



SELECTING TRAINING EQUIPMENT

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Basics on selecting equipment, how to determine how it will affect your dog & you as a handler.

By Suzanne Clothier

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Before you consider training equipment, consider this: The best equipment in the world is of little use if your training techniques are not appropriate for you or your dog, and if the relationship between you and your dog needs some work.

When selecting training equipment, you need to consider several factors:

Does the equipment allow for quiet signals easily perceived by the dog?

For the dog to perceive a signal from you, he must feel it, hear it, or see it. Most training equipment relies upon touch and therefore upon the dog's physical sensitivity. Touch sensitivity can vary from breed to breed, individual to individual dog, as well as being highly dependent upon the situation. A calm dog at home may yelp in anguish if you so much as step on a toe, but in an excited state feel none of the leash signals you send. Be sure to choose equipment that your dog actually perceives as information. This may require several equipment choices depending upon the activity and/or situation.

As a predator, the dog is "hard wired" to react quickly to movement. The canine eye actually contains more of the components that detect movement than does the human eye. Beware of any equipment which necessitates large hand or body movements in order to be effective. Your dog's brain will have to sort out that movement before it can work on figuring out what you were trying to communicate.

Does the equipment achieve the desired results?

If your dog continues to pull, ignore signals, choke himself or tune you out, you may need to switch equipment, as well as examine your handling practices and training method - you are not achieving your desired results.

While this may seem like common sense, it is astounding how many handlers continue to use equipment that frustrates them and/or the dog. By the same token, handlers often stick with a training methodology that is not effective for the dog, the handler or both.

Keep in mind the wonderful saying: "The response you get is the communication you gave." Forget intentions - look at reality, and if you are not achieving the desired results, do something else!

What effect does the equipment have on you?

While it is currently in vogue to train with thick leads, the mere act of holding such a lead can limit fine motor control, which is your ability to use your hands and arms in refined, subtle ways, much as a thick child's crayon inhibits fine penmanship. Such heavy leads became popular long ago because a very forceful correction can be given without hurting your hands, and without losing the full force of the correction to the dog. Now, thick leads allow dogs to pull very hard without the handler's hands being hurt. There are other ways to train so that corrections and pulling are not necessary.

The effect of heavy leads on the handler is very limiting. Softness and subtle in your lead signals is possible only when you can utilize fine motor control - instead of heavy, large movements, you can use fluttering or pulsing signals that originate with just a twitch of a finger or two. Such signals are welcomed, heard and understood by the dog.

Beyond limiting your fine motor control, holding a thick lead and/or holding your hand(s) in a clenched fist - a typical "training" position which readies you to give "corrections" - also affects your breathing. To test this for yourself, simply sit for a moment with your hands soft and open on your lap or at your sides. Pay attention to your breathing for a few breaths. Now, hold your hand(s) in your typical training position as if you had a lead in your hands - hold your imaginary lead with your usual grip. Now check your breathing. What breathing?!!!!

Check a little further. You may find tension in your jaw, neck and/or shoulders as well. How does this affect your emotional state? Do you feel calm, relaxed or focused? Or do you feel increasingly anxious or tense, two normal responses to interfering with your breathing? Imagine how this affects your training on many levels. Your dog believes that your breathing patterns are deliberate and meaningful, reflecting your tension, anxiety, fear or threat.

Still holding your imaginary lead, soften your hands so that your fingers are light and soft, as if you were attempting to

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contain a butterfly within your hand. How does this affect your breathing? Check the tension in your jaw - it should be disappearing as you relax your hands.

Your choice of equipment, as well as how you use that equipment, will have profound effects on your emotions, your patience and the results you get in your training session. Choose wisely, and with an awareness of the impact the equipment will have on both ends of the lead.

Can you be subtle?

One of the hallmarks of a novice in any activity is the rather awkward, overly large use of signals and movements. Compare the movements of someone just learning to ride a horse with the almost imperceptible movements and cues of the Olympic rider, or the lead handling of a novice handler with an experienced dog trainer. Unfortunately, these two images are not necessarily equal examples. In the first case, a beginning rider flails around, using large hand movements to "steer" their horse in very basic ways, while the Olympic level rider may achieve incredibly sophisticated responses with signals so subtle as to be virtually undetectable. The horse and rider seem to dance together in some pre-agreed fashion.

Mastery of any skill should include a progressive degree of subtlety. I feel this is especially true when our partners are dogs - the masters of subtle communications. Do yourself and your dog a favor - see how subtle you can get, and still achieve results. You may surprise yourself when a twitch of a finger is sufficient to give information through the leash and collar, or when a slight head turn is enough to give a signal across the room. Such subtlety requires precision and clarity in your signals, respect for and trust in the dog's willingness to respond, and mastery of yourself.

Is it worth it? You bet. For the casual onlooker, subtlety of signal adds an air of magic to all that you and your dog do together. For yourself, you may find, as I do, that there is a genuine joy in both giving and receiving the kind of willing and mutual attentiveness that is the hallmark of a great team.