash or have an assistant hold the dog on a long line( if the Handler is new to the Balabanov method). While the dog tugs on the toy give calm praise to the dog .After a few seconds of play the Handler immobilises the toy. The dog derives the pleasure from the fight not the possession.. When the toy is still the dog must release.. Jam your hands against your leg and tell him NO. The handler must be stronger than the dog. If not then the handler must go with the dog as he pulls at the toy ensuring that there is no tension or resistance on the toy. You can step on the leash to stop the backward movement of the dog. The frustration of no tig should lead to him releasing the toy. NB NO additional OUT commands. Once the dog is outing more frequently the handler must then ensure that the dog does not anticipate the OUT through signal or body position or movement.

Keep a gently vibration on the toy to maintain the grip till you give a verbal OUT command. Where dogs have had some other form of training before, it is often better to use some form of compulsion to induce the OUT. Fast tugging/nagging on the pinch collar rather than one hard correct is better as this gives the dog time to make the decision. When the dog does release, he is likely to rebite which the handler must NO. Repeat the nagging. Praise the release with a calm voice – good and then command OKAY to restart the game again. He has to learn that he only gains fulfillment of the game by releasing the toy and waiting for permission to rebite to play again.

Motivation derives from excitement and systematic rewards for all out efforts. The dog is only rewarded for full out effort to play (maximum effort)

The handler should not be predictable not get into a habit of only rewarding from one specific position but from several otherwise the dog becomes lazy and only tries for the toy in that specific position. The dog must believe that he can catch the toy at any moment and in any position when pursuing it.

The instant that the dog bites on the hands or clothing the Handler shouts NO and the game stops immediately. The handler assumes an upright position with the toy down at his side – waits 10-20 seconds. Only if the dog is calm is the game initiated with the Okay. If the dog volunteers behaviours trying to restart the game – the Handler ignores this.. Give the NO command for attempts to rebite and correct the dog if he doesn’t obey and no toy!

The dog must become a master in outing. A clean and deliberate out shows that there is no conflict.

FLUENCY

This is a state that is reached when the dog can perform the behavior on verbal cue alone without regard to the Handler’s body language, orientation, environmental concerns or other cues.

SIT & DOWN

Play is interrupted and channeled into the SIT or DOWN position. The Basic Game induces movement and drive. When the dog responds immediately to the SIT?DOWN command then he is rewarded with another game.

First teach the Sit and Down through the use of food. Manipulate him without forcing him physically as force creates resistance. Balabanov tries to reward the motion of the sit or down and not the passive state. Direct the food hand backwards into the dog to get him into a backward sphinx position. With food the dog relies a lot on body position and gesture This must be faded gradually so that he reacts to voice and not body movement. The dog must learn the sit/down with the handler in various orientations eg in front /behind /at side of Handler / or when running on the spot etc. When rewarding with food Balanov always releases the dog before allowing it to take the food.

A solid SIT/DOWN is only achieved when the dog:

1. understands that the release command terminates the exercise and predicts the game/reward
2. demonstrates a sit/down cleanly with voice command alone
3. is insensitive to irrelevant handler movements and body language.

The SIT & Down are introduced simultaneously. When in the Game choose when the dog has all 4 feet on the ground and then give a slight upward movement of the toy and give the SIT command. Repeat – release/ game/out/Sit If the dog assumes a down position instead of a sit then jus say NO and release the dog with no tug game. Get dog fluent in sequence.

Gradually raise the criterion – faster sit/down to win rewards

When teaching the down in the game almost hold the toy on the ground when giving the Down command. When the dog is steady in the down /release and play. Repeat. Gradually fade the body movement and then raise the criterion.

FIRST COMMANDS

The dog must respond to the first command given. If he fails to do so No him /Release him and tease him Use a reassurance command in a calm soothing voice when he has assumed a position to help him maintain it. Then release and reward.

DISTRACTIONS

Introduce distractions early into this training programme (play game). He must learn to ignore all stimulus emanating from elsewhere. Don’t introduce distractions till he is already good at the OUT. Have an assistant playing with a toy close by. If the pup goes over to the assistant and grabs his toy then the toy must be immobilized by bracing it and NO tugging. The handler should NOT give the OUT command when he has gone to someone else as he is then acknowledging the dog’s game. When the dog makes the decision to look at the handler he should be given the release command and when he returns to the Handler then he is rewarded for doing so. As the dog becomes more focused on it’s handler’s games then the assistant can become more persistant in trying to lure the dog away by wriggling the toy and hiding it away. All rewards only come from the handler for playing with him. Next have a couple of people playing and tossing the toy to and fro. If the dog cannot remain focused on the handler in play he cannot be expected to maintain focus in heelwork distractions. When the dog is good the assistant can even take the handlers toy and try to lure the dog into play. He may NOT play with the assistant!!!!!!!!!

ATTENTION AND HEELING

1 Heeling is considered a stateas apposed to and action. He must find the position and maintain it no matter what the Handler does.

2 Attention and heeling are 2 separate skills each with it’s own command cue.

HEELING - TWO WAY ATTENTION

This begins with the dog looking into the handlers eyes from the heel position and the handler looks back at the dog.

NB it is no use the dog looking at the toy as you will not have a toy in completion!!

Hold the toy or food in a natural position (at dog’s head height) and the dog can be in a neutral standing position. Handler gives the WATCH command and waits for the dog to look up into his eyes. Immediately release him and reward. The handler may give slight hisses to attract the dog but the toy must remain low. When eye meets eye give the release command and play for a few seconds. Repeat. By training the attention focus this helps avoid sign tracking( surging/crabbing)

Gradually increase the period of attention. Use the encouragement command when extending this.

Also train to maintain this with the handler moving. Move really slowly and maintain focus. This is more important than covering distance.. Add steps incrementally until fluency is achieved.. No sit at the halt is required at this stage. Transition from stillness to movement, gradually. Strengthen attention by introducing distractions using the toy itself. First hold it stationary, then close to his head then move it around maintaining absolute focus. Once the dog can do this introduce and assistant to try to distract the dog. If the dog shifts his eyes to look at the distraction- NO him and then tell him WATCH.

HEELING – ONE WAY ATTENTION

Once handler and dog are maintaining eye contact then the dog must be taught to keep focus when the handler looks away. With the dog in a sit or stand at heel – first maintain eye contact. Give the WATCH command Then look straight ahead but keep the dog in your peripheral vision.. After a moment of one way attention give the release command and play.

NB DO NOT look back at the dog before releasing him!!

Once the dog can maintain one way attention in the stationary position then repeat the procedure in very slow motion.. We are not trying for spirited heelwork here. Proof the dog with a couple of assistants.

FINDING THE LEG

Start teaching where the heel position is. It is most important that the dog relies on verbal cues and not on body language help in heelwork as this should be penalized in competition. Only train what you can use in competition.

Teach in a calm manner.

Leave the dog in the heel position and turn 90o to the dog Place your left hand flat into the dog’s collar and draw the dog behind your left leg as you step back and end with that leg back.

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It will only be drawn forward later. Release and reward. Later step forward in a second movement and draw dog into a sit. This is taught with a pause in between. Only once the dog is fluent and anticipating the whole movement is the dog asked to find heel. Gradually fade the hand and leg movement until dog responds to verbal command only. This method also teaches the dog to move his hind quarters.

Focus can re-established later.

Now the dog must learn to stick to the leg whether the handler takes a step forward/ backward/ sideways/ or with legs apart.etc

FORMAL HEELING

Next stage is putting the attention and the leg finding exercise together.

If the dog has more difficulty with attention than with heeling - give the WATCH command at first when you step off. After just a few steps of two way attention heeling change to one way- do a couple of steps in one way attention , release and play. Only once one way heeling is good is the halt introduced. When halting, bring the left foot up to the right foot. Only once the dog is sitting automatically at the halts is the dog taught to keep to the left leg with it in a variety of positions eg left leg ahead/ behind/ back and left (left halt) . Only release the dog if it absolutely correct in its position. NO any incorrect movements. If the dog self corrects tell him good but no release/reward is given.

TURNS

Concentrate on left turns to get the dog moving his hind quarters. Step back with the left leg and draw him back with your left hand in the collar. Do in 2 way attention first and then 1 way. When the dog is more fluid in his movement just pause in the left turn before stepping off.

When doing turns move the head and eyes in the new directions first followed by the shoulders/hips and feet.

By this stage you should be able to drop your toy and the dog keep on going without being distracted.

THE ADVANCED GAME

The dog must become a master in:

1. Never initiate play without permission ie the release command
2. He must strive to his utmost at all times – intense.
3. Must respect the hands and clothes of the trainer.
4. He must release the toy quickly on command.
5. He must SIT/DOWN quickly on command.

The difference between the Basic and the Advanced game is that the Hanlder freezes position in the Basic game but keeps moving in the Advanced game when a command is given. The Advanced game is vital for training the positions in motion. The handler must start with less vigorous movements after the SIT/DOWN commands. The dog must not move forward. NO any forward movement immediately.

Make the Advanced game more difficult by :

1 More vigorous body movements before and after the commands

2. The handler can start asking greater distance from the dog – the handler turns slightly away for the dog.

3. The handler can combine obedience with distance movement away from the dog.

Now chop and change between play and passive work ( Heel/pal/heel/play). With a lower drive dog do more heelwork on arriving at the field whereas a higher drive dog can play more first with SIT and DOWN commands.

THE STAND

Begin teaching this a soon as the dog understands the OUT and has a good clean release. Start moving forward without the Heel command and slow dog till the dog is stationary. Highlight this by giving a calm good command. Release and reward. Repeat. Hold the stationary position for longer periods and NO any forward movement and restart again. The verbal command is introduced after the dog is motionless. Gradually increase the stand period wth the good command. Introduce distractions with waving the toy or food in front of the dog after the stand command and the dog is steady.