

Q. I'm simply so frustrated. I just can't seem to figure this training thing out. What I mean is training philosophy. I've read parts of NAVHDA's "Green Book" (The Care and Training of the Versatile Hunting Dog, <http://navhdastore.org/>) and of course Joan Bailey's books (How to Help Gun Dogs Train Themselves, Taking Advantage of Early Conditioned Learning, <http://amzn.to/2xAXEQD>; How to Have The Best Trained Gun Dog, Taking Advantage of Proven, Unique Training Methods, All Natural - No Expensive Electronics Needed, <http://amzn.to/2yzt7AW>).

So far my exposure to NAVHDA and these books always teach avoidance and praise, but no treats. I see tons of dog training methods online that are using 100% positive reinforcement, constantly using a reward. I know you use treats, operant conditioning, and negative reinforcement. You know you are my "go to" resource. One thing I believe is there is a difference between getting a dog to perform a task for a reward and to perform the task as a job. This is portrayed clearly in the books I mentioned. So I decided to use treats to teach the concept, then, through constant repetition, without treats, and the use of mild negative reinforcement for correction, train the task, and then a grand finale reward at the end.

Monday I had a chat with our NAVHDA Chapter president who owns 2 GSPs. He is a nice guy, but...(I'll leave it at that). He pushes GREEN BOOK, GREEN BOOK, GREEN BOOK!!!! He doesn't like that I'm using Joan's books as well...(too bad). He asked how is going with my dog. I discussed the next step in Forced Retrieve where the dog must take the object from you and asked how he gets a dog to do that. To find out he uses treats extensively was a shock. When I questioned that, he said "you are always flirting with the Devil." (He also mentioned he saw someone treat his dog at a Test and felt the NAVHDA judge that criticized was wrong.)

I made some YouTube searches and found a guy that teaches "Fetch" 100% with treats and clicker exclusively, breaking down the task into very small steps. I already knew the concept. He isn't training a gun (working) dog in the video, but he said it works for working dogs and is very reliable.

With what I've seen in my dog so far, I can easily get him to do anything for a food reward. But is that OK? When does it become a job with no reward except pleasing me? Some think you shouldn't even praise the dog, but remain silent. Joan stresses mild praise at the right time and big praise for major breakthroughs. Where is the balance? What produces a truly obedient dog that knows his job and does it? I'm thinking the NAVHDA Chapter president has a dog that performs a task well and with excitement, but only because the dog gets the food reward most of the time.

Ultimately, he seems to get a great Test performance from his dogs. He has high expectations for obedience and his dogs respect him. They get corrected when out of line, but they also get rewarded for tasks performed. It's kind of like two extremes. Obey out of fear and perform with excitement for reward. Yes, I'm confused and having trouble enjoying training because I can't seem to nail down what to do and keep finding holes in my thought process, just when I'm starting to get confident.

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A. You must find the thing that trips your dog's trigger in order to get him to perform tasks because he wants the reward. You can't put pressure (negative reinforcement) on puppies, so using positive reinforcement methods is the only way we can teach puppies. My dog, KD, would walk thru fire for a piece of hot dog. So I used food rewards like crazy with her. I have other dogs who could care less about any type of food when birds are being used for training. So I had to find what they really, really liked. Anna wants to kiss my face, Tess and Bella like a run to the pond and back.

There are all kinds of training methods, as you've discovered. They all work. You can train using only a positive reinforcement (rewards) method or only using a negative reinforcement (punishment) method. Both will eventually work, but in my experience it takes longer than using a combination of both methods. Of course, I am talking about training an adult dog, not a puppy.

You need to choose a method and stick with it, period. Read what's required from beginning to end. Determine if it's something you are willing and able to follow all the way through - and if you think your dog will respond well to it. If you can't say "yes" to both of these criteria, it's not the method for you and your dog, so keep looking.

The negative reinforcement is what teaches the dog it's a job - something he MUST do, a requirement. He'll get a reward if he does it, but if he doesn't, you're going to make him. The idea of being stoic during training is bunk. It's no fun for the dog nor for you. It's completely unnecessary to turn training into a hated chore. Your dog should LOVE training and you should feel good about the progress you make, keeping in mind a dog must make mistakes so you can correct him. If your dog isn't making mistakes during training you're not making it difficult enough - the distractions aren't great enough. Sometimes you'll have a training session that is a complete train wreck. On those days, just have your dog do something he knows well so you can reward him and end on a high note with a smile. Tomorrow's another day. Some days don't train at all, just do something fun, like go check out a new field, pond or stream together. Dogs need breaks from training, just like people do.

Above all, remember that owning this dog is supposed to be fun. He's part of your family. He's not a machine. You are not a machine. You'll make mistakes and that's OK. No one ever trained a dog for a Utility Test without making tons of them. It's a learning experience through and through. It takes trainers years to nail down methods that will get them Prize I's reliably with multiple dogs.

Personally, I'm not a fan of some of the Green Book's methods (particularly when training Munsters). But there's also good stuff in there. For some people it's their bible. It doesn't have to be yours. You must choose a method you believe in. It must be something you understand and can follow. If that's clicker training with tons of treats, fine. I don't think a purely negative reinforcement method will work with your dog because of his temperament. He's a sensitive dog, like most Munsters. They don't respond well to a heavy hand. They need to have a relationship of trust and understanding with their owners.

Moving away from treats & praise to only praise is a transition. The dog learns to

enjoy the task and will do it only for the praise. You don't take treats hunting. The hunting itself is something of a reward. It's the most enjoyable thing you'll ever do with your dog - at least from his point of view.

You're making this harder than it needs to be because of your analytical nature. You're looking for the "perfect" method. There's no such thing. There's only methods you feel in your gut will work for you and your dog. They may not work at all for someone else. If you don't believe wholeheartedly in a training method it's probably not going to work well for you. You're going to constantly question if you're doing the right thing. Over the hunting season do some more research if you need to in order to be prepared for the upcoming training season.

Otherwise, please relax and enjoy your dog. He'll be old and gray and gone before you know it.