

THE LEARNING CURVE

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The motivation for this article arose from my work with an experienced handler who was seeking help to train his dog for hard surface tracking, (HST). Since the dog had been previously trained on soft surfaces it required many tracks to get him to develop this skill but we eventually succeeded to a point of successfully running one hour old tracks on hard surfaces. Due to his success a problem arose when I failed to recognize that there came a time when the dog's work began to deteriorate. What appeared to me to be some difficulty with the dog's ability was actually a problem with his attitude which I failed to recognize and correct. He was not actually having difficulty tracking but rather he was losing his focus on the odor trail and "pulling my leg". He would miss turns, his head would come up and he would attempt to air scent or he would simply pull when he was not actually on the track. The dog had "gotten ahead of me". Once I finally figured out what was going on we took steps to correct the problem and the dog's work immediately improved. If a trainer does not recognize where a dog is in his training, which is to say not only in his ability but also in his attitude, progress will stop and quite often reverse. The dog's "learning curve" was such that he recognized that I had failed to recognize his loss of interest in task and took advantage of that knowledge.

What I am calling a learning curve can work in two directions. First in a dog's progress in learning a skill, and second, in the dog's attitude towards performing that skill. If a dog's "heart is in the right place" that is to say that if he enjoys the required task we rarely if ever have a problem however if for any one of several reasons his attitude evolves to the point where he no longer wishes to perform that task he will "learn" how to avoid it. Whenever a dog fails to perform a learned task and the handler fails to recognize and correct the dog he will actually be teaching the dog that he does not have to do that task. This knowledge is cumulative, thus a "learning curve" on the part of the dog that is headed in the wrong direction.

So, on to the learning curve. You cannot begin teaching high level skills until basic knowledge and skill is established any more than you can teach a fourth grade student ninth grade math. Instead the fourth grade student must master fourth grade math and all the grades in between before we teach ninth grade. And we measure progress by the rate of learning of the individual and not just by the grade level which is why we have accelerated classes for the child that learns quickly and remedial classes for those who learn more slowly at each and every grade level, hence "the learning curve". Sometimes we may push a dog ahead before he has fully mastered a prior skill or fail to proceed when the dog is ready to go forward. Failing to do either fails to

recognize the learning curve of the individual dog and all dogs, like children, learn at their own individual rate based not only upon intelligence but just as much upon personality. Some, be they dogs or children, wish to learn, some do not, some learn rapidly, some slowly, and this trait must play an important role in our teaching schedule. Training “by the numbers” will never get the best from every dog you train. That is to say that the more capable dog may learn faster and should proceed at a faster rate so as not to bore him. Likewise, a good dog that may simply take a little longer to grasp a difficult skill or concept may have to proceed at a slower rate. The important factor is to know to the best of one’s ability where a dog is in his mastery of a given task, be it tracking or obedience, narcotics or explosive detection, agility or apprehension as well as the combination of any of the above that must be used in conjunction with one another.

Knowing where a dog may be in his mastery of any given task can be a major difficulty in the progress and success of any training schedule. One major factor to keep in mind is dogs are smart. I have personally trained many dogs that can learn simple tasks in less than a minute. That does not mean that they have “mastered the skill” but they have learned the task. The problem arises when the dog “gets ahead of the handler”. That is to say the dog knows and understands what he has been taught but the handler continues to operate at a level below the dog’s knowledge. This results, at the lowest level, the continuing command of “sit” when the dog knows he should sit but fails to do so unless told to do so. This further results in the dog learning that he does not have to do what he has been trained to do and whatever consequences that knowledge will have at future tasks. At higher levels such as tracking it is far more difficult to know whether the dog is actually working or simply avoiding the task. I am sure we have all experienced the dog that “loses a track” simply because he would rather “smell the roses” than track. One must know and be careful not to correct a dog if he is legitimately having difficulty with the odor trail or is he is simply not working. If we fail to correct a dog that is not working he will rapidly recognize that he can get away with doing so. I offer the following thought by the dog; “I know more today than I did yesterday. The question is, do you know that I know more today than I did yesterday?” If a handler fails to know what the dog knows the dog will “get ahead of the handler” just like the child that can fool his parents.

The technique I call “training by the numbers” means there is a training schedule that one adheres to for every dog in a group and every dog receives the same training as he proceeds through his career. Any failure to recognize that one dog may be intrinsically better at scent work than another yet both receive similar training fails to both capitalize upon the greater ability of the better dog and fails to improve the weaker dog. One of my more frustrating observations is the frequency of apprehension work done with many dogs. The majority of our dogs are more than willing and proficient in criminal apprehension and could go months without training exercises in this area yet they are practiced with unnecessary frequency. The question is, what are they actually learning by repeating an exercise they are already proficient in? Unfortunately this can result in a dog that is more interested in apprehension training than in tracking. And

there is little if any need to improve a task that the dog is already proficient in when that time can be better spent in improving a weaker skill.

Previously I wrote an article called "Training For Failure". The thrust of the article was aimed at giving the dog tasks at his highest level of proficiency of any particular skill set and not repeating an already achieved level of accomplishment. The dog that tracks a thirty minute old track well should be trained to forty minutes or longer. The dog that can find target odor in a suitcase or desk draw should be trained to find it in a ceiling and so forth. Repeating past proficiencies is the same as making little Johnny repeat fourth grade even though he received straight "A's" in the fourth grade. The eventual result is boredom and a lack of interest in the material. DOGS ARE SMART and if a dog becomes bored he can eventually lose interest in any task. That is one reason we may see deterioration in the performance of some dogs that have been on the street for a few years.

The dog should set the learning curve, not the trainer or handler and it should be the responsibility of both to recognize as quickly as possible where the dog is on that curve. This is not always easy as often times the dog will be "ahead of the handler" possibly making mistakes before the handler recognizes the problem. The more closely the handler can follow the dog's learning curve the better the results. Dogs learn at an astonishing fast rate and the failure to follow the dog's progress can interfere with training process. Working dogs, particularly police service dogs have little to think about other than what is being taught to them as their handlers control their entire environment, when they eat, when they work, and what happens to them based upon their actions with regard to their response to whatever their handler may do to them or for them as well as their experiences in the street.

Our dogs will learn something every working day of their career. Their brains are never in neutral consequently whatever you do with or to your dog today, whatever experience your dog may have with his handler, or his environment, be it large or small, on any given day will have an effect upon his behavior the next day, and every day thereafter will build upon all future performance, be that to the positive or negative future performance. The same is true of you. Should you find a routine call turns into a life or death situation on Monday, most assuredly you will react differently on Tuesday and probably for many days if not years afterwards. Thus your own "learning curve" has dramatically altered due to your experience and it is exactly the same for your dog. On the reverse side if you handle hundreds of "routine calls" it is easy to fall into a state of complacency and get caught off guard on your next call and so it is with our dogs. They will learn to "do nothing" if nothing happens to them on the street and their work will deteriorate. He will never stop "learning" regardless of what he may have learned previously.

Allow your dog to disobey one day and it will be worse the next. One cannot let a dog “get ahead of him” but must constantly be aware of where the dog is in his head and constantly guide the dog in the right direction.

I fear that sometimes I do not make myself clear in my writing so I will offer a simple example. Before I begin apprehension work I make it perfectly clear to my dogs that out means out on a toy. The first time the dog fails to respond correctly he is corrected as firmly as necessary in accordance with his personality. Once I begin apprehension work the first time the dog fails to release he is again corrected as firmly as necessary and the rule is never violated for once a dog learns that he will not be corrected in this high drive task he will become more and more difficult to control. This is an example of the dog’s ability to learn. Let me get away with it once and I will most certainly try it again. Good leadership will guarantee good performance. Poor leadership will always result in performance. Ask more of your dog and it will be granted, ask less and that also will be granted.

Remember, routine kills and someone out there may be trying to kill you and tonight may be the night.