

## Be Inventive - Use Clicker Training for Retraining or Help With Specific Issues

By Charlotte Allman & George Jensen

Now that we are having success training ourselves to use the clicker for tricks, let's expand the field to some particular situations where a "hands off" method of training is not only desirable, but also necessary. We will tell you some stories in this column from real life with PBGVs and their unique perspective on the training relationship. Keep in mind that not all training methods work for all dogs and their trainers, all of the time. You first must understand your dog(s) and its/their needs. Locking into one method or what has worked in one case may not be right for all. By you, as an owner/trainer, learning about how to use the clicker, and teaching your dogs what it is, adds another tool in your "quiver" for use in training and teaching your PBGV's.

Clicker training has literally saved the lives of dogs. Many in the shelter environment, whose behavior was so difficult to deal with as to render the dogs un-adoptable, have been rehabilitated with clicker training. Early maladjustments to the dogs' stressful early life could be impossible for an average family do deal with in traditional ways. Often shelters have to make a decision on adoptability based on liability, rather than the dogs' best interests. Dogs that have been labeled as "aggressive" are often found to be basically *normal* by trained shelter staff, but are still considered at risk to adopt out to the general public. The aggression needs to be evaluated for a cause, and the behavior needs to be changed. Force, intimidation and coercion, yelling, punishing, improper use of electronic collars and other harsh methods have almost always made a bad situation worse, resulting in a dog that is euthanized because of severe aggression problems. The hands-off and humane clicker method to deal with aggression has been proven successful many times over.

Relatively mild behavior issues are easily repaired with the clicker as well, such as pulling on the leash, or slow response in the obedience ring. PBGVs can be surprisingly sensitive, often offended by corrections, and have been known to firmly resist physical, compulsive training methods, earning them the reputation for stubbornness. The clicker method can help with the re-

training and counter-conditioning necessary to overcome this resistance. Another situation where the clicker helps is with the challenge of a veterinarian's prescription for "crate rest" and for keeping a dog quiet while he heals from surgery or illness. This is quite difficult for owners of such an active breed, but some clicker games can keep the dog – and owner – from going crazy! We will discuss only a few of these issues, from some personal experiences with PBGVs, and suggest books and easily accessible web pages that detail whole series' of training steps to accomplish these goals.

### RETRIEVE REHAB

Enter Phoebe, a typical PBGV, progressing well in basic obedience. She was ready to begin to compete in the Novice classes, and starting work with the Open obedience exercises. We had begun to teach the retrieve. I was uncomfortable with the instructor's insistence that the "ear pinch" was the only method to use that would guarantee a reliable retrieve. Phoebe and I had had a meeting of the minds early in her training; she agreed to go "down" if I would not force her with hands and leash.

With so much riding on my belief in my dog's willingness, I pushed a little too hard in my training with the dumbbell. I really didn't want to hear any nagging from the instructor about that ear pinch, and I expected to get a great retrieve without it. Things were going well – Phoebe was happily running out to pick up the dumbbell and rush back to me to drop it at my feet. The problem was that she was sometimes dropping it earlier than I wanted, and sometimes she would drop it and pick it up again two or three times, as if it were a toy. I was told to teach her that she wasn't going to "get away with that" behavior by correcting her. I had lots of suggestions on how to correct her. The least offensive method – it seemed at the time – was to gently – I thought - hold her jaw closed over the bit until I gave her a release command. We tried it exactly once. I immediately had a dog that would no longer pick up the dumbbell at all, or any object that resembled a dumbbell, such as a dowel or a Nylabone® chewy.

It just so happened that I had recently attended an obedience seminar that taught positive reinforcement training with a clicker. I had enjoyed it, and had practiced a little, so I began to think of ways to fix our retrieve problem with positive reinforcement. I realized that I had a situation in which I had "poisoned the cue (command)". Phoebe was not being stubborn about the

dumbbell – she had developed an instant aversion to the dumbbell, and anything associated with the retrieve exercise, including the commands that I used and the dumbbell itself. I had made her very uncomfortable with the bit in her mouth. I had pushed her too far too fast, and misunderstood her play behavior with the dumbbell as an actual retrieve.

We began our work by changing our training location. We worked with the retrieve exercise at home, not in class. Aside from helping Phoebe to be more comfortable, I could avoid the scorn of the instructor, who I knew could hardly wait to bring up that ear pinch again! I didn't want to give her the opportunity to say, "I told you so". She did prove to me, inadvertently, that correction and punishment-based training methods often don't work with PBGVs and maybe other breeds.

At home, in a safe environment, we began to change all aspects of the retrieve exercise. I put the dumbbell away, and brought out a toy that Phoebe liked and we back-chained the retrieve – starting with the end of the behavior chain, the "drop it", which I changed to "give". I gave her the toy, and then traded a piece of cheese for the toy, clicking at the exact moment that she let go of the toy to take the cheese. It wasn't long before Phoebe was offering to drop the toy for a click and a treat. At that point I began to use the word "give". Soon the sequence was "give" – hand out - dog drops toy into hand – CT (Click and Treat). The next step – the "hold" - was to give Phoebe the toy, delay the verbal cue for one second, and say "give" – hand out – drop – CT. Then we delayed for two seconds, three, four and so on. If Phoebe dropped the toy before the "give" I just gave it back to her silently. In between sessions we practiced "give" any chance we had. If Phoebe was chewing on a bone, I would approach her with a tasty treat to trade for her bone, and then give her back the bone right away. This exercise was always a part of our daily life with all our dogs, but by changing the old – sometimes sternly shouted – "drop it!" to a friendly "give" we were making more positive associations with releasing whatever she was enjoying. She learned that she would get it right back, with lots of verbal praise and tasty treats. We had made "give" into a voluntary behavior for Phoebe, with no more opposition to the old, shouted, "Drop It!"

From the "give" we moved to the "take it", which I changed to "fetch". This was easy to accomplish, as Phoebe was already taking the toy from my hand. I just added the verbal cue "fetch" to the moment when she

took the toy, and clicked. The toy is actually the T in this exercise, so you can eliminate the treat and proceed to the "give" part of the sequence. After the dog has learned the verbal cue "fetch", put the toy on the floor, say "fetch" and when the dog picks up the toy, Click or CT. Use the toy and play as a reward in addition to the treats.

We took away the negative association that we had created with the old "take it!" "Fetch" became a rewarding behavior with very little effort. I completely eliminated the "hold" command, because Phoebe simply held on to the object until I told her to "give". We gradually moved to putting the toy farther away, so that Phoebe had to go a little distance and retrieve it. We also changed up the toy for other things, some of which approached the size and shape of a dumbbell bar, such as markers, pencils, wooden spoons, other various items.

The final and most critical step was to associate the dumbbell itself with pleasant emotions. I brought out the dumbbell and showed it to Phoebe. If she glanced at it, CT! If she came closer to investigate it with her nose – CT! The treats for this stage were especially delicious, her favorite liver sausage, cheese spread with bacon, turkey baby food in a jar. I never pushed her, and we just looked at the dumbbell and sometimes sniffed it for a long time before I ever "let" her actually try to take it. Soon I put cheese or peanut butter on the bit for her to lick off. I changed Phoebe's emotional state from anxious to calm and happy in the presence of the dumbbell. When the time came to put the new, fun, cues together with the real dumbbell, there was no resistance. To prevent her from picking up the dumbbell by the bell, I was careful to CT only when she grabbed the bit, ignoring her attempts to take it by the bell.



*Phoebe Going to Get Dumbbell*

In general, teaching the retrieve with the clicker is very fast and easy. Rehabilitating a problem behavior will take much, much longer, and require more careful planning.

As with any type of training, it pays to do it right from the beginning, to save a lot of time and effort, not to

mention emotional pain. This description of how we succeeded is slightly modified – we struggled for quite some time while I learned to be a better trainer with the clicker. I skipped over some of our dead ends to save others from making the same mistakes. Phoebe became, within a few months, a dynamite retriever, never once failing to perform the retrieve when I asked her. She was as reliable as any other dog, and better than most. Retrieving games became our primary warm-up exercise before agility runs, and we practiced left and right turns, figure eights and swift take-offs by using the retrieve for motivation.

My favorite lessons for teaching the retrieve are detailed in Shirley Chong’s web site. You may skip some of the steps if you already have important pieces of the behavior chain already solidly in place.

<http://www.shirleychong.com/keepers/retrieve.html>

## MONSTER TO PUSSYCAT

When Jill Fitzgerald first met Quincy, age 6 months, he seemed to be just what she was looking for in a Petit that would be trained as a Human Remains Detection dog for Wisconsin Interstate Search and Recovery K9 Team. He had lots of drive, strength, stamina and attitude. There was one little problem – he hated to be groomed. He had already developed some serious mats, particularly on his muzzle, and when Jill tried to comb them out, Quincy roared, snarled and snapped at her hands and the comb. Clipping his nails was out of the question. Jill took Quincy to her groomer, with instructions to shave the dog if necessary, but it was a disaster. Tammy called Jill immediately and said she couldn’t safely groom the dog. He was quite dangerous – general anesthesia seemed to be the only answer to removing the mats and clipping the nails.



*Jill with Quincy (on left) and Heidi*

Jill and I set up a plan to condition Quincy to allow grooming, using the clicker. The clicker is very safe to use in a situation like this, when touching the dog could get you bitten. We didn’t even want to think about challenging Quincy by using force. If the professional groomer refused to go near him, we were not likely to succeed by hog-tying him, or

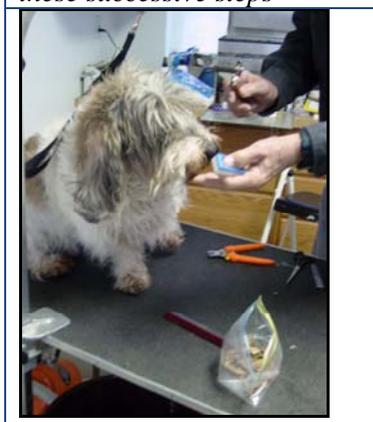
forcing him to submit.

We sat at Jill’s kitchen table with a bowl of cheese pieces, a clicker, a comb and brush. We put a leash on Quincy so that he couldn’t leave the immediate area, but we did not use the leash to control him. We expected Quincy to choose to stay near that bowl of cheese, even if we did have a brush and comb visible. We first “charged up the clicker” by clicking repeatedly and giving Quincy a treat each time. In a series of very small steps we exposed him to the sight of the grooming supplies, clicking and treating him each time he came close to the brush or comb. We began to move the brush

<p><i>The same clicker training that was used to teach Phoebe to take the dumbbell was used to teach Rufie and Max how to retrieve the telephone.</i></p>	
	<p><i>Rufie Sees Phone-Click-Treat</i></p>
	<p><i>Rufie Takes Phone-Click-Treat</i></p>
	<p><i>Rufie learns to take phone like Phoebe learned to take Dumb Bell</i></p>

or comb closer and closer to the dog, with plenty of CT's for progress. If he shied away from the grooming tools, we backed off a little until he was focusing on the click again. If he approached the comb, we gave him a big Jackpot of treats. If he lifted his lip or growled, we pretended to be very offended, and turned our backs on him for a few moments. He was then anxious to continue the game that was getting him all those delicious treats.

*Quincy overcame his fear of grooming with these successive steps*

	<p><i>Sniff-Click-Treat</i></p>
	<p><i>Comb in Hand-Click-Treat</i></p>
	<p><i>Start Combing-Click-Treat</i></p>

After this one session, Jill took over the exercises and in a few days Quincy was allowing Jill to touch him with the comb, and to brush out some of the less sensitive areas on his body. With continued work, a little bit each day, Quincy was able to go back to the groomer that had

banished him. He behaved well for a hair cut to remove the mats. Quincy has continued with regular grooming appointments, and has no need for any more embarrassing haircuts!

## FINE TUNING HEELING and the DROP ON RECALL

George Jensen, an experienced obedience trainer and competitor with PBGVs, began to take an interest in clicker training some time ago. By the time George's 12-year-old Petit Max had earned his CD and one leg for his CDX, he had had surgery on his neck and his knee, requiring physical therapy. (See "Max's Rehab" in the Sept. '07 issue of Saber Tails.) The clicker training helped Max to recover his strength and range of motion through proper conditioning. George could not, would not, put a collar and leash on Max, due to the neck surgery, so here is another benefit of the "hands off" clicker method. With no leash and collar to pull or "pop" for corrections, the dog needed to behave with intention, rather than to avoid a correction, as any physical correction would set back the recovery time, inflict unnecessary pain, and perhaps kill Max.

Max's age and his physical setbacks because of surgery seemed to make his obedience performance slow down on the heeling pattern. The start was especially slow. Since George didn't really know the exact cause of this slowing down, it was not fair to physically correct Max. Better to let the dog choose to quicken his pace for fun and because he is motivated. The target stick was a positive way to improve Max's heeling speed, eliminate lagging. Often trainers will actually make lagging worse with leash pops and other corrections – the clicker method makes the dog responsible for finding and staying in heel position. George had used a target stick with a treat on the end, and had given Max the treat when he moved. This did not work well after Max's surgeries so an alternative needed to be found. By adding a small ball to the end of the target stick, he trained Max to "kiss" the ball, very much the same as the target exercises detailed in the December '07 issue of Saber Tails article called "It's Magic".

George started with Max sitting in heel position. The target stick was held in front and to the left of his knee in the exact spot where the dog should aim his nose for a proper take-off on the cue to "heel". Each time, George would time his cue to his right or left foot moving, and when Max raised his bottom quickly to "kiss" the target

ball, George would “CT”. This was repeated about 10 times before each training session, rewarding as Max would increase speed and attitude on take-off. Soon the target was faded away, and occasionally brought out for interest and motivation. The training sessions always include all of the fun exercises that Max enjoys, like “get the phone”, “back up”, “bark”, and so forth. After a few sessions of one step forward on “heel”, George added more steps gradually. If Max goes back to being a little slow to start, George goes back to the target and one step for a few sessions.

	<p><i>Max Paw Up-CT</i></p>
	<p><i>Then Raises Rear-Starts-CT</i></p>
	<p><i>Max starts to heel using CT</i></p>
	<p><i>Max kisses target-CT</i></p>

Another exercise that George wanted to improve was the Drop on Recall for Open obedience competition. This is the one exercise in Open that results in the most failures

to pass, and there are a lot of superstitions surrounding the “best” way to train, from throwing chains, to shock collars. Most trainers find it very difficult to train the Dog with positive methods. The clicker method is by far the most reliable and fair method to train a dog to do something that could literally save his life in an emergency. If there is a problem, it usually starts with a weak “down” command, one that is dependent on a leash and collar and the close proximity of the trainer. A dog is not really fluent in the “down” until he can drop on cue any distance from the handler, with the handler sitting, standing moving, in any situation, with distractions. Work on this first.

George believes that there is room for improvement in Max, Brandy and Justin’s Drop on Recall training. He also believed that the command should be “drop” since from his point of view “down” means to lie down in one place and essentially stay there for long periods of time, whereas, “drop” will in the near future be followed by another command. The clicker has helped quite a bit, particularly for Max, without the leash and collar to rely on. There are two excellent web pages with positive, reliable training methods for the Drop on Recall. There is Shirley Chong’s Lesson 5, and Morgan Spector’s “Drop in Motion” method from his book “Clicker Training for Obedience” and Karen Pryor’s [clickertraining.com](http://www.clickertraining.com) web site.

Shirley Chong:  
<http://www.shirleychong.com/keepers/Lesson5.html>

Morgan Spector:  
<http://www.clickertraining.com/node/325>



*Max responds to “Drop” - CT*

We briefly mentioned the clicker as an aid to recovery from surgery, and assistance in physical therapy. This is a chance for each of us to be creative! Stretching exercises are

excellent to teach your dog to do before competition, a training session, or a long walk. Teach knee stretches by calling the dog “up” to your waist with his front feet, and CT for holding the position for up to 5 seconds. George

Jensen used/uses as mentioned in Max's article a variation of this when he gets the telephone since the telephone sits on a small table. He also has taught his PBGV's to find a treat and often puts them on the edge of a table or windowsill. A "bow" is a very helpful stretching exercise, lots of fun for the dog, and great for impressing your friends. Try a "high five" with one front paw at a time - CT for a higher and higher reach up. Any stretching exercises that your dog's physical therapy program recommends can be taught easily with the clicker, and the sessions will be fun.

For keeping the mind occupied, as well as the body, visit the Clicker Solutions web site: <http://www.clickersolutions.com/articles/2002c/tricks.htm> for a long list of suggested tricks that you can teach your dog. Figure out how you can teach these tricks with shaping – CT for successive approximations of the final trick. An afternoon of shaping a specific behavior can keep your dog from being bored. You both will get mental exercise!



*Rufie, Enthusiastic Hi-Five - CT*