**The Problem with All-Positive Dog Training**

I will talk about the controversial topic of “the need for corrections in dog training.” I will tell you a little about my experience in dog training and why I feel the need to talk about this subject.

There are three types of all-positive trainers:

1. Those who emulate Pet-Smart, which runs 100% all-positive training courses and won’t mention corrections in training. These kinds of people know better but chose to cash in on the image of all-positive training.

1. There are all-positive trainers who love animals and push the all-positive concept but simply lack experience to know better.

1. There are all-positive trainers who compete and win in various dog sports. These competitors do an excellent job of desensitizing their competition dog's to ignore the distractions their dog will face in their respective dog sport.

I have issues with the people in the first two categories and I will explain why in a minute.

I respect and admire most of those trainers in the third category because they know that 99.999% of every pet dog out there will require a "distraction / correction phase" at the end of a training program.

I know all positive sport trainers making headway with their appropriate puppy that they’ve raised in a strict system and they're managing every aspect of their dog’s life. This doesn't mean the dogs listen for crap outside the 'sport work' though. And these same trainers don’t do pet training because they can’t be as successful. They just avoid it.

The only people from this third category I don’t respect are those trainers who tell others they can train any pet dog using their all-positive methods and never have to correct the dog.

The bottom line is adopting a dog at 4 years old with a history of chasing critters, ignoring commands, pulling on leashes, barking at external stimuli, is going to be hard to impossible to reprogram with food rewards alone.

For the past 20 years I have used the following auto text when I respond to new trainers who have been influenced by "old wives tales – like all-100% positive training." It goes like this:

You are always going get other people’s opinions on how to train your dog. You only need to ask your neighbor, your friends or even your vet (Vets are not dog trainers they are health care providers).

99.99% of these people are well intended but lack the experience that is needed to offer sound training advice. The fact is they are more likely to offer "OLD WIVES TALES" on dog training rather than sound training advice.

In many circles today, correcting a dog during training has become politically incorrect. Frankly those are circles I don’t care to be part of.

Companies like Pet Smart are known to fire instructors from their "ALL POSITIVE trainer classes" if that person talks about corrections during a course. That's a info from one of their trainers not me. That trainer told me that "Pet Smart is only interested in selling training courses and not in providing accurate training information."

The problem with all-positive training is that there will come a time with every dog (and usually when the dog is off leash) when the distractions that dog faces are more interesting to the dog than the high value reward the handler is offering for compliance to a known command. At that point in time that dog needs to learn that there are consequences for not following direction from the handler.

Controversial subjects like this attract flies so before I get into the meat of why corrections are needed I talk a little about my experience in dog

I am 66 years old. I have owned and trained dogs my entire life. Back in the 1960’s I got the bug to really learn how to train. I read every book I could find and trained on a daily basis. I trained our family dogs and our neighbor’s dog’s.

I wanted to become a Vet so during college I studied pre-veterinary medicine (which is how I ended up with a minor in chemistry). I worked in a vet clinic in La Crosse WI. That clinic was also the dog shelter for the city of La Crosse. On Saturdays the Vet killed shelter dog’s. I couldn’t handle that and it didn’t take me long to realized I would rather train dogs than provide health care for dogs.

I went to my first serious dog training seminar in 1974 and from that point I never looked back. I can’t count the number of seminars, the number of trips I made filming dog training videos or filming dog competitions over the last 40 years.

I produced my first dog training video in 1982. My web site went on the internet in 1994. We currently have the largest dog training web site on the internet with over 800 streaming videos and 18,000 pages of training content. To my knowledge there isn’t another web site that is even 20% the size of leerburg.com

My only point in mentioning these things is to establish the fact that I have been deeply involved in dog training my entire life. Unlike a lot of all-positive dog trainers, this is not my first rodeo.

Becoming a professional dog trainer is a never ending evolution. Over the past 50 years I have evolved into a “balanced reward based dog trainer.”

A well balanced trainer uses high value rewards in the learning phase of training to teach behaviors. In my case I always start with marker training and high value food rewards. I have written extensively on training with markers and will not go into that here. You can read about it in my article THE POWER OF TRAINING DOGS WITH MARKERS.

The "Balance" part of a reward based system simply means that we will introduce a dog to corrections once it generalizes a command.

The purpose of a correction in dog training is not to punish a dog for inappropriate or bad behavior but rather the purpose of a correction is to change a dog’s behavior.

That is a subtle but very important distinction.

Many inexperience and/or new trainers fail to understand that different temperamented dogs require different kinds and levels of corrections.

Using remote collars and prong collars on dogs that may only need a verbal warning to get a behavior change is abusive. On the other hand that same dog may require a remote collar or prong collar correction to get a behavior change when faced with a strong distraction.

Understanding varying temperaments in dogs: how to motivate and build drive in dogs: how to manage levels of distractions: along with knowing what types and levels of correction specific dogs require is what is needed to become a “balanced reward based dog trainer.”

Dog’s, like people, are individuals. A correction that results in a behavior change for one dog will have no effect on another dog. Simply withholding a food reward or toy reward for many dog’s may produce a behavior changes, while an off leash high drive dog facing strong distractions may require stiff remote collar corrections to get behavior changes.

Not only do dogs of different temperaments require different kinds of corrections, what kind of distraction a dog faces often dictates what kind and level of correction a dog needs to get a behavior change.

For me the real ART OF DOG TRAINING means being able to control my dog is a highly distracting environment. To accomplish that the trainer needs to be able to produce a dog that understands and respects the consequences of not following a known command. The trainer who can do that and yet still have a really nice bond with his dog is a great trainer.

With all this said, there are two ends of the correction spectrum. At one end are trainers who consistently give ineffective corrections that don’t change behavior. They nag their dog with non-behavior changing corrections that have little to no effect on the dog. Ineffective corrections desensitize a dog to corrections. They simply teach a dog that they don’t need to pay attention to the handler.

At the other end of the correction spectrum are those trainers who feel the need to punish a dog with a correction. These handlers can train a dog but they never develop what I consider is a deep bond with their dog.

Trainers who give a prong collar correction to a dog that would have offered a behavior change with a verbal warning are abusing their dog. Trainers who nag their dog with repeated ineffective corrections desensitize their dog to corrections.

**All-Positive Dog Trainers Just Don't Get It**

Now back to these all-positive trainers. They have blinders on and they just don’t get it. They don’t understand that dog sport competitors who train with all positive methods need a very specific type of dog – they need dog’s that are compliant and have a very strong food or toy drive.

These same trainers could be given 10,000 pet dogs and they would be lucky to be able to train and compete at a high level with one of those dogs using all-positive methods in their respective dog sports much less be able to train that dog to be consistently compliant in off leash obedience.

Not one all-positive trainer could ever have trained and certified one of the police service dogs that I handled in the 10 years I was a K9 officer.

In fact, it’s safe to say that these all-positive trainers could never train and certify one single patrol dog anywhere. They simply couldn’t do it, but they will sure lead anyone who will listen to believe they could. The people who claim these things are the trainers who lack the experience to know what they are talking about.

All-positive trainers will always point to sea world and the dolphins and killer whales as proof of their system. They pontificate about how impossible it would be to give a killer whale a correction.

Well anyone with half a brain can see that these dolphins and killer whales are forced to live in very small pools that have zero distractions. Taking human interaction and withholding food rewards from an animal that lives in social isolation is in and of itself a pretty strong correction.

I stand with those folks who think what Sea World does to their animals is cruel and unusual punishment. How they force these animals to live is disgusting. Their claim to be using pure operant conditioning is a scam on the American public.

So let’s make this very clear, I have a lot of respect for reward-based competitors who go out there and win in their respective dog sports. My friends don’t try and tell pet owners that they should train their pet dogs or working dog’s without ever having to correct that dog for bad behavior.

These trainers know when they control the environment, the reinforcement history, present and future, and then play in a sport where things can be very predictable – with the right dog they don’t need corrections. But the rest of the world isn’t sterile and 'Oh-shit free.'

Something else to consider is a lot of this debate gets down to defining terms. What a human thinks is a correction, or pressure, may not be perceived so by a dog. My dogs simply thrill over the prospect of having their pinch collars go on because it means we’re going for a stroll. And the pinch collar ensures my 85 pound dog doesn’t pull me down the street. He walks like a dream because the pressure was taught correctly during “leash-pressure training” (which we are about to release a new training DVD and on-line course in).

And finally if you are one of those people from the second group –those people how love dog’s but don’t have the experience to realize all-positive training systems don't work – I would ask you to rethink your position.

Be honest with yourself. Know what distraction levels really affect your dog. You can manage your dog by keeping it on leash and away from these distractions, but ask yourself what you would do if your dog accidently got off leash in the face of these distractions – especially if this happened in an environment that could be dangerous for your dog.

Personally I want my dogs to learn to mind me all the time – not some of the time. Education is what is needed – not propaganda about all-positive training.