

## **Foundation Class**

### **Self Control: Turning On and Off**

Your dog needs to be able to become aroused and excited, but also know how to settle down and relax. The handler must find the key to turning their dog on and off. When you are engaging your dog, it's important that you provide 100% focus, which is something you are asking for in return. Don't teach your dog that focusing on you is a waste of time.

#### **Rev 'Em Up, Settle 'Em Down**

##### ***The "On" Switch***

Your dog will show emotional excitement and arousal. To switch your dog "on", use a high, happy, exciting voice. Tone is important. Use key phrases regularly such as, "Ready!, Ready! Let's play! Good dog!"

- ◆ Be sure not to use body language that is demanding and overbearing. You want to initiate a play response, not force interaction. To invite your dog to play, move into your dog's space slightly. Give quick playful body pushes on his shoulder or hips. If your dog gives any response, let him know you're pleased: "You are such a good dog!"
- ◆ Keep the sessions short in the beginning and stop before your dog wants to.
- ◆ Make play times special and exciting events. Turn him into a play junkie!
- ◆ Don't give up. He may be unsure or confused if this is new. Keep trying. Keep it fun and light.
- ◆ Use toys but don't let them be the cue for turning your dog on. You need to be the initiator. The toy is a secondary part of the interaction.

Use the On switch to turn your dog on before training. Only train a dog that is turned on and ready to play. This puts the dog in the right frame of mind—eager and enthusiastic!

##### ***The "Off" Switch***

While the "on" created an excitement and arousal, the "off" is for calming and relaxation. Give clear cues that intense interaction is over. Verbal cues and body language are used: "Ok" or "All done" are effective when you are finished with a play session. Give the cue in a boring, neutral tone. Being finished with play should be a slightly unpleasant event for your dog. There should be a clear distinction between being "on" and gearing down to "off". Off body language cues include an upright posture turned slightly away from your dog, and breaking off of eye contact. The dog is now free to be on his own and relaxed for a while. Practice switching from on to off.

##### ***Play the "Crazy Dog Game"***

The goal here is to place your dog in as many highly aroused states as possible using "on" cues, then using "off" cues to get him back to a relaxed state. Then start the game again. This will prepare him for quick emotional changes required in agility competition. Some dogs will find it easier to do one or the other.

In a class situation, control exercises lend themselves well to challenges for homework, easy ones such as "hold a sit in front of a piece of sausage for 30secs" are a good beginning. Discuss with handlers how to break the challenge down and how to build it up gradually. Begin small, in the beginning, almost as soon as the food is placed out the dog is clicked and the handler picks up the food and gives it to the dog. Gradually, very gradually the time asked is raised. Eventually you can work towards off lead heelwork in a figure of eight, with the figure eight marked by two plates with freshly cooked sausages on them, or brand new squeaky toys placed out. Have a treat balancing contest, or see which dog can do a 5 minute sit-stay with a piece of sausage resting gently on each paw.

The final piece of the puzzle really is specific to toys – does the dog remove his mouth from the toy on cue? How many times have you heard handlers tell you that they can't work with toys because their dog gets too excited? What the dog is lacking is a little self-control. Teaching a sit in front of the toy, a sit whilst the toy is thrown past (have the toy on a lead or string, whip it out of reach if the dog moves) will all help drive home the point, but many partnerships in this situation simply battle for control of the toy. The dog knows that if he gives it up, he won't see it again and the handler doesn't play, so much as shout and yell at the dog to let go.

To turn this situation around, you first of all need to ramp the excitement levels down a little, so a handler and dog with this problem might need to try playing in the bathroom, with a low value toy. Bathroom should be equated with boring for most dogs; home is far less stimulating and exciting than class. Playing in front of a mirror is also a really good idea as it can help handlers check out their body language. When they want their dog to play, it's important that they invite play with playful body language. Almost as soon as the dog does so, give the cue to let go, reward by immediately cueing play again. This does two things, it stops the game before it can become too exciting and it demonstrates to the dog that letting go doesn't necessarily mean that the fun is over. Remind handlers that when they've cued the dog to let go, play must stop. Their body must still and become more upright, they must release all and any pressure on the toy, if necessary hold the dog by the collar so that he can't put any pressure on the toy and simply wait him out. AS SOON AS he, in the beginning, relaxes his hold, cue play and play again.

Again, handlers must join in wholeheartedly with the play. Then stop, then play, then stop, then play. Once the dog is actually removing his mouth from the toy, cue the stop and ask for a sit, then cue the toy. At all times the toy must be within easy reach. If the dogs grab for the toy in-between times, simply hold them by their collar (GENTLY!) until they let go. Do not let handlers ramp the excitement levels and tease and torment by keeping a toy just out of reach. Once a dog can offer a sit for play, ask for a sit and a down, or a hand touch. Ask for heelwork around the toy, recalls across the toy, sit-stays with toys being thrown past. Again it's REALLY important that the dogs' rate of reward and success rates remain high for this type of work. Proofing or testing control should be fun and exciting for the dog because he should know that it will lead to a really good game.

Paradoxically it often seems that when control over toys is extended in this way, toys become more exciting and more valuable and therefore higher value rewards than they were when the dog just grabbed for them when-ever he saw them. It's also lovely to see handlers start to enjoy their dog play, rather than dreading it.

### ***Ready? Go!***

Many trainers use the word *Ready?* as part of the dog's on switch. Using *Ready?* in a low, excited tone of voice while playing with your dog will help condition his emotional response to that word. You can play running games with your dog by lightly restraining him with your hand on his chest, asking him if he's *Ready? Ready? Ready?* until he is revved up, then pushing him back a bit while telling him *Go!* and running forward a few steps with him. You can pair the *Ready? Go!* phrase with chasing a toy by teasing your dog with the toy, asking him *Are you READY?*, then throwing the toy and encouraging him to *Go!* chase after it. Pair your dog's favorite toy with the *Ready?* cue by showing him the toy, teasing him with *Ready? Ready? Ready?*, and then playing tug with the toy. You can also pair the *Ready? Go!* phrase with food by showing your dog a treat, teasing him a bit, asking him *Are you READY?*, then throwing the treat and encouraging him to *Go!* Another option is to toss a treat on the floor, restrain your dog by the chest, and ask him if he's *Ready?* When he's pulling to get to the treat, release him and command *Go!* All these games help make *Ready? Go!* an arousal cue.

Most dogs love playing the Two Treats game. Use treats that are easy to see on the floor and that roll easily. We prefer Planters Cheese Balls for big dogs and Kix cereal for small dogs. Show your dog the treat and tease him a bit asking *Ready? Ready?*, then roll the treat away from you to the side encouraging your dog to *Go!* As soon as your dog gets the treat and eats it, show him another one, use the *Ready?* cue and roll it in the opposite direction telling him to *Go!* Repeat this sequence sending the dog to chase a treat first in one direction, then the other. This game is a good warm-up exercise. It gets most dogs energized and excited.

### **Body Language and Movement**

Your body language and movement can be an arousal cue for your dog. Adopt a body posture that is playful and appealing to your dog; it will help to get your dog excited and ready to engage with you. Try suddenly freezing, crouching a bit, hunch your shoulders slightly, and quickly dart first toward and then away from your dog. If your dog is comfortable with more physical play you might reach out and lightly pinch your dog's shoulder or hip before you dart away. Chase games are another good way to increase your dog's level of excitement. Once your dog responds to your arousal cues, you can add in a work requirement: First give your arousal cues, and then ask for a well-known and practiced behavior. When your dog responds correctly, you can use a verbal marker (such as *Yes!*) then play with your dog or let him chase after some tossed treats. The entire sequence should take no more than 30 seconds.