



Gundog training



with Ian Clinton

In the first of a new series on developing a puppy into a competent gundog, professional gundog trainer **Ian Clinton** looks at introductory heelwork

This week: basic heelwork

Anyone who is serious about owning a dog needs first to consider carefully their relationship with the dog and how obedient and well behaved they wish it to be. If you have any intention of taking the dog into the shooting field then obedience and behaviour become even more important, especially on the shoot

day, which has a whole host of enticing distractions for the dog.

In this new series of articles I will go back to the basics to ensure that you can train your dogs to be fully obedient and well-behaved in all situations. After all, a house built on weak foundations will soon crumble; the same principle applies to gundogs. Poor attention to the foundation rules of obedience can often lead to problems when you move on to more advanced gundog work.

This week we demonstrate how to teach a young dog to get used to being put on a lead and how to develop the start of heelwork training. Some young dogs may show an initial dislike to being restricted by a lead, or the feel of it around its neck, which means this introduction must be undertaken both gently and calmly. ■

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Getting the dog used to wearing a lead

Keep the dog close by your side and, without any fuss or ceremony, gently slip the lead over its head while at the same time giving verbal

praise and a gentle stroke of the head and ears. The whole process must be seen by the dog as something positive and pleasurable — it will enjoy the fuss and may even roll over to have a good tummy rub.

This is a good sign, as we clearly aim to develop the feeling that being with you and by your side is the best thing a puppy can experience at this stage of its training. Keep repeating this positive exercise so that the puppy learns to have no fear of the lead.

Allow the dog to move around on its own so that it gets used to the feeling of the lead dragging on the floor. Make it a rewarding experience — increase the excitement and distract attention from the lead by holding out a puppy dummy and calling the dog to you.

Again, keep repeating this exercise so the puppy learns to accept this new experience with a positive attitude.



Give the dog praise and stroke its ears while slipping the lead over its head



The dog will come to see this as a pleasurable process with lots of fuss



Distract attention from the lead by holding out a dummy and calling the dog to you — making it a rewarding experience

Walking the dog on the lead to heel

It is now time to start walking the puppy on the lead. The aim is to train the dog to walk to heel — not only on the lead, but off it as well. Poor heelwork is the most common issue with handlers that come to me for gundog training. Unfortunately there are no short cuts to this obedient behaviour; it takes repetition and a consistent approach to achieve a dog that is a good heeler 100 per cent of the time.

One mistake that many people make is they inadvertently teach their dog that the word “heel” means a sharp tug on the lead and a drag back to the handler’s side. It should come as no surprise if the dog then stiffens up and offers resistance to the lead when it hears the word. The puppy needs to learn what the word “heel” really means, otherwise it will not understand what you want and will therefore never willingly be in the correct position.

I always teach my dogs by having them sit by my side with their head as close to my left knee as possible while gently stroking their ears and repeating the word “heel” in a kind and soft voice. This teaches the dog in no ambiguous terms not only what the command means but also the correct position for heel. There is no set rule for which side the dog should heel on — my preferred choice is the left because I am right-handed and I like it this way round. If your preference is the opposite side then simply reverse these instructions.

From this position it is easy to start walking by repeating the command “heel” and striding forward, encouraging the puppy to come with you. You may find your puppy resists and lags behind or jumps around. Below you can see how I prefer to hold the lead: the handle loop



Give a gentle tug of correction if the dog pulls forward or drops its head



Sit the dog by your side with its head close to your knee and repeat the word “heel” in a soft voice

in my right hand and my left hand gripping the lead about 30cm above the collar. This allows me to give a gentle tug correction if the dog pulls forward or drops his head down.

If this does occur, take your time and keep calm. Sit the dog in the heel position, stroke it and repeat “heel”. Then, with a tap of the leg, walk on, encouraging the puppy to come with you. If the dog begins to pull forward, give a gentle left hand tug, let go with this hand and take a step backwards. At the same time, call the dog and turn around to your right, easing the dog gently and encouraging it to follow you. Take up the lead with the left hand again and walk on with the command “heel”.

Keep practising this method. Remember, it takes time and repetition to sink in, so keep repeating it and be consistent. This teaches the dog to pay attention to your position, and when you stop it will begin automatically to drop into the correct heel position. Always praise the right behaviour and gently correct the wrong. My watchwords for these exercises are “make haste slowly.”

With practice the dog will understand where he needs to be and walk properly in the correct position at all times.

Once you can walk a short distance in a straight line with consistency it will be time to introduce changing direction to the left, right or about-turn.



With practice the dog will learn to walk in the correct position at all times

NEXT TIME

Ian will concentrate on teaching the dog to change direction, as well as introducing sit and stay exercises — the foundations towards establishing steadiness, which is key to teaching obedience to a potential shooting dog.