

LOOK MA! NO HANDS!

Making Rally-FrEe, Hands Free!

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As a musical freestyle judge I often see what a struggle and challenge it is for many freestyle exhibitors to move from the Novice levels up to the Intermediate levels. This is in no small part due to the Intermediate-level requirement that “rarely are visual cues noticeable,” meaning that exhibitors must refrain from using lure-like hand signals, and instead use verbal-only cues or present subtle physical cues and/or choreography cues to receive a qualifying score. The team’s success in the Intermediate and Advanced levels is often dependent on whether they can meet this criterion. For non-qualifying teams, a judge’s comments can often read “too many hand signals for this level”. Rally-FrEe guidelines also state exhibitors will use “subtle physical cues or verbal-only cues” and the goal is to shift to primarily verbal cues by the time you reach the higher level classes.

When I first started training my dogs in freestyle over twelve years ago, I used lure-reward training—which at the time was, and continues to be, the most widely used form of positive reinforcement training. Getting our dogs to perform behaviors by using a food lure and signaling them with our hands is not difficult for either dog or handler, and there is satisfaction in seeing our dogs perform correct behaviors, even when they are not on verbal cues. This method of training became highly reinforcing to many of us, but while lure-reward training served us well in the Beginner and Novice levels, it began to hinder our ability to do well in the more advanced levels.

Luring with food to produce a desired behavior often leaves remnants of the luring method that can be difficult to extinguish. In order to rid ourselves of those pesky remnants, we must understand and effectively execute the steps of transitioning from lure to hand signal to verbal cue. The longer our dogs are cued using hand signals, the more dependent they will become on seeking information from our hands. And the more dependent *we* become on using hand signals, the harder it will be for us to employ more subtle cues.

By the time we have trained up to the intermediate level, which can be 2-3 years depending on opportunities in your area, the pattern of using our hands as a source of information has been set, the dependency now deeply rooted in both dog and handler.

For the last several years, I have concentrated on becoming a more effective and more efficient trainer. In doing so, I have diminished my reliance on lure-reward training methods and instead encourage my dog to actively participate in the learning process. Now my dog has a much clearer understanding of what is being asked of her and enjoys participating in the training process. And I am no longer worried that hand signals will detract from the audience’s enjoyment of our performance or prevent me from earning a qualifying score. I firmly believe it is to everyone’s benefit, and especially our dogs’, to invest in the training methods that I will summarize below.

TRAINING OPTIONS

There are several training options that virtually eliminate the need to use, and therefore fade, hand signals. They allow us to move directly into placing behaviors on verbal cues. Each option requires

you and your dog to learn new skills, but the effort invested will be of immeasurable benefit, as it sets you up from the get-go to meet the more stringent cueing requirements for the Intermediate and Advanced levels.

TARGET STICKS

The use of a target stick is a much under-utilized training tool. When conditioned, the target stick replaces the hand as a visual lure. Once the behavior is trained using the target stick and placed on a verbal cue, the target stick is no longer used and therefore no longer available to the dog as information. The handler's verbal cue becomes the dog's source of information, combined with additional supportive choreography cues included in the routine for support. The handler, too, is less likely to revert to hand signals. My own dogs, now trained primarily through shaping methods or the use of a target stick or other props, sometimes can appear confused when I revert to the use of my hands, reminding me that hand signals are an unnecessary part of the training process.

Recently, a trainer told me that she doesn't like to use target sticks or other props because she doesn't want to have to fade these tools. I, along with many of my students, have found that a target stick (or other props such as platforms or gates) is far easier for both dog and handler to fade than are hand signals. After all, we can't remove our hands! They are always there and are generally associated with food, making them a strong draw. A dog will naturally look first to body language for information, and once our dogs learn that our hands are a source of information *and* reinforcement, it can be difficult for them to find value in other forms of communication.

I used to teach "spin" to my freestyle students and my own dogs by using lure-reward training. Dogs quickly learn to follow a lure and subsequently a hand signal, and when the correct process is followed, the spin behavior can be put on a verbal cue in one or two training sessions. The problem arises when pressure is placed on either you or your dog, such as when you're competing. In such instances, when we know we can get a behavior using a hand signal and we are under pressure to do so, we might revert to using hand signals, thereby poisoning the judge's pen for *that* comment!

I now teach "spin" using a target stick and a platform or barrier. These help to create all of the criteria I want to include in my verbal cue "spin". After my dog is able perform the behavior on a verbal cue paired with the target stick and platform, the target stick is put away and my verbal cue becomes more powerful, as that is all she has to go on. The platform is removed after the target stick. This process creates a much more reliable verbally cued spin. And while "spin" is a simple behavior, this same process holds true for training more complex behaviors.

SHAPING

Shaping with a clicker to train behaviors is also an under-utilized training method. While I don't recommend free-shaping all freestyle behaviors, many behaviors can be quickly trained and placed on a verbal cue without ever using a hand signal. Shaping is the process of rewarding a dog's offered incremental movements toward the final end behavior. Through shaping, the dog learns to offer and build upon behaviors that are "marked" by the sound of a clicker. The clicker sound signals that a reward is forthcoming and informs the dog exactly what behavior is being rewarded

and, if repeated or extended, the dog will earn the reward again. Once the dog predictably offers the intended behavior, it can then be placed on a verbal cue.

PLACING BEHAVIORS ON VERBAL CUES

Whether you are using lure-reward methods with the use of hand-signals as an intermediary step or shaping with a clicker or utilizing a target stick, no method will be wholly successful without applying an effective and efficient process for placing behaviors on a verbal cue. In presenting workshops across the country, I have found this to be the most misunderstood and misapplied process in training. I believe this is the primary reason many of us have difficulty creating effective verbal cues.

The process for placing behaviors on a verbal cue is very specific and when followed provides your dog clear understanding of the meaning of the verbal cue. When applied incorrectly or incompletely the compliance to a verbal cue can be inconsistent.

For example, if we add the verbal cue too early in the process, before the dog has a clear understanding of the behavior, we are inadvertently labeling the mistakes often presented in the early stages of training. How often have we seen a handler say to the dog "heel, heel, heel" as their dog is lagging, thinking they are encouraging the dog to heel correctly. In actuality, they may be associating the word "heel" with lagging. By adding the verbal cue before the dog fully understands how to perform the behavior, we can cause the dog to carry his mistakes into his understanding of the verbal cue.

So how do you make verbal cues meaningful to your dog? It's not that difficult; much like learning a new language, you just have to transfer the meaning of the familiar hand cue to the new verbal cue. Give the new verbal cue and follow it by the now familiar hand signal. Be sure to pause a half-second between the new verbal cue and the familiar hand signal; this way the dog registers the verbal cue--otherwise the verbal cue is "overshadowed" by the hand cue (that is, the dog doesn't register what is said, but continues to respond to the hand cue). Every dog's goal is to get to the reward as fast as possible. After several repetitions, your dog will begin anticipating that when you say the verbal cue, and follow it up with the hand-signal and he responds with a certain behavior, he receives a treat. Soon the hand signal becomes less relevant to your dog because he's getting all the necessary information from your verbal cue--and he gets his treat faster by responding immediately to the verbal cue, never mind the "time wasting" hand signal!

When placing a behavior on a verbal cue after using the shaping method, the process is even more streamlined. Once you can predict that your dog will offer the behavior, simply insert your verbal cue just *before* he performs it. After several repetitions of verbal cue followed by the offered behavior and then a click and reward, hold off on providing the verbal cue. If your dog performs the behavior without being prompted, do not click and reward. Then provide the verbal cue and when the dog again performs the behavior, click and reward. This will give the dog an understanding of verbal cues as "green lights." When he hears the "green light," rewards are available. When he does not hear the "green light", rewards are not available and offering of the behavior will extinguish, replaced by a behavior that is performed only when cued.

These methods are not new to the world of animal training, but have taken their time getting to the general dog training public. It is worth the freestyler's time and energy to seek out trainers and attend workshops where these methods are being used and taught. As Freestylers, we are a unique group, taking our dog's skills to new levels. Learning more effective and efficient training methods is a part of our history. So don't let the fact that you may not currently understand or have skill in these methods prevent you from furthering your success in freestyle and developing a stronger, more beneficial training relationship with your dog.