



MOTIVATING THE UNMOTIVATED GUNDOG

Lez Graham reveals how to get your dog to do what you want, when the dog has other ideas

Handling a “full-on”, over-enthusiastic dog takes time, patience and lots of steadiness training, with masses of common sense. With these dogs, I use mirrors and window reflections to check that they aren’t creeping forward or away from me when my back is turned.

I find it easier to put the brakes on a fizzy dog and then take the “handbrake” off once they are steady. However, many owners find uninterested and unmotivated dogs just as difficult to train as the high energy “full-on” ones.

As a gundog trainer it’s quite normal to see dogs from both ends of the enthusiasm spectrum and it is working with unenthusiastic retrievers that I love and gives me, and owners, so much satisfaction. But how do we go about motivating the unmotivated gundog?

Motivation

First of all we have to understand what motivation is. Think of what gets you to

do things. It could be because you want to do something for someone else, because you want to please someone or because you simply have to do it.

Most of the time we do things because it gives us a good feeling; even the most altruistic of gestures can give us something back – an inner smile, or a “warm and fuzzy” moment. When we do things because we have to, we can drag our feet or find a million and one other things to do first (in dog training we refer to this as displacement behaviour). When we change our attitude towards the task then our motivation to do it also changes. This is true for our dogs too.

There are many things that our dogs have to do; those things that aren’t up for debate, either from a safety perspective or while working on the shooting field. Unfortunately, this is where a lot of gundog training comes unstuck. Having to do something and being forced to do something are very different things.



Delivering to hand is a behaviour that is first taught and then expected

My dogs have to walk on a loose lead, come when called, deliver to hand and settle down on command. These things, plus many others, are not up for debate. When I say “come”, my dogs say, “how fast?” and when I say “give” (me the dummy), my dogs say, “which hand would you like it in?”

With training we are able to motivate our dogs to work for us within their own communication system (as discussed in previous articles, we can accomplish this with body language, hand gestures and voice), which actually isn’t much different to ours; especially when you bear in mind that we’re both social predators.



Body language, voice and hand signals can all help to get dogs to do as we ask

Getting things done

So, how do we do this? In the animal kingdom there is one rule that stands above all others; survival of the fittest. Everything else will lead the animal back to this. If they are not fit they cannot pass on their genes and their species will die.

Dog behaviourists and trainers knowingly, or otherwise, tap into this rule all the time. If a dog doesn’t get anything

from a behaviour, then that behaviour will come to an end. Say, for example, your dog tries to raid the kitchen worktop and gets nothing – neither food nor a “warm and fuzzy” – then it is highly likely that the dog won’t waste their energy on doing it again.

If, however, your dog finds a piece of toast or a chunk of cheese that you forgot to put back in the fridge and wolfs it down, giving them an instant and massive “warm and fuzzy” feeling, I guarantee your dog will be back counter-surfing at the earliest opportunity. Likewise, if your dog raids the worktop and something jumps out and startles it, then I pretty much guarantee your dog won’t go near the worktop again.

These three differing “consequences” for your dog’s actions (nothing, good or bad) are where their motivation to do something is borne from.

“My dogs have been trained to walk on a loose lead, come when called deliver to hand and settle down on command. These things are not up for debate”



If your dog finds some unattended toast on a worktop, it’ll soon be back for more

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Got a question for Lez?

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Using a sit-stay as an example

> If you leave your dog and walk away from him and he creeps forward, nothing has happened; ie there hasn’t been a consequence to his actions. Your dog will then decide whether he gets something out of the action; if he does (and he will, because he’s getting closer to you) then he will likely repeat the behaviour.

> If you ‘ahhh-ahhh’ him as he goes to move or put him back where you left him, it is unlikely he will continue to repeat the behaviour.

> If you then reward him on your return (a stroke, a smile, a “yes” or a treat) for not moving, then it’s highly likely your dog won’t break his sit-stay.

When working with dogs I always try to correct the intention where possible, nipping in the bud the behaviour that I don’t want to prevent it turning into a bad habit through repetition.

Remember to use a mirror or set up opposite a window if you’re doing a sit-stay with your dog behind you, so you can keep an eye on them. **SG**

NEXT MONTH:

Next time, Lez will look at how to apply motivational training to gundog work.