



Stop, place and listen

Lez Graham takes away the boards and replaces them with a mat as she continues your puppy place training

Last month we looked at the way different disciplines train the equivalent of the ever-popular 'place board' exercise. Place board training is an adaptation of the more familiar 'on your bed', 'mat' and 'place' all rolled into one, the difference being that a raised platform is used. In gundog training that seems to be a board, in pet obedience it's often a mesh bed.

As discussed in the last article, the greatest strength behind this type of training is that the 'place' is raised slightly off the ground, which makes it very clear to your dog the area that it needs to stay within (in the same way that its bed is a clearly defined space). This strength is also the technique's greatest weakness as the place board is not very portable, but what if we could build on the strength of place board training without being encumbered by the piece of wood or mesh bed?

To do this, we need to drop the place board. Because the board is raised off the ground, it clearly delimits where the dog needs to stay in order to get the exercise 'right' and receive a reward, be that verbal praise, a stroke, a smile or a food treat. All we need to do to get the same effect is to train our dogs to go on something that is a different colour, a contrasting colour that is, and that has a different texture or feel to its pads. That way, it is very obvious to your dog where the boundary is, drawing on the fact that our dogs are highly sensitive to their environment and are highly conscious of changes in terrain.

Having worked this one through with our very own Nick Ridley, I decided to start conditioning my dogs to 'place' (that is sit-wait to you and I) on a rubber mat.

Fit in training whenever you can, even in your kitchen when making a cuppa



WHY A RUBBER MAT?

It's very portable and it's a completely different texture. Also, we generally have them either in our cars or homes. All you need to do is turn over your rubber backed doormat and you have your 'place' set up for training.

If you're out and about with your dog and driving, then use your car mats, again just turn them over so that the rubber is smooth and feels the same as your overturned doormat.

If you want to be completely and utterly consistent or tend to walk to your training ground, then invest in two pliable rubber backed bath mats, that way you can train with them around the home, in the garden and roll them up to put in your training bag - they'll fit in pretty easily and they won't be too heavy. The mats that I have been using are my rubber-backed door mats - at 30in by 20in they have been ideal for both my Labrador and my working cocker, however, in time you would want to reduce them down to a handkerchief size, that way you can take them to the pub or a friend's house and 'place' your dog on them.

GOING FOR IT!

I started my training in the kitchen, simply because I could do a minute or two whenever I put the kettle on, and being a Northern weaned on tea, that's a lot of training per day.

If, like me, you have more than one dog sharing your home, please ensure that you only train one at a time, otherwise at this early stage in your training, mayhem will ensue.



Sooner or later, your puppy is going to need to retrieve without place board

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I put a single mat in the middle of the kitchen floor, rubber side up, not only has this slightly dimpled rubber surface a very different feel under the paw, it's also a contrasting colour as it is black against terracotta tiles. I then went about conditioning my dogs, one at a time, to 'place' on the rubber mats in the way that Jeremy Organ has detailed in his articles on place board training.

When doing this kind of training, and by that I mean steady and stay, it's important that you don't go too 'over the top' with your praise. You need to communicate to your dog that they are getting it right and doing a great job without enticing them to get up or misbehave

THE CONE, AKA THE SEND-AWAY

Another exercise that, like the place board, involves sending the dog away from you to a designated area is the 'send-away', which I've very successfully been incorporating into my gundog training for the last four or five years.

Many of the problems encountered when teaching a young dog to stop is lack of confidence on the dog's part - hearing the whistle, it expects to have to come back and doesn't understand all the arm waving, shouting and frowning that goes on when trying to stop them coming closer.

By teaching the dog to be confident stopping and sitting away from your side makes this advanced, and very necessary, exercise of stopping on the whistle so much easier (and less stressful) to train and yes, we will be covering 'stop' another time.

Although I use a cone with a puppy, anything similar can be used and when starting to train an adult dog I recommend something heavier like a terracotta flower pot or even a kibble jar full of treats - something that can contain a reward that the dog cannot get to without your assistance and that is too heavy for them to pick up on their own.

SLOWLY AND SURELY

Start off by keeping your dog beside you, either in a sit-wait position for a grown-up dog

or gently holding it back if it's a puppy, and let it see you place a biscuit under the cone or whatever object you have chosen.

I use the command 'away' and point to the cone, which is only initially a couple of feet away. Once the dog is there, tell it to sit and as soon as its backside touches the ground, lift the cone and allow it to eat its reward.

Continue with the exercise at this distance until your dog learns to automatically sit when it reaches the cone.

Now you can start to edge the cone further and further away from you. You need to have taught a steady sit before you do so because your dog will need to sit still while you walk to the cone and lift it up for it to get the reward.

In time, as you increase the distance, you can occasionally call the dog back for its reward and, when it's confident and proficient at this, you can start pointing at other landmarks and say 'away' and it should run to them and sit 'awaiting further instructions'.

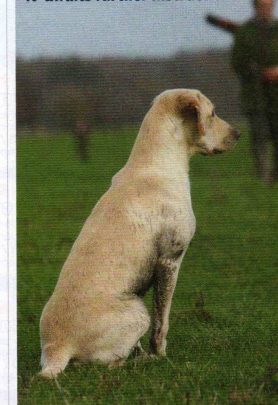
A few minutes of training a few times a day will pay dividends. Take it slowly and steadily, praising when your dog gets it right and just working through the mistakes, which you will get whenever you train something new. Remember to only increase one element of complexity at a time, so either increase the distance or duration, not both at the same time - duration, being the most important factor, should always come first. **SG**



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Eventually, your dog should be happy sitting away from you as it 'awaits further instructions'



NEXT MONTH: Lez explains the correct method to teach your dog to walk to heel



1 Begin by placing a treat under a cone, or similar object



2 Next, give the 'send away' command, only lifting the cone to give the treat to your dog once it is patiently sat



3 Gradually increase the distance to the cone



4 Your dog should become confident 'sit-staying' at a distance from you and in time you can call it back to you for its treat