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Competition Heeling: The Chronic forger

By Jim & Phyllis Dobbs and Alice Woodyard

Competition heeling

Is the remote trainer useful for polishing competition heeling? It can be.

The strength of the remote trainer as a tool for heeling corrections lies in its "impersonal" quality.

First, corrections can be given with it with no alteration of the handler's body language. Your hand position, upper body position, etc., can stay exactly the same as they'll be during off-leash heeling. In fact, in certain situations, the correction can be given by your assistant standing off to the side. This approach can be astonishingly effective in the right situation.

The mechanics of making a leash correction, by comparison, are crude. First, to have the leash ready to give a correction, you must carry your leash-holding hand differently than you do in the ring, thus giving the dog a chance to differentiate the two situations.

Also, in the ultra-precise environment of competition heeling, leash corrections are usually "late," because of the need to take up even minor amounts of slack in the leash.

Finally, the mechanical aspect of leash corrections means that the dog sees them as "coming from the handler." So the dominant dog resents them as a personal challenge, and resists. While the sensitive dog is cowed by them, and loses attitude.

However, keep in mind that corrections from a remote trainer often don't enable a dog to make the extremely fine distinctions that are required for precise heeling. Remember that precise heeling is often more a matter of constant refining than "correcting."

Also, minor problems in precise heeling are often not a dog problem at all. They're a handling problem. A change in the handler's body language, footwork, etc., is the required correction, not "correcting" the dog.

So the remote trainer can be an excellent problem solver when you can single out a

clearly defined heeling problem. But if you try to use it as your only means of correcting every possible error, the dog might just see the heel position as an unpleasant place to be, and won't be able to differentiate between right and wrong.

Problem Solving - The Chronic Forger

When **can** you use the remote trainer to improve precise heeling? One example is the chronic forger--the dog who forges, or tries to forge, through most of his heel pattern. (Or he forges whenever you place your left hand at your waist, a cue to him that he won't be corrected.)

Remember, many enthusiastic dogs forge when they first learn to heel. Gradually, further training refines their understanding of the heel position. We don't use the remote trainer to correct forging in the enthusiastic **beginner**. But when the dog is advanced in his training, the remote trainer can be a good solution, especially if other approaches to the forging problem haven't worked. This use of the remote trainer is, of course, for the dog that already has good collar understanding from other exercises.

Introducing the correction

You can use a remote trainer to give an "environmental" correction when the dog is in forged position, followed by a positive comparison. We discussed the theory behind this technique two columns ago.

When the dog advances into the forged position, say nothing, but just "tap" him with very low-level stimulation. (If he momentarily loses attention, just give him a verbal reminder to watch you.)

The "immediate positive comparison" technique

The next step is very important.

The correction shows him what's wrong, but he won't necessarily know from that experience what "right" is. You must show him immediately, before making another correction.

In other words, you just used the collar to show him where he **doesn't** want to be. Now, right away before he can make another mistake, **show** him where to heel correctly, thus giving him a positive comparison.

Give him this comparison by holding him in the correct heel position for a minute on a snug lead, so that he **can't** forge. Praise him quietly while he's in the correct position.

Now loosen the lead and let the dog forge on out again. Let him "run into" the environmental correction that happens when he gets into the forged position. Follow up immediately with the positive comparison again, holding him in the heel position for a few moments.

After a few repetitions of this cycle, you'll see him start to forge, then change his mind and drop back. Praise him calmly for his correct decision. (Until you are clearly seeing this response, be sure you **always** follow up the correction with the positive comparison, holding him in heel position for a few moments.)

Using the correction

Now that the dog understands the correction and how to avoid it, you can put it to use during normal heeling practice.

To use this correction effectively, be sure your transmitter is in your hand at all times, and your finger right over the button. Your time window for making an effective correction is very small. (If you are using a field-style transmitter with the flex antenna, keep the antenna out of the dog's picture during heeling by holding it backwards.)

This subtle correction for chronic forging can be incorporated very naturally into your heeling practice. And you won't disrupt your own concentration or your dog's.

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