

## Focus Throughout the Day

By Cass Fisher

Photographs by Cass Fisher and Barbara Ferguson

The quality of the relationship you have with your dog, your agility partner, is the key to successful runs. It begins with the dog paying attention to you or “focus”, as Deborah Jones, Ph.D. and Judy Keller write and teach about. I went to a seminar with them last year in January after reading their book, *In Focus: Developing a Working Relationship with Your Performance Dog*. I came home and began practicing what I learned on a daily basis. And I began qualifying a lot more often at trials as a result. Many of these techniques can be considered foundation skills. Deb and Judy teach that you can go back to them or start over at any time. The important thing is to do them on a regular basis. I did consistently and it has been very effective. Here is how I applied what I learned from Deb and Judy over the two days of the seminar and from their book.



*Sissile ready to go in the morning*

Bubba and Sissile sleep in crates. So the first thing they do in the morning is WAIT in their crate as I open it. (The commands I use will be in all capitals throughout this article.) They then give me eye contact and I say OK, my release word, and treat them. The idea is that all good things come from me and that they give me their attention in exchange for the good things in life. There is no free lunch. After the seminar, I picked up all the toys, bones, and hooves. They still get them but they first have to do something. Training per Deb and Judy is 99.9% positive. It is only negative if someone, including your dog, might get hurt.

I use a clicker for teaching new things and used it to teach the WAIT initially. Judy and Deb teach that click always equals a treat. Never break this contract or you have lost the value of the clicker. Timing is key and they taught us to use either hand to click. Use the hand away from the dog to click. The hand close to the dog delivers the treat. It is better to click early at a non-behavior than be late. They say to click early and click often. We did an exercise to improve



clicker timing in the handler. Bounce a rubber ball, click at it hitting ground, then click when it leaves the hand, then click both. This is tough. You can watch TV and click at certain words. There are lots of options to work on your timing. And good timing will speed up your training progress on the agility field where things happen fast. Another thing they teach is to train during the commercials. Short frequent training sessions are more effective than long ones. And some commercials are even too long a training session. Always quit before the dog does. Less is more in this case.

Giving attention to come out of their crate builds on one of the foundation skills, basic baby focus, where the dog just looks at you. Looking at you becomes a default behavior. No cue is used. You just click for the offered behavior of looking at you. Do this at home first and then everywhere. If the dog can not focus in the environment, change the environment. Make it less distracting or stressful for the dog. Always remember the dog can only do what he or she can, and not more. Build success, but build it slowly. I reward offered attention when familiarizing my dogs with a trial site on our walk around the rings. As we walk around the rings, I click and treat for Sissile looking at me. This can happen as often as every few feet. Sissile used to leave me when running to go do her own thing. You might remember us at the Nationals in Rhode Island where she even stuck her head in the orange plastic fencing when she left me. This basic baby focus technique was invaluable to us to establish a connection with Sissile in distracting environments. If she paid attention to me she got wonderful treats: steak, salmon, or livermush; just fabulous treats from her perspective.

That raises the topic of reinforcers. Dogs need very good reasons to work with you. What does your dog want most of all? Know and use the different values of reinforcers for your individual dog. Bubba's favorite is dried Brie cheese followed closely by livermush. He is both French and Southern after all! Next he likes fish, steak, kibble, and Cheerios in that order. Do use a variety of treats. Other options are peanut butter Captain Crunch cereal, mini vanilla wafers, Ranch dressing in a squeeze bottle, meat flavor baby food, and cheese spread in a can. And then there are all the dog treats you can buy like liver biscotti or meat rolls.

Judy and Deb say something you pay for is more



*A variety of treats from left to right: shredded roast chicken, real meat jerky strips, Captain Crunch peanut butter cereal, string cheese, liver mush, Kraft Easy Cheese, peanut butter, butter, and Brie cheese*

valuable than something free. They teach that there is no free lunch for dogs. Dogs always pay for reinforcers with some action. The proper mindset is that the dog works all the time. This is the same as the aphorism that you are training every time you interact with your dog. Match the reinforcer to the situation. An agility trial always calls for the best reinforcers. Learning something new also calls for the best reinforcers from the dog's perspective.

Let's get back to our morning routine. Bubba and Sissile both get a pill that has to be given twenty minutes before they eat. So for the pill in butter, they both COME. They also will do some more commanded behaviors. Simple things like SIT and DOWN and SIT again. Then it is OK and they get the pill in butter. The idea here is that they come to you and perform a sequence of behaviors. The sequence length varies and can even be a single behavior but not too often. This builds on their giving their attention and lasts as long as you want it to last. The variable duration will be used in many other interactions with the dog. You are turning the dog on and off for your purposes. On and you are interacting. Off and the dog is free to go and do his thing.

You want to be able to manipulate the dog's emotional level, up or down, to get focus and then to turn it off. To do this you want to build a cue for working and not working with your dog. You can use any number of things. A toy or treats or the tone of your voice or your body posture are all options. Just use a consistent signal to your dog that you are playing your game now. At trials, which Bubba finds stressful, I will "turn him on and off" at least five times during the day. If at all possible I try and do this several times before our first run of the day to establish and reinforce our connection in the new environment of the trial site. To do this I take him out of his crate, using the usual WAIT technique, and put on his agility trial slip lead. We then walk around the site and I click and treat for offered attention, that being his looking at me without me commanding or saying LOOK or anything else for that matter. The idea here

is that the dog finds looking at you rewarding. We stay away from the agility ring when clicking so as not to interfere with other dogs running. We will also do agility heeling. Deb and Judy teach that the dog walks with you on either side. You can use a different cue for each side, for example CLOSE for left or SIDE for right. You speed up and slow down with the dog matching your pace. Click and treat for the attention. The handler also turns either into the dog or away from the dog and the dog follows. This is your rear cross or front cross on leash. Again click and treat intermittently for the sustained attention. I also might practice my RIGHT and LEFT turns or my start line STAY. And we might do TOUCH as well where he touches my hand each time I say TOUCH and then I move it to another spot and we TOUCH again. Here he will do several TOUCHES before I end the sequence and reward him. We will interact for at least a few minutes and up to five or so and then he goes back in his crate with a KENNEL command. This little exercise has given Bubba more confidence in a stressful trial environment. It is play time for him and he enjoys it. And perhaps more importantly, it has given me more confidence in my ability to turn Bubba on and off. I know I can get his attention and keep his attention for minutes. And guess how long a run takes? About the same time to prepare, wait your turn to go, and then run.



*Click and treat when the dog makes eye contact with you*

Next in the morning routine, Sissile and Bubba get to go out for their morning constitutional. We all go to the door. They WAIT and I open the door. When they give me eye contact it is OK and they get a squirt of Kraft Easy Cheese. Again I originally taught this with the clicker but now that they are trained, the attention is acknowledged with my release word, and they get a reinforcer. For Bubba, the reinforcer has become the freedom to go on out the door. For Sissile who is always hungry, the reinforcer is the squirt or two or three of the Easy Cheese. The Easy Cheese can stay on the chest by the door so it is readily available. And they WAIT every time they want to go out. This is the simple but successful part of the focus technique. The repetition of the desired behavior, attention given to you, is the key to strengthening the relationship with your dog. Yes,



*Sissile gets her favorite flavor of "cheese in a can" for waiting at the door to go out*

it is incredibly simple and equally effective.

Several mornings a week I do some shaping work with them. This is great fun for both of us. Shaping is a training technique where the dog thinks and offers behaviors and you reward for those behaviors. Deb and Judy teach you to do this with a series of different things at the seminar. We used a closed cardboard box, a skateboard (watch out amazing Al!), an open plastic box large enough to get



*Bubba goes for the box happily and differently the second time*

in safely, and a ball. You get ready with lots of small soft treats, your clicker, and the object they are going to interact with. You do this for only one or two minutes maximum as it is very hard mental work for your dog. Set a timer as it is fun once they get the hang of this game. You put the object down, look at it, and wait for your dog to do something to it. With the object there, you click for any interaction with it. Give them some thinking time, but you want lots of click and treats. Don't make eye contact with the dog; look at the thing you want him to notice. Give the treat close to the object. Some dogs are bold like Bubba and they progress quickly. In a couple minutes with Deb he was putting his front feet on the skateboard. You click for any interaction to begin with. For some dogs this would



*Reward close to the object being used for shaping*

include even looking at the object. Once they get the hang of what you are doing, you click for different behaviors. I use three plastic bins that are strong enough to support a PBGV. I put them on the floor with the bottoms up so Bubba and Sissile can stand on them. Then I see what they offer but remember you work with only one dog at a time. Both do different things to these bins. Sissile prefers to stand on them while Bubba will boisterously push them around as he paws them. You can do shaping almost anywhere with anything safe for the dog to interact with. I have done it on walks on with concrete parking place stops. The benefits of shaping include your dog's



*Bubba is about to give the box a vigorous paw push*

increased confidence and thinking ability. After we began shaping I saw an increased willingness to try new things when training in my agility field. If the offered behavior did not merit reward as it was not what I wanted, I saw both my dogs try something else much more readily than before to earn that reinforcer.

When it is time to eat they both STAY, watch me put their food bowls down, and then wait to be released with OK to eat. This is one of several impulse control techniques where you are inhibiting



*Impulse control is useful in lots of situations; especially multi-dog mealtimes*

a dog's natural desire to get what they want immediately when they want it. Here a verbal marker like YES or OK is preferable to the clicker. Another impulse control technique is what Deb and Judy called slow treats. In this you move the treat very slowly toward the dog's mouth. The dog is not to take the treat until verbal permission is given, your YES or OK for example. If the dog moves at all toward the treat, you say OOPS or whatever your non reward marker is, and the treat goes away, out of sight, quickly. At first you give permission when the treat is a quarter of the way to their mouth. Then half way and so on, so that you make the dog successful while teaching control. You also begin with boring treats to again ensure success early. This is the start of "I must wait for permission before I get what I want." You work toward very slow movement and giving permission with the treat right next to dog's mouth. I do this with Sissile and Bubba when they go to their pen for the day and get their Greenies. Both SIT or DOWN depending on my mood, and then remain motionless until the Greenie is near their mouth and I say OKAY. Then they may take it and enjoy.

In the evening, they both WAIT to come out of their pen. In the yard we do more focus exercises. One of the most beneficial is the in your face recall. Deb and Judy say that the recall is the most important behavior you can train. With this exercise you call the dog, BUBBA COME, and you click and treat as fast as possible. Try to deliver ten treats per minute. You can use their regular food for this, of course debiting their supper bowl accordingly, or your focused dog will be fat and focused. You continue to say BUBBA COME and click and treat for each treat given and the dog does nothing but

eat the treats while hearing their name and COME. This exercise has amazing benefits. See how quickly they come on the next recall after their first in your face recall. I guarantee you will be pleasantly surprised. Deb and Judy recommend doing this in new settings, all new places, and immediately upon getting out of the car. If you do this before they play with a very high value toy or other dogs at the dog park it often ensures a quicker recall. They say to start this with a puppy and do it with all dogs in every new setting forever.

Another recall technique requires a smooth surface floor and rolling treats. I like peanut butter Captain Crunch cereal for this exercise and my kitchen as the rest of my house is carpeted. Cut up string cheese disks also work per Deb and Judy. The commands are GO and COME or whatever your recall word is. You say GO as you throw the Captain Crunch underhanded across the room. Pair the verbal command and the hand signal. Start out short until the dog knows what is going on. Later you can send the Captain Crunch all the way across your room to increase your distance recall. You click as the dog's head goes down to eat the cereal. The GO and the hand signal will be extremely useful on the agility field. Sissile's distance work and speed improved dramatically after learning this exercise. She finally understood what GO meant after more than a year of agility training. After eating the cereal or the cheese, say COME,



*Sissile GOes for the cereal I just threw across the room*



*Sissile returns after a COME command to get another piece of cereal*



click for movement toward you at first, and treat when they get back to you. They will COME as you have the reinforcers. Later you can click for their getting to you. If COME is harder than GO, use a higher value reinforcer for the return to you. If your dog is motivated by toys you can use two toys for this exercise and again use the more desirable of the two for whichever command is more difficult for your dog. You can also use this exercise to teach READY as a motivator. You hold the dog by the chest, toss the treat, say READY and let the dog loose with GO to eat the treat. This gives you two things. READY as a command is useful to indicate you are about to run. It also produces more speed as you restrain the dog momentarily and she gets excited about being able to go get the treat she just saw roll away.

Rewarding for thirty continuous seconds is something I do for an especially difficult recall. Bubba is enthralled by squirrels and the car of the teenager who lives across the street. When he performs a recall when either of these is a potential distraction he will get the entire contents of my treat bag. Thirty seconds of play is also OK if your dog likes that but food is typically a better motivator per Deb and Judy. You can use this technique, thirty seconds of treats, for any breakthrough. For a while that would have been Sissile not jumping her down contact on the dog walk. When it was not so hot and humid, Bubba did weave poles and Sissile speed circles for breakfast. Well his weaves improved and her speed as well. However breakfast was so exciting for Sissile that the running the dog walk toward her food bowl meant soaring off the end to get there even faster. Adding both a hoop to run under at the bottom and a shoulder check to cause her to shorten her stride on the down plank were needed to make her paws hit the yellow. Thirty seconds of steak made that success clear to this proverbial chow hound. For recalls, use the thirty seconds of food randomly. This is partial reinforcement in training lingo which makes the dog respond more quickly because he does not know which recall will get the fabulous reward.

In the evening we do our formal agility training. Deb and Judy taught me a technique for Bubba to help us stay connected before a run. When the leash comes off it does not mean the dog is free to go and do whatever he is inclined to. It means he focuses on me



*Bubba really gets into playing TOUCH*

and doing what I ask. That can be anything he has been taught. It typically includes agility heeling, and RIGHT and LEFT turns. It might also include hand TOUCHes or our favorite trick, repeated ROLLovers. So part of our evening training session includes our agility trial leash and our start line routine. I also bought a slip lead that I can remove with one hand. When I remove it I drop it. I do not throw it as Bubba then wants to retrieve it and zoom with it. We practice leash off and focus on me several times in each training session so he is familiar with the routine we will follow at the trial right before we run. If the dog does leave you when you wish they had not, do not reward for the return to you. Instead give verbal praise and then require a behavior of some sort. It does not have to be hard, SIT or DOWN will do, and then give the reinforcer, a treat. This was especially useful for Sissile who had a habit of executing her own mission when it was least desirable, like when it involved an entry fee and a judge. If the dog is not willing to do agility exercises then you have not made agility reinforcing enough. Making you the most interesting thing around and agility great fun for the dog is the key to Deb and Judy's focus methods. Your goal is for working with the handler to be the most reinforcing thing around for the dog. As they said, these are not earth shattering truths but if they are put together and done repeatedly, your dog will improve. And that has been my own experience with both Sissile and Bubba.