

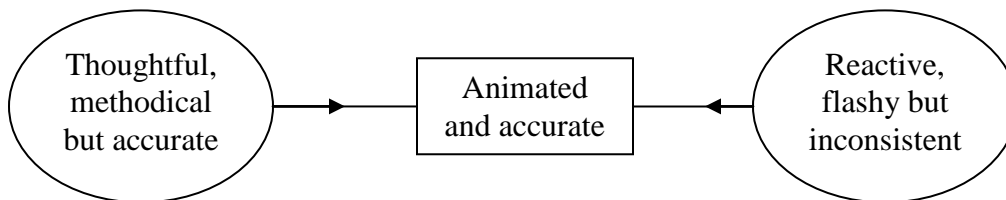
What Kind of Trainer Do You Need to Be?

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We've all stood outside the ring and watched dogs perform that make us say "Wow." The speed, enthusiasm, and enjoyment for the work are breathtaking. However, these same dogs can often be reactive and inconsistent. When they are good they are great, but anticipation or some other error of over enthusiasm can cause a failing score. How do we make these dogs become a little more thoughtful, thereby increasing their qualifying rate without sacrificing the animation?

We've also watched dogs that plod around the ring, sometimes very accurately, but giving the impression of being mechanical, and possibly bored with the work. Their qualifying rate is high, but their enthusiasm seems diminished, and they are nowhere near as fun to watch as the speedy, albeit inconsistent competitors. So, how do we motivate the methodical dogs to become more animated while maintaining their consistency and accuracy?

A performance continuum might look like the following diagram. With thoughtful dogs on the left and reactive dogs on the right, shouldn't we be able to find a happy medium where animation and accuracy can be achieved?



Where is your dog on the continuum? Is he a thoughtful dog that needs to worry less about making a mistake and become more reactive? Does he need to relax, not worry about his mistakes, and just "live a little"? Or is your dog one of the reactive ones that needs to be pushed to be more thoughtful, so as not to let his enthusiasm get in the way of his good sense?

Once you understand what type of dog you have, you can decide what kind of trainer you need to be. All of us would like to proclaim, "I'm a motivational trainer," but I fear that this statement evokes the wrong picture. Motivation does not simply mean spitting food at a dog that can bounce, touch, spin, and tug. It means you know how to motivate any

type of dog to become animated and accurate. You must know how to find the ideal balance producing qualifying scores with dogs who enjoy the job.

Training the Thoughtful Dog

The truth is, most of us have had or currently have a dog that is not as motivated as we would like. You may be struggling with slow, unmotivated performances and be pulling your hair out to create more animation. Here are some hints that might be useful.

1. Train Like You Show

When faced with a lack-luster performance, our temptation is to go home and motivate, motivate, motivate! We get better treats, play more games, and in general try to make training a big party. The problem is that since dogs are situational (See How Dogs Learn; www.dogtrainersworkshop.com) this is one of the quickest ways to teach the dog that training is fun and showing is not. It doesn't take any time at all for him to walk into the ring and know you don't play all those fun games there!

Instead, try to make training and showing more similar. Train for 5-8 minutes, moving from one exercise to another, and then stop and have a party. That is much more similar to the situation your dog will experience at a dog show.

2. Stop Repeating

The thoughtful dog does not need you to repeat an exercise again and again. Be patient, learning does and will accumulate. Don't be afraid to do an exercise once, do something else, and then come back to it in another location or with a distraction added. Repeating and repeating and repeating is boring, time consuming, and counterproductive.

3. Learn What Motivates Your Dog

My first Shih-tzu taught me this. When she performed well, I would bend over and pat her, rather roughly, like I did with my retrievers. She was not impressed. Soon, every time I released her she'd jump out of reach as if to say, "DON'T touch me!" I realized that what she wanted was for me to remain erect, cheerfully praising her, and then she would jump up on me and allow me to scratch her back.

Learn how to play with your dog in a way he enjoys. Watch how he interacts with other dogs. Not all dogs are food motivated. Not all dogs want to tug, bounce, or spin. Starving a dog to create a desire for food, or forcing a dog to tug that would rather have a hug is not the kind of motivation you are looking for.

4. Keep Your Hands Off

Lots of unmotivated dogs become more animated when we stop throwing ourselves at them to physically praise them. Simply cheer, clap and act enthusiastic. You'll be surprised at how quickly they come to you for affection.

5. Add Distractions- Teach a new Exercise

Some dogs become less motivated and more methodical simply because they are bored. Remember how well they performed in Open when they were learning Utility? Learning new things can be a great motivator. Think of something new to teach your dog.

Likewise, add distractions to the exercises he knows making it harder to perform correctly. Lots of dogs will almost instantly become more interested when the task becomes more difficult.

6. Work on the Details without Drilling

It's probably going to be more successful for you to work on the fronts, finishes, and pivots in the context of the exercises, not as a separate drill. Only the highly motivated dogs really enjoy that much repetition.

7. Change His Lifestyle

Most of our dogs live better than most middle income children. Perhaps a change in lifestyle will help your dog's attitude. This could be as simple as tying him to the fence as you work with another dog (leaving him in a crate is usually not helpful, as most dogs are so well crate trained that they are happy to be there), or having someone else warm him up. Perhaps he shouldn't be lounging on the couch all day with the TV on while you're at work if you expect him to be excited to work when you get home. Please understand, my dogs are house dogs. They are my pets, enjoying lots of long walks and swims, and I love "piling up" in the bed with dogs surrounding me. On the other hand, I don't think a few minutes of work are too much to ask in exchange for the full life they lead.

8. Stop Thinking it's All Your Fault

There is a lot of guilt associated with dogs that are difficult to motivate. If you have done everything you can think of to increase your dog's enthusiasm and animation, perhaps you are doing the best anyone could do. Dogs have separate and distinct personalities. Accept your dog for who he is: don't get caught up trying to make him someone he's not.

Training the Reactive Dog

The truth is, if you've ever had a dog that was hard to motivate, you start out thrilled with your energetic, enthusiastic puppy. You probably played games just because you could. How grand to have a dog that wants treats, and willingly barks, bounces, touches and spins. Before you congratulate yourself on your newfound talent at motivation, understand that some of what you have is genetic, and if you're not careful, you're likely to end up with a dog that is out of control.

1. The Exercise is the Game- Quit Adding More

I had a wonderfully attentive, enthusiastic puppy that quickly learned all the tricks I could teach him. Until his retirement, I often said, "He simply thinks that dog obedience is an extension of the parlor tricks he learned in his youth." What a great attitude to have. It's not uncommon to see a dog come flying over a jump and then the trainer rewarding him with an enthusiastic game of tug. Why? The dog thought jumping was the game. Don't teach him that you always have a better one. Let the exercise be the reward, whether it be

the heeling, jumping, or retrieving, lots of dogs are naturally motivated to do these exercises.

2. Control Everything

If you have taught your reactive dog to bark, bounce, and spin, you'd better have it on cue. He should not offer these behaviors when he wants, but only when asked. If you're not careful, he'll be initiating the game when he thinks the ring is too dull, and you'll struggle with unwanted barking, nipping or other "amusing" variations that become irritating in a big hurry.

3. Learn When and How to Release Him

The highly motivated dog needs you to know when to release him, how to release him, and most importantly, how to get him back to work! You will not be able to keep him under tight control for an entire performance. He'll come unglued. You have to be able to let him leap for joy, and know that you can get him back under control.

4. Train with Distractions

Many of our highly motivated dogs are obsessed with some object or exercise. For example, if your dog is constantly thinking about his dumbbell, then he's going to have to learn to heel with the dumbbell in the middle of the floor. He's going to have to let you give it to the judge, and take it back, without losing his mind. He's going to have to learn to do his least favorite exercise even if some other dog is retrieving!

5. Stop Thinking You Created This

It is probably accurate to say that, especially if you've trained a few dogs, you know a lot more about playing and motivating now than with your first dog. This makes sense. Look at any teacher of any subject. One with lots of experience in the classroom has a lot more confidence and is more relaxed with the students than one trying to teach a subject for the first time. However, it's probably also accurate to say that you were more selective of your second or third dog, perhaps paying more attention to genetics and attitude than you did with your first one. The great attitude your dog has may not be all your doing. It may simply be the dog. Don't worry - if you are a little less motivational and require more control, you will not ruin him- you will simply move toward more accurate performances.

Years ago, a trainer working her third dog said to me, "Don't you wish they were all alike?" I paused for a moment, before I said, "If they were all alike, I'd have lost interest years ago." The fact of the matter is that each different personality comes with a unique set of problems. Some dogs need to be more motivated, some more controlled. In your attempt to move your dog on the continuum, sometimes you will fail. Your reactive dog will anticipate an exercise, bark in the middle of the performance, or in some other way burst out of control. Your thoughtful dog will have a down day, not offering 100%, acting disinterested and lack-luster. No coach is 100% successful at motivating his player to perform at the peak of his ability in every event.

What you can do as coach and trainer is learn to identify your dog's unique personality and work on solutions that are specific to his problems. If you train very many dogs, you are going to have dogs that range from one end of the continuum to the other. Learn to be a motivating trainer- motivating each dog in the individual and distinct way that will make him become as accurate and animated as possible.