

A FEW NEW TRICKS

Our written record of misinformation can be traced to 1605 when William Camden wrote, "*It is hard to teach an old dog new tricks.*" That line, familiar to every dog owner, has probably done more to influence attitudes and discourage training than any other.

But it isn't necessarily so! And my old Scottish Terrier, Piper, can prove it. There is no reason why dogs cannot continue to learn throughout their productive lives. Mature dogs often possess the very same personality features of curiosity, intelligence and willingness to learn that they had when they were pups. The difference between then and now is experience. The challenge is to structure training so that past experiences contribute to learning rather than conflict with it.

Knowing what your dog likes and dislikes is the first big step. My dog Piper loves to hike with me. Because of that, he willingly accepts the "rules" which I impose on him when we go hiking together. We have been together on so many trails, and he has been observing the basic rules for so long, that he is accustomed to them as a routine part of hiking. And, if he were suddenly tasked to learn a new "trick" associated with hiking, one of his favorite activities, although he might not be enthusiastic, he would certainly be interested and receptive.

Basic rules, of course, include such things as staying on the designated trail, not straining at the lead, not sniffing strangers we meet, and sitting or lying quietly beside me when we take a break. Most of these rules apply whether we are hiking in the wilds or heeling in the city. New tricks go beyond these.

We began to learn our first new trick because I needed to have better off-lead control. There are places where we are able to hike off-lead, and although we both enjoy this freedom, it does present some risks. On twisting trails where it is possible to see only a few yards ahead because of terrain and vegetation, Piper is often momentarily out of sight. At these times I worry that he might encounter trouble--a confrontation with a skunk or a porcupine, for example. It became obvious that our standby safety measure, which consists of me calling "Piper, Come!" doesn't adequately cover our circumstances. A new trick was necessary.

After much thought, I reasoned that a command which would cause him to immediately stop and to remain perfectly still at that spot would be the best trick we could perform. Learning this feat would allow me to keep him in sight at all times, and to literally freeze him in his tracks during times of potential danger. To avoid confusion with other voice commands, the word we chose for our new trick was "Wait."

The next time out on the trail, connected by our 6-foot lead, we began playing a new game. At totally random times and places, I would call out, "Piper, Wait!" At the same time, I would take the slack out of the leash so that he was obligated to come to a prompt halt. Gushing praise and special pats and scratches for his great performance immediately followed. He was confused at first, but he soon caught on, and responding to the unexpected command became an exciting challenge to him. We played the game many times that day. By the time we finished the hike, he delighted in stopping before the sag left the lead. In addition, he voluntarily stood motionless each time until the plentiful praise rewarded his performance.

On the next few hikes we repeatedly practiced our trick. When his execution was nearly flawless, I replaced his short lead with 25 feet of light line. We continued the game, but now he ranged out of close control, attached to me only by the long slack line. A few practice situations was all it took before he responded on cue--and collected his rewarding praise. Now we were ready for the game with the highest stakes of all--heeling off-lead.

Fortunately, Piper has as much fun hiking on- or off-lead. "Wait," means the same to him in either case, and he performs equally well in both situations. Because of that, our routine now contains what is probably one of the most useful and powerful tricks on, or off, the trail.

Our success at mastering the "Wait" command led to learning another. The second trick is "Back!" The reason we needed "Back" was that I could not always clearly see the trail ahead, or that something I could see looked like it might be an unsafe condition for Piper. Now, when we find ourselves in that situation and I give the second trick instruction, Piper knows he is expected to follow me. I position him directly behind, command "Back!" and he obediently parades along in single file.

We must be a comical sight; man in front and dog trailing after. No doubt we make an even funnier sight in places where the trail is wide as a highway, yet he is dutifully marching along close behind me. But it is effective, and we have managed to minimize his exposure to some of the risks of the trail with this unusual trick. We taught "Back" with the same step-at-a-time approach as "Wait" and he learned it with nearly the same enthusiasm.

Someday I would like to teach him a new pair of companion tricks: "Go Left!" and "Go Right!" He already reacts correctly to, "No-no, This Way!" after he has started down the wrong branch of the trail ahead of me. It is obvious he has a sense of direction. So, I feel certain he will learn left from right if I can just arouse his curiosity a little, even though he is getting to be an "old dog."

Maybe it was appropriate in 1605 for William Camden to write that "*It is hard to teach an old dog new tricks.*" But based on our experience, I think the real truth was expressed a mere 6 years later by Ben Johnson. He observed that, "*A good dog deserves a good bone.*" And what Piper and I like best is that Ben didn't bother to mention age.