

Real Life Recalls

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One of the more critical exercises your dog should learn is to come when called. This is usually an easy concept to get across to the dog. Provide an incentive and motivation and the dog will race back to you - right? Well, not quite.

Problems arise when there are conflicting motivations: the reason the dog comes to you has to do with rewards and social motivation. Sometimes when you call the dog, he is busy chasing another dog, or a bird, or an interesting scent when you call, and thus in predatory mode, and that usually wins over the social motivation.

Some dogs, like many Oriental breeds tend to be more aloof and not as socially motivated as the average dog. Others, like the bullmastiff, are independent free-thinkers and tend to question your every decision, or debate whether to abandon their current activity or not. This tends to make bullmastiffs come when called at their own time and pace. This independent personality is going to need stronger motivation and consistency than a dog from the sporting or herding breeds.

Problems will also ensue when the owner teaches a nice recall to the puppy or young dog, and then uses it to call the dog for everything, including actions that may serve as negative reinforcement in the dogs mind. Obviously the dog will stop coming if the owner calls the dog to punish him. But actions like calling the dog to put him away before leaving the house, or to put the leash back on in the park before walking away from the dogs playmates, or to shove pills down his throat, etc. will also be perceived as negative by the dog and decrease his motivation to come when called.

The key in teaching a bullmastiff is to set the dog up for success every time he is called and provide attractive enough rewards. One yummy at the end is not enough. It takes motivation at each step of the teaching process. In addition, I like recalls at superfast speed, so the dog needs to be set up in the beginning to move fast.

Here is my way of teaching a fast Real Life Recall that works 90% of the time. This can later be modified for the obedience ring recall. For the remaining 10% I also teach an Emergency Recall. Teaching a Real Life Recall is easy, but it does take hundreds of repetitions in practice to make it reliable.

Equipment: a buckle collar, leash, 20 foot long line, boxes of Tic-Tacs, and super-out-of-this-world-yummies (e.g. Chicken MacNuggets, KFC, liver, stinky cheese, meatballs, hot dogs) and two people.

Procedure: The first step is to condition the dog that the sounds of Tic-Tacs shaking means a super-yummy. Shake the box of Tic-Tacs, give the dog a treat. Repeat 4 times. Take a 30 second break. Repeat another 4 times. Test by shaking the box of Tic-Tacs. If the dog turns his head towards you, you are ready for the next step, otherwise repeat until the dog clearly associate the sound of the Tic-Tacs shaking with super-out-of this-world yummys.

Then have one person (P1) hold the dog by the buckle collar. The dog should be standing, preferably pulling in a forward direction. The other person (P2) teases the dog in front of the nose with the super-yummy, and runs as fast as possible away around 50 feet or so, kneels down, open arms like a chute and shake the Tic-Tacs. As soon as the shaking sound starts, P1 lets go of the dog. Now P2 can take hold of the collar, and P1 teases the dog waving super-yummies by the dogs nose, runs away fast, kneels down, shakes the Tic-Tacs, and P2 lets the dog loose.

Repeat this over a week with increasing distance, then run out of sight of the dog before shaking the Tic-Tacs, then have the dog come from inside to outside, and vice versa, steadily increasing distance and difficulty.

This method works great. It is based on what we know about how dogs are put together and what makes them tick.

By holding the dog back on a buckle collar we are using an opposition reflex (thigmotaxis) that is present to a varying degree in dogs. This reflex makes the dog react to pressure by applying counter pressure. This means that when you pull back on a dog, the dog will react by opposing your pressure and pull forward. The opposition reflex tends to be quite strong in bullmastiffs. When we apply a steady pressure against the dogs body via the buckle collar, the dog will response by countering this pressure and pull forward strongly. The stronger the dog

pulls forward, the faster he will then explode into forward motion when the buckle collar is released. The result is high speed from the start.

In the beginning of teaching the recall, I insist on not using a verbal command, particularly not Come!. The majority of owners have already taught their dogs not to come to this command. Dogs are told to Come! lots of times by all family members and friends and relatives and most of the time the dog in fact does not return to the caller. Unfortunately, dogs learn exactly what we teach them. Most dogs have been carefully taught that Come! is pretty meaningless by the time they are 4 months old. Even if the owner could learn to be consistent and only call Come! when he knows the dog will in fact return to him, there is no way to control friends, family, and relatives. So the goal becomes to teach the dog a new verbal command that is 100% meaningful to the dog at all times. This command can be whatever you like, in any language you like. Personally I use Here! in a somewhat highpitched and penetrating voice. The verbal command is however not taught until much later in the process.

Teaching the recall with a non-verbal sounds makes the signal more consistent and does not expose the dog to any variation in peoples voice qualities and ways of calling. The most efficient signal to make animals approach is a sound that is sharp and repetitive, clapping hands or shaking a box of Tic-Tacs, or a bottle of aspirin. There is some research showing that in many cultures of the world people call their animals with a high-pitched repetitive sound like in English pup-pup-pup-pup..., or kitty-kitty-kitty.... People also tend to make their animals stop motion with a lowpitched longdrawn sound like in English whoa! Whether people call their donkeys, llamas, goats, dogs, or whatever, the type of signal used is the same, and animals seem to respond to this universally. It is possible that there is some hard-wiring in animal brains to respond to these types of sounds. The sound of shaking a box of Tic-Tacs works in synchrony with this universal principle, and thus uses possible hard-wiring in the dogs brain.

Later on in the training process we can use clapping hands, and associate this repetitive sharp sound with a verbal command like Here!!! as the dog comes running at you. Ultimately the dog will have a good recall at either handclapping, or a verbal command, so this will work even when the owner has laryngitis, or is in great emotional turmoil with concomitant changes in voice quality.

By teasing the dog with a super-yummy treat the dog knows with certainty that the owner has something that is definitely valuable, and worth trying to get.

By running away as fast as possible, the owner will release and use the dogs natural chase instinct. Most dogs, even bullmastiffs, instinctively will chase a moving object. The faster the object moves, the faster the dog will run in chase. Between the opposition reflex and the chase instinct the recall speed will be maximized.

By kneeling and opening the arms in a chute-like gesture the owner will provide the dog with a fun and friendly picture which he is more likely to run towards than an owner standing up straight. The shaking Tic-Tacs and all the super-yummies at the end of the run will further reinforce the dog in his conviction to get to the owner as fast as his legs can move.

This recall game is the foundation for a fast, reliable recall in real life. In order to get it firmly established in the dogs brain it needs repeating, several dozen times every week, gradually increasing the difficulties. It does not hurt to spend a month or two playing this game before progressing to later stages of the recall process. This foundation is the most important aspect in teaching a dog to come when called.

At the same time, make sure you do not use a recall unless the dog is in a situation with the two people, one holding the dog, the other one running with treats and Tic-Tacs. Also, when teaching a bullmastiff, the general rule of not repeating anything more than 2-3 times also holds here. Do one or two shaker-games - and then quit. This leaves the dog at the peak of his fun, and he will start at a peak of arousal next time he hears the Tic-Tacs.

Once the foundation is established and the dog responds 100% of the time, it is time to repeat the whole process, but add a Here! or some other verbal command after a couple of shakes with the Tic-Tacs. The dog will hear [Shake-shake] Here! and associate Here! with the fast recall he knows by now.

The next step involves taking this game to many different locations and play the recall shaker-game with different distractions. When the dog is very good at this, it is finally time to try a [shake-shake] Here! without somebody holding the dog back by the collar. Use the [shake-shake] Here! with sometimes somebody holding the dog, sometimes not. This needs a couple of weeks of repetition.

The final step is going to involve going to a park or a place with lots of distractions, having the dog on a 30-40 foot long line. Let him loose, let him get into his own thing, and call him by using handclapping and Here!. If he does not come really fast, give a sharp jerk using the end of the line, then drop the line and run away. The jerk has to be hard and fast, to get the

dogs attention, and so that he does not see it comes from you. When he gets to you, he gets extra hugs and kisses and a handful of yummys. This stage needs repetition over several months.

Be sure to give your dog high quality treats EVERY time he comes to you for the rest of the dogs life. This is one exercise where it is best never to let up on the training

This way of teaching the dog to come when called, and come at maximum speed, does work. It uses the hard-wiring and behaviors that dogs are equipped with before we start teaching. Then we teach in small steps, and repeat more than enough at each step of the teaching process. It takes time, between 4-6 months, but oh what joy, when your dog comes bounding to you to check in on one command at all occasions!

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