

Balanced Training Theory and Methods

Developed by Laura G White

Cinnstar Retrievers

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Introduction

In a balanced training program, the balance is between Praise, Encouragement, Teaching, and Correction. They all blend together in a unique mix that takes the dog's temperament into consideration. Balanced Training enables a trainer, whether beginner or advanced, to progress in a shorter time frame as ALL of the reinforcers: Praise, Encouragement, Teaching, and Correction to train the dog are utilized.

The Balanced Method establishes the trainer as the Leader: The Alpha of the pack. Dogs are pack animals that want order and hierarchy. A good pack leader is one who shows approval, displeasure, and teaches in a fair, honest, straightforward manner that is understood and accepted by members of its pack. Dogs being pack animals need to know, want to know where they stand in the pack order. The trainer and dog are not at an equal level. If the trainer does not assert himself or herself as alpha, the dog will, even if expressed in a passive form.

In this article I have chosen to use the term "correction" for ANY kind of negative reinforcement. One could easily use the term "consequences" for this. As you will read further in detail later, some kind of consequences, negative reinforcement is crucial to have a balanced system. This only copies what is vital in the natural world.

The trainer should always be on the lookout for new ideas and training methods, even if they might not be applicable for the dog currently in training or is markedly different than the method you use. Listen and learn from others who have had **demonstrated success**. Today it seems like everyone and anyone is a dog trainer. Many with "miracle cures", or using a bunch of Psychobabble to sell you. Training one dog to a minor degree with a "new" method is not proof that a method works. But many dogs trained to high levels of success consistently will "tell you" if and when a particular theory "works." Some methods are only adaptable to certain temperament types. You cannot necessarily apply methods that work for example on a German Shepard, to a Sheltie or Hound without substantial modification. Trainers that have only worked with small delicate breeds are often unable to cope with larger, or more dominate dogs. They give the owner a pinch collar, but not the knowledge on how to begin to use the tool correctly. If you take a class, interview the instructor. Find out their qualifications. When I speak to a trainer or look at a website, I look for demonstrated success over a period of time. Time because training dogs takes a lot of time and many dogs to be proficient. I was referred once to a website where the trainer espoused a non-force trained retrieve for retrievers. You had to read between the lines to find out that you would have to leave your retriever there for a long, long time just to get the trained retrieve accomplished, and never did they discuss how they would accomplish this task. Further this trainer had only attained a Lab WC

with ONE dog, and the Lab WC does not even require delivery to hand! What does this tell you?

The Balanced Training theory and methods encourage and develop teamwork, and generate enjoyment for both the dog and owner. The Balanced Training method works for all breeds and temperaments of dogs. This is because it individualizes the amounts of Praise, Encouragement, Teaching and Correction to the individual dog. For example: With Shelties, almost all training can be approached with very little “correction.” An occasional gentle tug on a nylon collar is all that may be needed. Shelties are smart and have a high desire to please their person, so the owner/handler can use that to achieve the desired behavior. Harsh corrections are counter-productive and can “crush” their attitude, raising the question as to why such a method would be utilized. Instead, with such soft breeds/dogs, teach them what you want, using lots of verbal praise. They are usually extremely enthusiastic retrievers, so to keep motivation high; balls and other “retrieving objects” are valuable training rewards. Food may or may not be effective, but it is critical to know and understand your dog and use whatever is most useful as a motivational tool. A key point is not “getting stuck” on one particular reinforcer, but to use common sense and adapt to the individual dog’s needs and responses. For some dogs that do not have a high desire to “please,” food is often the best positive reinforcer, and even for dogs that find work self-reinforcing, high-value food treats can be an extremely valuable reward. Many breeds lack the trainability or intelligence which retrieving and herding breeds possess. Some are seemingly “stubborn” or “obstinate.” As a trainer, owner, or handler, it is important to be thoughtful, creative. And above all, it is crucial to be “fair.” Many dogs resent being treated unfairly, or what they perceive as being treated unfairly. Be careful in your interpretation of “why” the dog is doing something. Look at the situation from many different angles. Give the dog the benefit of the doubt. Too many trainers feel that the dog is “blowing them off” when the dog acts inappropriately. This may or may not be true. More often I have found that the dog is confused, not fully comprehending what you are asking, the previous step not clearly understood. Or is it some environmental factor causing your problem? Let your dog’s temperament, level of experience be your guide.

Consistency in any venue of dog training is extremely important, and its importance cannot be stressed enough. It gives the dog a clear-cut picture of what is expected. It is also fair to the dog. Consistency! The more consistent you can be the better you dog will perform. If you want the dog to sit straight, then teach him to sit straight every time from the first time. If you see that the dog is tending to sit “crooked,” it is helpful to “straighten” him or her before the “rear hits the ground.” Dogs, like people, are confused by ambiguity. So do not be wishy-washy. Let your dog know what you want. Dogs appreciate and respond to information.

It is important to give your dog a chance to be successful. When dogs are struggling to understand a task, make sure they commit to making a mistake before helping, encouraging or correcting. If the dog is able to complete the task on its own, he or she develops confidence in the ability to complete the job. If the owner/handler always “helps” or “helps too soon” then the dog will always expect help in stressful situations. In

obedience, help is often repeating the command, or encouraging the dog. This is different than encouragement when they are just learning something. That is why we might encourage a dog at first to keep up with us at heel, but as the dog progresses, we cut down on this. The dog has to perform the entire heel on or off leash with no encouragement, so you need to wean them from it in practice. Conversely, correcting the dog before it has actually committed any “wrong” will cause confusion, even panic. Let the dog commit to the mistake, then help, encourage, or correct. If you try to second-guess your dog, you may be wrong. It is advisable to eliminate such “gray areas.”

Envision perfection. Envision what you and your dog look like when you are working as a perfect team. Imagine your dog performing every exercise perfectly, taking every signal and cue from you with enjoyment and precision. Use Praise, Encouragement, Teaching and Correction in the right situation to get the desired results. My agility experience has demonstrated how this Balanced Theory works in this venue, and agility enthusiasts can benefit from considering the concepts and methods in this article.

The Balancing Act

Praise: The importance of praise cannot be stressed enough. The single biggest difficulty with “beginners” in any venue is teaching owners/handlers to praise the dog. Using voice, body posture, and physical contact, the trainer shows the dog that what he/she has done pleases us. In a pack situation, the pack continually works to please the Alpha. Food, playing with the dog, fun retrieves, playing tug, petting and stroking, and verbal praise are all positive reinforcers. However, praise, if done incorrectly can be a distraction. It has to be used at the right time in the right situation, and in the right amount. It is important to know when a quiet “good dog” is needed, and when to “throw a party.” Tone of voice is so important. Dogs understand the tone of our voice better than they understand the actual word. Thus it is not just what we say, but how we say it. For example: A young boisterous pup requires soothing, calm praise, gentle stroking. Getting excited when doing basic obedience training will only make the dog completely lose control, and thus is counter-productive and distracting. However, just the opposite is true of an introverted, or “laid-back” dog. Dogs who are shy or reserved need special mention--for such dogs reassurance, being happy and confident as a handler/trainer versus “coddling” or “protecting” are most effective. Speaking gently can help a dog “face its fear” when reacting in fear or panic. In such situations, it is important to react with confidence and assurance. By learning and understanding your dog’s nature/temperament, you will discover the best tone to use and when, to get the best response. This can be different in various situations.

Companion obedience training is different than competition obedience. With companion dogs and their owners, more often you are working with a dog that is already out of control. You work with aggression issues toward both other dogs, and humans. Stopping these issues is of immediate concern. The owner has to let the dog know in no uncertain terms that aggression toward humans or other dogs is not allowed, ever. I do not use food in companion obedience training, except in rare instances, and normally only to

overcome an issue or teach a particular concept. Too often (and in the obedience ring as well I am afraid) the dog senses no cookie is forthcoming, so the dog does not perform to the level they are trained to. I do not expect companion people to walk around all the time with dog treats in their pockets to reward the dog for correct behavior. They must learn other methods of praising their dog. By rewarding primarily with food, there is very little interaction between the dog and trainer. I personally feel treats can be held off in most situations. Obedience trial competitors are in a slightly different situation. Most likely the dog does not have major, serious issues. But just like any reinforcer, if you always give a piece of food for every correct sit, the dog will expect it. Food is not allowed in the obedience ring, but praise is after and between each exercise. Think of yourself as a cookie! Your love, praise and affection are the treats. I prefer to use myself as the cookie. I want the dog to work for me, not their stomach. Most dogs respond to this, even if they do not show it like some dogs might. But in teaching a particular exercise, luring the dog to come in and sit straight for example, and a few other instances, food used judiciously is a good tool for most dogs, particularly if it is used sparingly and only occasionally. Intermittent reinforcement with food actually is considerably more effective than using treats all the time, every time. Retrieving games and toys are good as well. You have to interact with the dog. The same holds true with tug toys. Again, watch that they do not become a distraction. For obedience competitors I like to taper off the amount of praise and encouragement as the dog's confidence grows, so that when ready for competition, you do nothing that would not be allowed in the ring. I do a "run through," then concentrate on any exercise where the dog has made a mistake or if an obedience competition dog, imperfect. That is not to say that I would not straighten or correct for a crooked sit or ignore if the dog lags while doing my run through. You need to be consistent. I just keep praise and encouragement to a minimum for the run through. Praising at the end of the exercise as done in actual competition. Obviously, the dog has to be about ready for competition for this. If I use a toy, I leave it out of the "ring." When I am "finished" with the run through and have exited the ring, I play a game, asking the dog where its toy is, and we play. At a trial, the dog is used to having its toy outside the ring in practice, so you can show the dog the toy, or even play before going to the ring. When you come out, let the dog play as a reward. With dogs that are food motivated, you can do the same for them. Note! No running out of the "ring" in practice to get the reinforcer! Many run throughs at obedience clubs also allow you to bring toys or food into the ring. This is excellent for transition from practice to actual competition.

Encouragement: Encouragement helps the dog to act, or continue to act "correctly." It is similar to praise, and there is an overlap. Praise is given after the dog has done the desired task. i.e., responded to the instruction. Encouragement is given while the dog is actually in the act of doing something correctly, or about to make a mistake.

Encouragement can be verbal or physical. Patting your leg or clapping your hands are examples. Beginning and advanced dogs learning new skills in any venue require more encouragement than for dogs with already known and established, well-learned skills. In "beginning" training, the owner/handler should not be reluctant to talk and encourage the dog, allowing him to know when he is "doing right." Encouragement must be upbeat and "happy." Dogs used to being encouraged do not get distracted by positive

encouragement, and will continue along with what they are doing. Here again, the tone of voice is important. For example, when a handler returns to the dog on a sit-stay in practice, a soft “good sit” greatly helps reinforce the sit-stay. This will eliminate the anxiety that often occurs when most of the time the only reason one comes back on a long stay is to correct the dog.

Teaching: When we teach, we show the dog what we want it to do. We may physically position the dog in the correct position. In retriever training we can set up a drill to teach new concepts. We use a word or signal associated with the position or movement. We then praise the dog for being in the correct position or doing what we want. Many exercises cannot be taught as a whole. Elements can be either back-chained, or taught in separate “sections” or “parts” and then slowly brought together. It is important that the dog knows each part and is successful, before progressing in the chain further, or bringing the different sections together. In training retrievers in the field, training tests should be set up so as to teach by success, not failure. Ensuing tests or exercises should be progressively more difficult. Some failure or mistakes can and will happen. This is just as true in obedience as it is in the field training your retriever. In the field, one will need to help the retriever or have the gunner help the retriever. Or correct the retriever if they are already taught what is correct, and then help. Failure teaches a retriever what not to do. Success teaches a retriever what to do. Different learning concepts, and both necessary, but have to be in balance. Without some failure, there is not a lot of progress, as you never find the dog’s limits of knowledge. If the retriever fails, repeat for success if you feel they need it. Success makes for a confident retriever. Each retriever requires an individual amount of success. You certainly do not need to repeat each unsuccessful mark. Only repeat if you feel you have something to gain by it.

The same theory can be applied for the obedience dog. In heeling, coming to a halt from a fast pace is very demanding, as is a turn. It will not only teach the dog to keep focused, precise and alert, it will keep him interested. It can help to make the heeling pattern more difficult, teaching a “left about turn,” to keep the dog “on its toes.”

When I do practice a “run through,” I will also teach other exercises that will not interfere with what the dog is doing in the ring at that time, e.g., I do not teach the drop on recall when the dog is competing in Novice, but I can do the jumping and retrieve work.

Each dog can only do so many repetitions before becoming bored. In training, I like to simplify, and make what I am trying to teach cut-and-dried, black and white. In obedience some dogs actually thrive on repetitions, but most have a pretty short limit. In retriever training I use drills to teach concepts. This lessens confusion. For example, when teaching retrievers concept marks, I like to use a flat short grass field so that the dog will see the bumpers and not be distracted in having to find a bird, or deal with terrain or cover. I use short distances--this tires the dog out less, and he is also able to keep the concept in mind. I make each succeeding mark in the drill a little tighter or tougher in a series of four or five retrieves. So while you are repeating, it is not exactly the same, thus boredom does not occur. All this involves teaching by success. The dog feels good about passing close to a gunner where they just retrieved a mark, and runs

with confidence. If they do fail, I repeat, and if the retriever is still confused, I go back a step. You can easily apply the same methods teaching ditches, cover, and land water land scenarios. Start close to the obstacle and use a big white bumper where the retriever can see the success just on the other side. Move back as the retriever returns, increasing the difficulty. Once the retriever understands, then set up an actual mark with birds and other distractions in another area.

The handler should never be afraid of going a back a step in the learning chain. Maybe the dog did not understand what you wanted as well as you thought? Maybe you are trying to progress faster than the dog can absorb.

Intelligent retrievers are not always the best field trial dogs, as “the wheels are always turning.” Sometimes this will work in your favor. As you can see, my training methods involve a lot of drills that are teaching exercises. An intelligent retriever will thrive on this, as will a sensitive retriever. Drills are a cut-and-dried experience, less chance of the retriever making a mistake, thus more success. When they then do go out in the field and see the same concept, they already know it, and success is better assured. Some retrievers do not have this desire to please their person, they have desire to please themselves, and the act of retrieving is self-fulfilling. That is where being the Alpha comes in, and the trainer being the Alpha is important. It is in a dog’s nature to please and obey the Alpha. And why is so important for the dog to accept it that you are the Alpha. Otherwise the dog and you will always be arguing for dominance.

Obedience for a competition dog is a nit-picking experience. Every little thing has to be perfect. Not all dogs have the temperament for this. In retriever training, you can “pick your battles.” You can choose what to concentrate on in your work. Nit picking makes for a methodical field worker, as the dog can get worried about making a mistake. And not just from the corrections! Many of my dogs really try to do right, they want to please, and they worry about it. This is the big theoretical difference between training for obedience competition and training for field competition.

Correction: I have chosen to use the word “correction” in this article for anything that is negative reinforcement. Correction is a “consequence” of doing something the dog knows is incorrect. All animals learn from both positive and negative reinforcement. Even in our daily environments we get both positive and negative reinforcement all the time. If we walk across a hot asphalt parking lot without shoes, we are going to get some pretty negative reinforcement from the nerve endings on our feet! Our brain makes a note of this, saying “Don’t do that again without shoes!” All animals make these kinds of equations. They learn how to avoid death. They also learn from others in their species. Pack and herd animals learn from both their parents and from others in their herd or pack. Many studies have been done on both wild horse herds and wolf (the dog’s closest relative) packs. And a lot of this learning is by negative reinforcement. Some of the negative reinforcement can even lead to the death of the animal. You can witness this by tuning to just about any TV station showing the life of wild animals. Correction, aka negative reinforcement, is a natural part of life. It can be subtle or it can hit you over the head like a hammer. Harsh or very mild.

In recent times humans have tried to take away the balance between positive and negative reinforcement. Schools want all kids to be winners, all the time. They are coddled and never allowed to stand on their own two feet and possibly fail. Some parents allow their kids to do whatever they want, when they want, with no negative consequences. Then they get to the real world and they are not prepared for the disillusionment. Losing is a fact of life. And there are consequences for our actions. We can't be winners all the time, and we have to learn to lose with a handful of grace and dignity. What do you think a "sore loser" is?

Unfortunately in dogs, as well as horses and even children, trainers and parents in the past (and still today, sadly) have dealt out far too much or too harsh correction. There are "trainers" that see the e-collar as a cure-all/do-all for better dog training. I have even heard that the use of the collar is not a correction in order to sell its use. Huh? People have seen their delicate Shelties and Poodles jerked around and strung up. They have seen field Labs crawl on their bellies, sunken eyes scared to death, their once high rolling temperaments destroyed. No wonder many people have gone to only positive reinforcement. I can hardly blame them. Another problem is the human loses control and takes out their frustration or anger on the dog. Some try to justify this despicable treatment as "tough correction." But most have seen through this as the torture it is.

Correction does not have to be that way. By using your dog's temperament and the situation as guides to a correction, the correction can be as mild as a stern "no," or other verbal cue to let the dog know we are displeased. I often use a "non word": "eha" to remind the dog what they just are starting to do is not correct. A choke chain should never be used to choke the dog, nor is it to be pulled on. The correction should be sharp and quick. This jerk can be as little as a flick of your finger. Use only the amount of correction the dog requires and no more. More is abuse. Modern e-collars have many intensities to fit the dog's sensitivity. Just because you have a "whip stick" in your hand does not mean that you can't use it to lightly tap the dog's rump, or use it as a guide. Common sense, fairness and respect to your dog are of paramount importance.

Consistency in correction is all-important. You can't correct the dog one minute then completely ignore the same mistake the next. This creates confusion. Confusion creates all kinds of problems that will latter have to be straightened out. Further what often happens in this scenario is that the handler then over corrects: showing their frustration, further confusing the dog, and even scaring it. How fair is that? The handler really deserves the correction, not the poor dog.

One last comment about correction: you can't correct any animal, be it a human, horse or dog unless they know what they did was wrong. You can't correct for something they don't know. That is not fair.

In Conclusion

Because The Balanced Theory and Method utilizes all of the training tools, centered in an individualized program, a trainer does not get “stuck” on utilizing only one tool that might not be appropriate or productive for the dog. Why take years to train a particular skill if it can be trained utilizing another tool more effectively?

That does not mean that every dog trained with this method is capable of a high-in-trial award or field trial wins. That has to do with many factors more than just a theory or methodology. The individual dog’s personal capabilities and limitations come into play. Some breeds of dogs or individuals simply do not possess the desire to please, work ethic, or intelligence that it takes to be a competitive winner. The dedication, ability and even the handler’s funding resources factor in as well.

As with people, some dogs like or dislike different venues. Why spend time and effort on a venue that is obvious the dog simply does not enjoy and/or does not have the natural talent for? Pick activities that the dog likes. Generally if the dog enjoys a given sport, they will work harder at it. A dog that loves its work is fun to train. There is only so much the handler can do to make the training experience enjoyable for the dog.

Training dogs requires a tremendous amount of time, dedication and work. We put in so much energy and resources, and it should always be something that at least for the most part is fun and rewarding for both the dog and the trainer. I hope the Balanced Theory and Methods can help you become a better trainer no matter what your chosen venue is.

Good Luck,
Laura G White