



BUILDING BLOCKS

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR PERFORMANCE

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“The purpose of training is to make learning possible.”

—Klas Mellander

The most important job a breeder has is to provide new pups with a solid foundation. The owner’s job is to take that foundation and begin building towards future goals. Klas Mellander’s quote was to encourage employee growth within the workplace but the concept easily applies to the early development of the performance canine.

In the human/animal relationship the process of training and learning becomes an effective means to communicate between species. A solid foundation for any dog, no matter the goal, has two parts: early exposure to various sights, sounds and surfaces; and positive introduction to the concept of learning.

Specific behaviors learned early tend to be life long however these behaviors will have less overall impact on the pup’s performance future when compared to the pup’s ability to fully understand the notion of learning.

This point became clear to me when a dog I bred was returned when he was six-years old. Clay left the fold at four months. His owner did some sporadic training. Less than two months after his return he came within three seconds of qualifying in his first ever agility trial, after I worked with him for less than 10 minutes a day, maybe twice a week. The early foundation I provided stayed with him. He knew how to learn.

SIGHTS, SOUNDS, AND SURFACES

Creating a solid foundation for your puppies' future aspirations needn't be cost prohibitive—money need never enter the picture. The real investment is time. Properly creating a solid foundation is time consuming; therefore the more litters a breeder has on the ground, the less foundation each pup may have. As a potential owner, I prefer breeders who have one, or at most, two litters at any one time. Or I make plans to bring my pup home as early as eight weeks, so I can begin to lay my own foundation.

From the moment my pups are born, I follow the suggestions outlined by Dr. Carmen Battaglia, PhD in his "Developing High Achievers" (Early Neurological Stimulation) article. Pups are handled daily in a multitude of ways, as per his recommendations, for the sole purposes of introducing mild amounts of stress. Research shows that animals challenged with minimal amounts of daily stress during the first weeks of life have better coping skills of everyday stressors as compared to non-stimulated brethren.

When their ears begin to open I introduce the sound of the clicker during nursing. The idea is to have positive subliminal associations to the click; there is nothing more positive to a hungry baby than feeding time. This early exposure makes for a smooth (and quick) transition to more classic click/treat sessions starting around five to six weeks of age. For me, the clicker is the first means of communication with my dogs and while I do not use it exactly as described by click/treat enthusiasts, I will use it sporadically throughout my dogs' lives, especially when introducing any new behaviors.

With little money to spend on expensive puppy agility primers, I used my imagination to create some rather interesting substitutes; rough perhaps but effective for the purpose of early exposure to a

variety of surfaces. For an "A-frame" I took a used tri-fold lawn lounge, folded it into an upright triangle, which allowed the pups to climb up the soft fabric, go over, and then slide down the other side. Running through the center of the triangle created a makeshift tunnel. To simulate the rickety movement of a teeter-totter I did two things; I fed the pups with a large flat pan atop of a small flat rock or piece of wood. Every time they climbed onto the pan, the pan would wobble.

Later I used the round lid of a large rubber garbage can and laid it upside down atop a small plastic dish. I would then throw food bits into the center to encourage investigation. Once one brave pup climbed inside, the rest had to investigate. A game of "King of the Trash Lid" would often ensue with the lid rocking erratically to and fro. The rickety movement became a normal and fun sensation for all, certainly nothing to fear. For my second litter I had the added benefit of an actual teeter-totter. At first it was rigged so as not to sway from their weight. As they grew they seemed to enjoy, especially as a team, making it crash to the ground.

A raised dog walk may be the easiest to create—all one needs is a long piece of wood and two low bricks upon which to set the

wood. The pups' natural curiosity takes over and they will climb up, climb over, run atop of and oft-times fall off the makeshift obstacle with no negative connotations. As they get bolder one can raise the elevation ever so slightly on one side so they learn about the structure from various heights, angles, etc.



For a tunnel I "splurged" and bought a very cheap children's tunnel at a local toy store. An alternative would be to convert a cardboard box by opening both ends and reinforcing the sides with tape to help keep their shape. A chute can be made by attaching an old sheet to one end of the box tunnel and allowing it to lay flat beyond the opening thereby encouraging pups to push through the sheet to escape.

Everything at this stage is done at the pups' pace and initiative. Other than dispersing treats here and there to encourage investigation, at no time do I force any pup to experience anything it does not want to try. Remember too all dogs are situational, puppies even more so. What they may embrace in one location inexplicably becomes something to fear in another, so I make sure to rotate the various obstacles throughout the house/yard to help shape future acceptance of all things new.



MAKE LEARNING POSSIBLE

Teaching the pups how to learn becomes a natural progression from their early clicker training. At first they are "worked" as a group with all "training" revolving around mealtime. Naturally the pups clamor or climb on the sides of their ex-pen, or my pant leg begging for their supper; when this occurs I try and stand tall, hold the food high and above/towards the back of their heads and quietly wait. Invariably, with their heads looking straight up vying for the food, their bums will rock back and hit the floor. Oddly, they all seem to do it at the same time and when they do, I immediately click and put the food down. I then sporadically click as they gorge themselves, reinforcing those positive click associations.

Pups are veritable sponges at this age and super quick to repeat what works, so when upon my approach with the food bowl they begin to offer the sit, I introduce a quasi-wait; I have them sit a little longer each time before offering the click and meal. Eventually little light bulbs start to flicker in their brains and they begin to learn that their action, such as sitting equals food; pay attention to the human and you might earn the food!

As the pups leave the nest, and I am left with one or two, I begin more individual "training." I introduce the dumbbell and retrieve, the send away and recall, and of course longer waits for supper—up to and including placing a bowl on the ground, a mere foot from a sitting 10-12 week old pup who hungrily, but patiently, awaits my release word of "OK!"

I have found the learning curve between mentally conditioned puppies versus adult dogs that lack any kind of foundation to be astronomical. Pups as young as five weeks are easily lured with food into sits, downs, stands, etc. while an adult dog will oftentimes paw at the food, stare and whine in frustration or give up completely; they have no clue how to make the "human food dispenser" pay off. And it's not just the dogs that get frustrated. Owners often lose their patience with adult dogs (or non-conditioned puppies) and sometimes consider the dogs "dumb" when in truth they are

just uneducated in the art of learning. With a little perseverance the light bulb slowly turns on, and the learning curve can become indistinguishable between the two age groups.

So owners: do not despair—old dogs can learn new tricks! But more importantly breeders do your puppies (and the owners) a favor—stimulate those young minds early and often; you might be surprised by what they can grow up to accomplish. 🐾



To view Dr. Battaglia's article visit:

http://breedingbetterdogs.com/pdfFiles/articles/early_neurological_stimulation_en.pdf