

## Refining the skills to earn a Companion Dog title

By Ingrida Robinson, Teressa Keenan and George Jensen

Our column in the last edition of *Saber Tails* focused on training your dog to earn a Companion Dog (CD) title. Much of what is outlined in this column will enhance your dog's performance in earning a Companion Dog (CD) title as well as other activities you can do with your dog at AKC events and other dog venues. These behaviors can be used to help your dog learn to move his body in new ways, improve focus and attention, and help both dog and handler work together more smoothly as a team. Topics that will be discussed to help establish these behaviors are: gaining your dog's attention, doodling, and pre-novice obedience. There will be references to tools and descriptions of exercises in the previous *Saber Tails* issue (*Saber Tails*, 10(4), Dec. 03). You may find it helpful to have that issue alongside to get a better understanding of our explanations.

### Gaining Your Dog's Attention

Our wonderful scent hounds are notorious nose-draggers if given the opportunity. They can also be willful, independent, stubborn, ridiculous, food hounds, and very hard to deal with. But you have one real advantage; nearly all of them want to please you! They come by it naturally and if you wish them to pay attention to you, you need to take the time to teach them to look up at you when you need their full attention. Food, favorite toys, or your voice can be wonderful tools to get Fido to look up at you or focus on you, your leg, knee, or foot and stop trolling for food, sniffs, etc. during training or performing. However, it does take patience, effort, and time to accomplish.

Be sure that you use the same collar on your PBGV every time you train. This will tell him that he is going to work and needs to pay attention. Initially, you will want to get Fido used to looking into your face. Sit on the floor in front of him, look into his eyes and say sweet nothings like "I love you", "You're the best dog on the planet," "Pay attention," etc. to him. Initially, all dogs view staring into their eyes as a threat, and you need to overcome this to be sure he is paying attention. See Figures 1 and 2. You can also do this by having him stand in front of you while you repeat those same sweet nothings. When Fido does it correctly and looks into your eyes, give him a lot of praise for looking at you and paying attention. Saying something like "Good pay attention Fido" in a very happy voice is essential to teaching him to pay attention. You might also begin dropping a treat directly into his mouth when he is standing or sitting correctly in front of you. Some trainers might be disgusted about putting food into their mouths and spitting it to the dog, so many of us prefer to hold the food



Figure 1. George teaching Max to pay attention. Note that Max focuses on Georges eyes.

at waist level just in front (about 6-8 inches) of our belt buckles to drop it to the dog. See Figures 3 and 4 opposite page.

Once Fido has learned to pay attention to you while sitting or standing straight in front of you, transfer this "pay attention" skill to heel position. Have him sit at your left side in heel position, ask him "to pay attention" and look at your face and pay attention. To ensure his success at this you may need to help him by lifting his chin with your left hand so that he looks you in the eye. Or you can lure his attention to your face with a piece of food that will fall from your mouth when you've turned your head to the left, or your left hand held about 6" to the left of your hip. Be sure that you are standing straight up, so that the piece of food can drop directly into Fido's mouth when he is sitting correctly. See Figures 5 and 6 opposite page.



Figure 2. George teaching Max to pay attention. Note that Max focuses on Georges eyes.

Once Fido gets the idea that food and praise come from heaven and he does not need to troll for treats, he will begin to follow (focus on) your hand, leg, knee, or foot as you move. This will be his "focal point" to cue him on what he is to do, i.e., turn left, right turn, etc. He will also begin to look at your face when you are away from him (for instance, when you are practicing the recall exercises), or when you are stopped.

At this point, begin to reduce the treats and praise so that he gets used to the fact that they will be there when he performs correctly. Be sure to say, "pay attention," when he strays or he starts dragging his nose to troll. Also, give praise or treats only when he does what he is asked to do. Start limiting and reducing your praise or treats to the end

of whole exercises, i.e., a heeling pattern, come and finish, etc. Do not be afraid to encourage him and remind him to “pay attention” but limit your praise. Remember, you cannot praise your dog during a formal obedience exercise but only when the Judge says “exercise finished” in the formal obedience ring. Also, food is not allowed. Remember, PBGVs wish to please. Silence and the stern look will mean you are not pleased and they did something wrong. Keep in mind that while training your PBGV wrong is not “bad” it is just wrong and soon they will figure out that doing what you command correctly is right and will act accordingly.

confidence to move into the proper positions if he has slightly strayed.

Some dogs are more agile than others. By watching how your dog moves when he’s playing, you’ll be able to tell what kinds of movements come naturally to him, and which ones he seems to avoid. Some can walk across the top of the back of the couch, like a gymnast on the balance beam, turning 360-degree circles without falling off. Some can walk backwards as if it was as normal as walking forward. Some dogs can walk in tight circles, forwards and backwards, so smoothly and with such precision you might think they were professional truck drivers maneuvering a large semi-truck! Dogs are also right-handed or right-sided or left-handed or left-sided. These dogs, when turning to look at you, will generally always turn in their preferred direction because it’s easier, or comes more naturally to them. For instance, right-sided dogs will be more inclined to learn how to spin or dance in a clock-wise rotation than counter-clockwise.



*Figure 3. Max sitting in front of George, paying attention and getting a treat. Note hand position and Max's focus.*



*Figure 4. Max in front of George, paying attention and getting a treat. Note hand position.*

## Doodling

Doodling is a fun way to teach your dog how to move its body in ways that might not come naturally to him. Fido will learn that he can move not just in a forward direction, but also backwards, sideways, and in circles. A dog who knows how to move his body in these ways will also be better prepared in the obedience ring and elsewhere. He’ll have the abilities to perform the required exercises with finesse and more precision. Finesse is not a requirement for doing an AKC exercise, but your dog will have more

These simple exercises are used to help the handler gain the dog’s attention and help the dog understand where he should be when heeling, stopping and sitting. Doodling makes the handler give more precise body language cues to the dog. These cues help the dog understand what the handler’s body language cues are intended to mean. As the dog’s skill level increases, the handler and dog’s movements become smooth and flowing, like professional dancers doing a waltz. Regardless of where the one dancer leads,

the other one just knows to follow. To help the handler, we have included pictures to give an idea of the footwork to be used by the handler for his movement. The steps to achieve the turns are numbered S1, S2, etc. in each picture. His dog is always on his left heeling and starts in a heel position. Magical? Yes. Automatic? No. The time spent working on these little parts improves the overall quality of the big picture and performance.



Figure 5. Max in heel position, paying attention and getting a treat. Note hand position and Max's focus.



Figure 6. Max in heel position, paying attention and getting a treat. Note hand position.

Let's review what proper heel position is. The American Kennel Club's obedience regulations' definition is: "The dog should be straight in line with the direction in which the handler is facing, at the handler's left side. The area from the dog's head to shoulder is to be in line with the handler's left hip. The dog should be close, but not crowding, so that the handler has freedom of motion at all times." So, you and Fido should be close enough together to look like a team, not too far from each other, or too close to each other. And you both should be aligned so that neither one of you is in front of, or behind, the other (see pictures *Saber Tails*, 10(4), Dec. 03, page 57). In the following, if you are giving treats for

Fido performing correctly, hold the treat in your left hand in a natural position slightly in front of Fido's nose (see above picture) but at your hip level and drop it into the dog's mouth when he finishes correctly, and give him praise.

Forward. One step. Stop. This improves the dog's sitting speed, and the precision with which he sits. Do these in a space that confines his movement so that he can be successful. For instance, use wooden chutes or do these along the street side of a curb, or between the coffee table

and sofa. It's also helpful to do these in front of a mirror or reflective sliding glass door, so that you can watch how your dog moves his body. Then you can reinforce the correct position. You and the dog should remain in heel position while practicing this move.

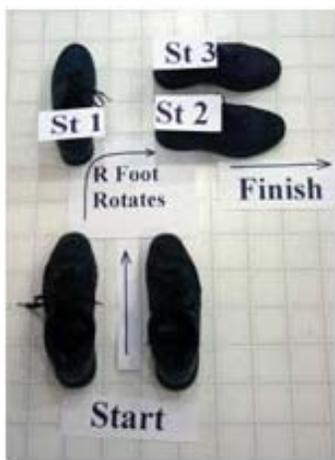


Figure 7. Foot-work for Forward Right Turn.



Figure 8. Foot-work for Right Face Version of Forward Right Turn.



Figure 9. Max doing Forward Right Turn.

success ratio described in the last issue (*Saber Tails*, 10(4), Dec. 03, page 56). Make sure Fido is still applying the correct work ethic here! Your PBGV needs to learn what is right. If he does something wrong, he's not being bad, he just needs to be given the chance to figure out what you want him to do.

The handler starts with the dog on his left side in heel position. The handler will be taking only one step forward and then halting. The handler commands Fido to "heel" or "forward", takes one step forward with his left foot and brings his right foot forward to meet up with his left foot in the halt position. As the dog starts

understanding this exercise, his speed will probably improve to the point where he just “hops” into the one-step halt. This is ok as long as he’s sitting straight, in correct heel position. Increase the difficulty of this exercise by taking two steps and stopping, three steps and stopping, etc. For the first few repetitions, it may be useful to Fido if the handler gives the command to “sit” when the handler stops, just as a gentle reminder so Fido understands what’s being taught.

Forward. Right Turn. The handler will be taking only one step forward, making a right turn, and then halting. The handler and Fido start in heel position. The handler commands the dog to move forward, takes one step forward with his left foot, and plants his right foot at a 90° angle to his left foot, brings his left foot alongside his right foot and stops. The PBGV should respond by standing up, moving forward, speeding up along the curved line of travel, and promptly sitting straight next to the left side of the handler with its ear in line with the handler’s left hip looking up at

be surprised if he beats you around the turn the next few times! That’s ok at this training level.

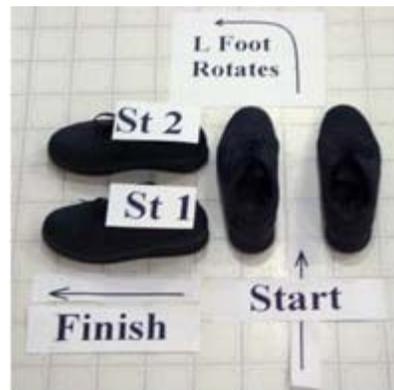


Figure 10. Foot-work for Forward Left Turn.

Forward. Left Turn. This is a bit more difficult than the right turn because the dog has to learn how to move his back end to keep it properly aligned with the handler. It would be helpful to first teach him how to walk backwards and walk sideways (see sections below). Again, the handler

and Fido are standing ready to move forward when the heel command is given. The handler gives his command to heel and steps immediately turning his left foot to the left by 90 degrees. The handler’s right foot is then planted next to his left foot as the handler stops (exactly what you would do if ordered to do a military left face.) Here Fido’s travel is minimal and he may actually have to wiggle backwards to be in good heel position when he sits. You might want to remind Fido to “back” so that he can move out of your way to sit properly. You can incorporate this exercise for teaching Fido to back up.

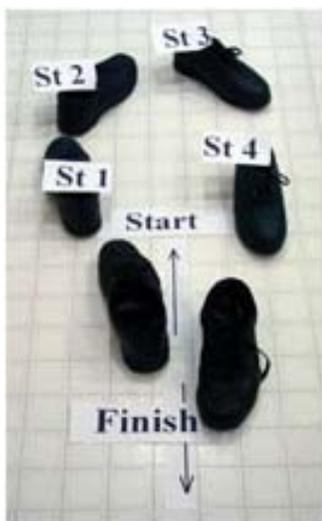


Figure 11. Foot-work for Right About Turn.



Figure 12. Foot-work for Left About Turn.

its handler. Variants of this are taking one, two, etc. steps before or after turning. An alternative is to do a military right face as shown on the opposite page in figure eight.

This move is similar to the Figure 8 exercise on the outside post (see previous *Saber Tails* issue *Saber Tails*, 10(4), Dec. 03, page 59-60). The dog has the further distance to travel therefore he needs to speed up on the turn. The handler should not slow down to accommodate a lagging dog. Encourage Fido with your voice or a cookie. You might even toss the cookie in a straight line after the right turn to increase the dog’s speed on the turn (don’t add the halt if doing this cookie-toss). The purpose of the cookie toss is to increase the dog’s speed around the turn, so don’t

This Forward Left Turn is similar to the Figure 8 exercise on the inside post. Pull out the last *Saber Tails* issue. Review the bottom right photo on page 59. Abraham’s back legs are crossed. This is the same movement speed skaters make on the turns. The crossover makes for a smooth, arcing turn, instead of a jerky-adjust-jerky-adjust line of travel around the post.



Figure 13. Max doing Right About Turn.

180’s, 270’s, 360’s left and right. These six turns are essentially variants of the Forward Right Turn and Forward Left Turn described above. For example: In a 180-degree turn you would execute a forward right turn or forward left turn followed immediately by a second forward right or left turn stopping after you take your second step to the right or left. In either case, the result is that you are facing in the opposite direction from where you started with Fido sitting fondly looking up at your eyes at attention. At completion of a

270-degree turn, you would be facing 90 degrees to your original position, and at completion of a 360-degree turn you would be facing the direction you started. Try to be sure that you are on the same line that you started out and be sure that each turn is square. When heeling, a non-stop 180-degree turn to the right is called an “about turn” and to the left is called an “inside about turn.” Footwork for these turns is shown in the figures 11 through 13 on the opposite page

When doing Formal Obedience, only the 180-degree about turn is used. However, in some AKC events and other miscellaneous venues you may be asked or need to do both inside and outside about turns. You may also need to use the inside about in other situations and it is therefore a good idea that Fido knows both of these turns.

Finding Heel or Return. Some people use the command “heel” to mean the heel position and some use the command “return” to mean “Be beside me, ready to heel”. Like all commands you will need to be consistent in what you mean to avoid confusing Fido. Here the handler is standing with Fido sitting straight at his left side, at attention, fondly looking up at your face. The handler then steps sideways to the right or backwards, commands “heel” or “return,” and his PBGV, if he understands the command or knows where the heel/return position is, will move and sit straight on the left side of the handler. It is not necessary for the handler to teach Fido to back up for this exercise. Its purpose is to be sure that Fido knows where heel/return position is.

Step Right. This is useful to see if your PBGV is paying attention while heeling. It is done with you, the handler, and Fido in motion. If you are in a class the class teacher might give the command to “step right.” You, the handler, would immediately step forward diagonally to the right and Fido, if paying attention, should then immediately follow your lead and move right with you. If Fido is not paying attention, gently guide him into heel position by luring him with a tidbit of food or applying gentle pressure on the leash, while continuing to move forward. Remember you may have confused Fido by suddenly stepping right. This is your problem, not Fido’s, and you need to teach him what to do in this situation.

Step Left. Step left is done in the same manner as Step Right except that you step left. If your PBGV is paying attention, he will also do so in order to maintain his heel position. It is more difficult to teach and for Fido to

understand what he is to do. You must be moving slowly the first few times you step left because Fido must learn to step left in order to get out of your way. Be sure your lead is tight but not choking Fido and step forward diagonally as you step left to cue him on what you are going to do. You may also want drape the lead over your shoulders with Fido on your left side. Hold the lead with your right hand and holding a treat in your left hand, guide your PBGV into a correct heel position. As Fido begins to understand that he is to move left, pick up speed until you are both moving normally. If he does it correctly give him a lot of praise and a treat.

Spirals. To do spirals, you start with your PBGV sitting at your left side fondly gazing up into your eyes at attention as needed at the start of all exercises. Start with the command “heel” or “forward” and continuously slowly turn right (or left) in circles continuously decreasing the radius of your circles until you can only complete a right square. Fido will essentially pivot around as you finish the spiral. Be sure to start with a large circle perhaps 10-15 feet in diameter. When practicing this exercise it is helpful if the handler keeps their eyes up and forward as you move. If you look down and back at your dog, it is easy to become dizzy and lose your balance.

Backing up. To teach a dog to back up while either walking backwards or scooting backwards, you will need to have the dog standing or sitting between a wall and you. With



Figure 14. Teaching Max “back”.



Figure 15. Teaching Max “back”.

the lead draped over your shoulders, and a treat in your left hand just in front of the dog’s nose, gently push the dog backwards using the treat as leverage. Keep your PBGV between you and the wall with your foot/leg so that he is forced to back up. You could also use a 2x6 timber in a 6-

to 8-foot length standing on edge between you and Fido to act as a second barrier, creating a chute. Be patient, Fido will soon get the idea. See Figures 14 and 15 on the opposite page.

Walking sideways. This will help your dog be aware that he can more efficiently maneuver into various positions. So, instead of your dog walking himself in a forward direction in a big loop, he can just sidestep to properly position himself. This doodling will teach your dog how to move his feet sideways, but the result of the dog being able to move this way is most useful for proper positioning for sitting in front of you after a recall. Therefore, we'll use the command "come" as a verbal signal to the dog to move his body while learning this doodling. Start with your dog standing facing you, holding the leash in your left hand. With a three or four-foot 1/4" dowel in your right hand, very gently tap the ground just left of your dog's back left foot. Both of your arms should hang naturally at your sides. The handler simultaneously steps about six inches to the handler's left. Tapping the ground will get the dog to move away from the dowel. The length of the dowel from your right hand prevents the dog from turning in a counterclockwise loop under the dowel to get to the front position. Keep traveling left in a straight line six inches at a time for several repetitions. Alternatively, you can pivot so that the dog just ends up going in a circle.

Switch the leash and dowel to opposite hands and travel to the handler's right direction. You might notice that your dog maneuvers in this direction much more easily, or perhaps this direction is more difficult. This will be another indicator of whether your dog is right- or left-handed.

Rewards can be given for the amount of effort the dog puts out in learning this maneuver. (Later, after your dog is proficient moving his body in both directions you can reward for the straightness of his Front.) Initially, your dog will probably just move the front half of his body, and not move the back half. Keep gently tapping the ground closely to his back left foot. If that doesn't cause him to move his back end, you may need to gently tap his back left hock. It just depends on how sensitive your dog is to either the sound of the dowel tapping the ground, or being touched with the dowel.

Your dog might strongly resist moving his back end at all. Lots of praise and encouragement are helpful. You might try this exercise during several training sessions and find that he's totally resisting the sideways movement, and then suddenly he'll catch on.

Teach spinning in both directions. On page 63, in our previous article on teaching your dog CD exercises (*Saber Tails*, 19(4), Dec. 03), we discussed one method to teach Fido to spin. Another method for teaching your dog to spin is described in *Saber Tails*, 19(4), Sept. 03, page 63. Both of these methods work well and are useful tools that teach your dog how to move his body in both directions while spinning. In the novice recall exercise that requires a finish, a dog doing a finish with a spin is very dramatic and wows the audience!

All of the above exercises are initially done on lead and can be used in the early and the later stages of off lead training. When doing these exercises off lead, it is useful to use the dowel described in the previous *Saber Tails* (*Saber Tails*, 19(4), Dec. 03, page 58) issue to help direct Fido into position. If you have trained him to give you his full attention, gentle guidance is all that will be needed. These exercises are useful as warm-ups and will enhance the precision needed for performing the majority of the obedience exercises used in the ring or elsewhere. They don't have to be trained to perfection before entering the obedience ring or anywhere else for that matter, but they are useful for getting you and your dog working as a team. Also, there may be times during your dog's life that your dog needs to move in these ways to prevent or remove him from a life-threatening situation.

Now that you and Fido have been practicing and refining your basic obedience skills, what's next? There are some fun ways you and Fido can get your introduction to formal obedience. Check your local dog club and see when they are offering fun matches. Matches are a great way to transition from practice to formal obedience in the ring. Like an obedience trial, there will be rings set up and a judge will be there to run you through the exercises and to score your performance. There will be other dogs, people and children around. The event will be similar to the types of distractions you and your dog would encounter at a show. Unlike a real dog show you can help your dog if he needs it and you can use food rewards while in the ring. If you want to enter a real show, but just aren't sure you are ready to trust your PBGV off leash, the pre-novice class is perfect.

### **The Pre-Novice Class**

There is a non-regular class offered at some shows and fun matches where you can practice your skills before starting to enter the Novice class. Dogs who have not yet earned their third Novice leg can compete in this class. According to information we received from the AKC, at the present time, i.e., January 7, 2004: "a dog may be entered in pre-novice and novice at the same trial. If the pre-novice class

becomes a titling class, you will be unable to enter pre-novice once you have earned a CD title.” However, the AKC will be reviewing suggested changes in the rules for Pre-Novice and the rules existing at this writing could change dramatically early in 2004 depending on the results of this review. When your dog has learned the basic CD exercises, and you’ve started to practice at fun matches, you can enter the Pre-Novice class at shows (check the premium to determine if it’s being offered).

Pre-Novice is one of the non-regular classes. There isn’t a title to earn, but it’s good practice for you and your dog. It also exposes you and your dog to actual ring conditions. Sometimes there are great prizes for various categories in the non-regular classes! Any dog registered with the AKC, is at least 6 months of age, and has not yet earned their third qualifying leg toward a Novice title (CD) can compete in this class.

The Pre-Novice class exercises are:

- Heel on leash
- Figure eight
- Stand for exam
- Recall
- Long sit
- Long down

Training for the Pre-Novice class is identical to training the Companion Dog exercises. In fact, showing in the Pre-novice class is even easier because all the exercises are done on leash, including the recall and group exercises. Fido will not be able to stray from you any farther than the length of his leash. Remember, the leash must be long enough to provide adequate slack; there is no specific stated length. Just like in the novice class, this means that the clip should hang straight down from the dog’s collar, and the leash makes a gentle U-shape under the dog’s chin. The handler will probably find that a 3.5-4.0 foot length is adequate. Then you don’t have to wad up a bunch of leash in your left hand while heeling.

Although the Pre-Novice exercises are performed identically to their Novice counterparts, we will give some additional explanations about the Recall and Stand For Exam exercises. All the parts of the exercises are the same, but because they’re done on leash, they look quite different from the dog’s perspective.

Recall: Since this is done on leash, this exercise is pretty much the same as the Forward, One-step, Stop described in the doodling section, except that Fido will be coming directly towards you. You and your dog start the exercise from heel position...Fido sitting at your left side looking up

at you. Upon the judge’s order, you will give your dog a signal or verbal command to “stay”. You’ll walk forward as far as the leash allows BEFORE it pulls taut (keep the gentle U-shape under Fido’s chin!). This will probably be a total distance of about 12-15 inches because both your arms must hang naturally at your sides while you’re still holding the leash. Fido must come, and must sit facing you and close enough to you after coming so that you can touch his head. He may think he doesn’t need to move at all because he’s close enough already. Nope! He has to move and come.

Once in the proper front position the judge will tell you to “finish”. You then will give Fido either a verbal command or a hand signal to return to heel position. Remember, your dog is on leash so if you use a hand signal make sure you are holding your leash in the opposite hand with which you will be giving the signal. Or, if your dog does an around finish you will have to switch hands to keep from becoming entangled in the leash.

Stand for Examination is similar to the recall. Because you will not be as far away from the dog it’s good to practice this exercise on leash and when standing close. On the Judge’s order to “Return to your dog,” it is a good idea to use your right hand to gently lift and guide the leash over your dog’s back while you walk around and behind him to keep the leash from dragging on or getting tangled around your dog. You will need to practice this with your dog.

Fido does the sits and stays in the same fashion as he would do them in CD obedience but he does them on lead. You, the handler, will have to teach the dog that when doing either exercise, that on the command “stay” he will remain in position without moving while you walk to the end of the lead, turn, and stop. To do this, with the dog on your left side in either the sitting or the downed position, the lead in your right hand, give the command “stay”, place your left open hand in front of the dog’s nose (but not touching him), step forward on your right foot so that you reach the end of his lead without pulling on it, and turn to face Fido. You step forward on your right foot because stepping forward on your left foot is Fido’s cue to heel. Be sure that Fido obeys. If he does not, grunt or say “ah”, and gently reposition him but do not say “NO!” Most novice handlers and many experienced handlers cannot say “No” without sounding angry which gives their dogs the impression that they are “bad”, not just wrong. Keep in mind that you are teaching and the dog is not bad, but just wrong.

Practicing specific attention exercises and doodling are great ways to help prepare you and your dog for formal

events including formal obedience. These small behaviors can help you take the general obedience exercises and turn them into a precise, smooth flowing performance. No matter what your ultimate goals are, practicing these intricate doodling exercises will enhance your teamwork, movement, and handling skills making your ability to work with and play with your PBGV more successful and fun for all. Using matches and pre-novice classes can also give you a gradual and less stressful introduction into formal obedience.