

It's All About Body Language

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Almost every year, I assist my local region of the USPCA by judging at their annual Police Dog I (PDI) trials. If you haven't judged at a trial, judging gives one a unique opportunity to observe the effects of stress on working dog teams.

Having competed in approximately thirty PDI trials myself with four different dogs, as well in many Schutzhund and RH dog trials, I understand very well how stressful a trial can be, especially for novice handlers. I took multiple trips to the bathroom or outhouse before competitions just like everyone else.

This year's PDI trial, as usual, started with all the teams doing heeling. I know I always dreaded heeling when I was in a PDI, because it seemed to be the place where things went wrong that I didn't anticipate, even though, after my first dog, I had dogs that usually heeled well. Now that I've successfully trained dogs to heel well in competition, I now know why the heeling portion of the PDI is often the most disappointing phase of obedience for new handlers.

Why Heeling is Difficult

It's all about the handler's body language. Heeling is a difficult exercise. It has two main training components: the dog maintaining position at the handler's leg and the dog paying close attention to the handler so he can follow or even anticipate the handler's movements. It doesn't really matter which of these components are taught first, but both must be taught for successful heeling. Competitive heeling drives this performance to a high level, as even a small deviation in the dog's position creates point deductions. To make it harder, after the initial command to start, few if any more commands are allowed. After the first command, the dog has to pay attention and maintain position without any obvious help from the handler.

Competitive heeling is really a "dance" with the handler leading and the dog following. Good competitors give their dogs the right "lead" for each turn, halt or change in pace so that the dog can react quickly and correctly. Good competitors carefully practice and program their body movements to give the dog the best communication. Their dogs also pay attention to them, because paying attention results in rewards from the handler for good performance.

Dogs Communicate with Body Language

Dogs are biologically programmed to communicate with body language. Verbal noises much less important to them, and when a handler works with their dog, the handler's body language has much more meaning to the dog than voice commands. Handlers and many

trainers think that they are teaching the dog to respond to verbal commands, but, in reality, the dog is also looking closely at all of the handler's body language.

You can test this by holding the dog on leash, and assuming the dog knows the command sit, and thinking "sit," but not saying it, but doing all the usual hand motions, body positions and breathing to say "sit" like you normally would. Many dogs will sit, because the handler may lift up on the leash slightly, look at the dog, inhale, and do all the actions that precede or accompany the word sit when it is used. Many dogs will not perform a command unless they see the proper body actions that usually accompany it. Often the handler is making body motions they aren't even aware of, like lifting the hand holding the leash or a hand that usually holds a reward in training. If a handler really wants to test or train verbal commands, he or she should train until the dog responds with the handler's back to the dog or with the dog in another room out of sight.

Dogs Know the Emotional State of their Handlers

Dogs' senses are much keener than ours. They can hear and sense our breathing, our smell, and instantly analyze every movement of our hands, arms and legs. They notice where their handler is looking, the rate, strength and length of the handler's stride, and they can probably hear their handler's heart beating when they are in heel position. Every police dog is emotionally and psychologically tied to their handler. They know what mood the handler is in, whether the handler is sick or tired, and what emotion the handler is experiencing. The handler is the leader, the "god" who hands out the good and bad stuff on a daily basis, and the dog quickly learns what body language is present when the god is angry or pleased.

How would you feel if you arrived at a serious police incident to find your supervisor, the person you need to follow, appearing sick, shaking and unsure? It wouldn't be reassuring, and you would immediately be put on edge. What are your alternatives? Avoid the situation; drag along warily for the duration? Take over for the supervisor who obviously can't do the job, or maybe find someone else to help?

What do we see on the obedience field with our dogs? Some try to leave. Some heel, but poorly and at some distance from the handler, some run to the nearest judge, and some just "take control" and do what they want. Kind of like an officer with a poor supervisor when the chips are down.

Every dog is different and some are more handler sensitive than others. The sensitive ones tend to fold, and the tough ones take over or ignore their handlers. Most patrol dogs are pretty tough, but, given the mental state of some of the novice handlers I see competing, it is a credit to the dogs that they don't run off the field and back to their cruiser.

Why Competition can be Valuable Training

Yes, competition is stressful, and seems even more so than working on the street, because on the street the handler is in control and not being judged and watched by people who are peers and know good dog work from bad. Street incidents happen relatively quickly, not like a trial where the handler knows what is coming weeks in advance and has plenty of time to get worried. Yet, if a handler can conquer their nerves on the competition field, and train so that they and their dog perform under stress, their street work will be better. Competition can be used to hone a good dog/handler team.

So what happens to the handler when they enter a competition? First of all, they usually invest a great deal of extra training time. Many have to take time off, or have begged their department to attend, pay their own way, etc., or have to compete after working all night, etc. In other words, the handler has investment in the process. This time and financial investment creates an emotional investment. Add to this the pressure of having to perform in front of peers.

So, if the handler lets the emotional stress of entering the competition get to him or her, the handler starts to worry about the performance, getting enough sleep, getting there on time, etc. The stress raises heart rate, sweating, breathing, etc., hormone levels change until the handler is feeling half sick before the competition. The handler's reptilian brain is saying, "Let's get out of here", but the higher brain says, "No, I have to see this through" and the conflict within the handler's body gets worse. It's like the handler's unconscious trying to rush the performance and get it over with, and this changes the handler's body language, voice, gait, everything. Verbal commands are given too quick and too loud. Hand signals are stiff, quick, and jerky. The dog isn't given time to mentally process the changes or the commands. To the dog, the handler even walks funny. The breath inhale before the verbal command that the dog has become used to in training doesn't happen, or it happens and is held for awhile, so the dog doesn't "hear" or see the precursors to the verbal command that the dog is used to. So the dog doesn't sit, or down or heel or whatever, because the dog doesn't see the body language and hear the verbal commands he is used to in training.

Don't Blame the Dog

If you are new to dog training, you may blame the problems on the dog. If you have some dog training knowledge, you know to blame the training, not the dog. And then you continue to train to perform better next time.

What can a handler do to conquer stress? First of all, be aware of what is causing the performance problem. It is not the dog, it is the handler's emotional state. Go back and review all the tips you learned for controlling stress short term. Practice deep breathing, and practice this during training when you are not stressed, just before you start your training routine, so

the dog is not freaked out when it happens the first time in competition. The dog will get used to it and it will become part of the “start” routine and body language for the dog. The dog may even deep breath with you!

Second, understand that the dog’s performance depends heavily on the handler’s emotions and how they affect the handler’s body language. Obedience is a dance between handler and dog, but the other phase that is profoundly affected by the handler’s emotions is apprehension work. If compulsion and negative handler emotions have been part of the dog’s training, and the dog perceives that handler is stressed during competition, the dog will usually do one of two things during apprehension work: fail to bite well and be slow to come to the handler, or become too stressed and lapse into fight drive, failing to let go of the bite and going out of control. In short, the weaker dogs may resort to avoidance of the situation while the stronger dogs resort to fighting too much. Neither type of dog will want to return to the handler on command if the handler is stressed out.

Training Tips for Good Performances under Stress

Understanding that the handler’s mood controls body language can give the handler the motivation to learn how to control their stress. Below are some suggestions on how to train:

1. Be aware of your body language as you train in obedience. Take note of when you inhale, exactly how your hand signals are given, how you walk, your footwork on turns, etc. Take note of what body language creates the best dog performance. Refine your signals, and, for heeling, your footwork. Be aware of everything, and standardize everything. I stand at attention for heeling, I walk in a particular way, kind of a half walk, half march, and it looks natural, but it is not the way I walk when I am out for a walk in the woods with my dog. When I walk in heeling mode, the dog knows instantly that we are heeling now, and my very gait serves as a command to follow along. If you can’t do this yourself, have someone watch and coach you. You can help your dog immensely with small signals like inhales (dogs that anticipate commands often move prematurely on a loud inhale), a half step in heeling before a turn, turning your head before a turn, etc., without causing point deductions as long as the movements look natural.
2. Standardize your body language and voice commands and practice them, even if you have to them without the dog to practice obedience routines so you don’t confuse the dog. Make it a chance to practice a down stay. Make body movements, breathing and footwork second nature so that you don’t have to

think about them during the competition, and do them the same way every time. Your dog will thank you.

3. Do some training after you have run around the field enough times so that your breathing is rapid and heart rate elevated. Give commands in this state and acclimate the dog to the changes in your commands and body language. This will help for actual deployments as well as for competition.
4. Create and practice “prepping routines” for each phase of competition. You can do some prep work before each phase before you are being judged. One of the things I learned from Schutzhund was proper preparation of the dog for each phase. At the last PDI, I saw a few dogs that were taken out of cruisers and on to the field with no preparation, and they were sitting at the start line wondering if this was obedience, articles or bite work. The first “heel” command seemed like a surprise to them, and they were looking around like they just woke up. In Schutzhund trials before obedience, you will see competitors play with their dogs with toys and rehearse some heeling, often leaving the toy with a friend just as they walk on to the field so that the dog thinks they still have the toy; doing a short track, article indication or start pad with food in the grass before tracking; and doing bite work in the parking lot before the protection phase. When these competitors’ dogs walk out on the competition field to be judged, they are primed and ready for the activity that is going to take place. Most PDI competitors know that they have to walk their dogs so the dogs have a chance to relieve themselves before an event. Adding a start or prep routine also gives the handler something to do and think about, relieving handlers stress before their turn, and helping to put the dog and handler in sync before the event.
5. If it doesn’t interfere with the competition, part of the starting routine can be to get the dog out and walk or put the dog in a down stay in the general area so the dog can see what is going on. I used to get my dog out and put him or her in a down stay while I waited for my turn. The dog gets to see what is going on, can acclimate to the noise, sights and smells, and shouldn’t be gawking as much during the performance. An exception to this would be bite work if you are trying to keep the dog calm. The PDI rules state you cannot disturb the other teams. I know that a lot of handlers want to keep their dogs cool in the AC before they get them out, but it seems like too many dogs come to the start line without the proper frame of mind for the exercise they are doing.
6. Train as if you were going into a competition. Train on a new athletic field rather than your normal training grounds. Train on agility obstacles other than those at your usual training grounds. You will rarely compete on your training grounds and you certainly are unlikely to deploy there. Go to a new place, and practice

getting the dog out and doing your startup routine as if it was a competition. I used to hide toys on new fields and take the dog to the toys during training routines as a reward for good performance. My dogs thought there were toys to be earned through training everywhere we went.

7. As you train, and as you perform at the competition, learn to shut out the outside world and concentrate on your dog. This helps to focus you on the most important thing out there, how you and your dog interact. Push the emotion aside and take charge. Notice how you are giving commands and how they affect the dog. If the dog missed a command, how should you practice this to fix the problem? An extra command might be needed, or a different tone of voice. Learn to be “in the moment” and not get emotionally lost over a mistake. Mistakes will happen, so move on. Try to anticipate the next thing you have to do as a handler to maximize performance. Strategize how to get the maximum points out of an exercise. Giving a needed extra command and getting a small deduction is better than losing all the points for a failed exercise.
8. Be realistic about your limitations as a team. Measure your performance against the last trial or training, not a perfect score. There are some things that a team may never get right. Older dogs just can't do all the agility obstacles they did when young. Be totally aware of what you as a team can accomplish given your talents, training time and training ability, and don't try to push so hard that you cause your dog or your relationship with your dog to be damaged. **If you and your dog can perform in a trial at a level that is 95% or better than what you do in training, you can be proud of that performance, because it tells you that your emotional control and handling are working in a high stress situation.**