

What Motivates a Dog to Perform?

I knew as I stood outside the ring and watched the dog that he couldn't possibly perform that badly at home. He trailed his owner on the heeling and wandered around in the article pile staring at the crowd. He raced wildly to the wrong glove, shaking it as he returned, and then walked in on the moving stand. His first go-out was in the corner and the second go-out was too short to be sent over a jump.

He had gotten his UD 10 shows earlier, but his performances had steadily deteriorated since his third leg. What was happening?

When the AKC added the UDX to the list of obedience titles, many exhibitors were inspired to continue showing in Open B and Utility B. Many of you are pursuing seemingly elusive UDX legs and becoming frustrated by your dog's low qualifying rate or by the errors he is making. Many of you are discovering that keeping a trained dog working well is more difficult than it was to teach him the exercises in the first place.

There are four reasons that dogs perform correctly.

1. Desire: The Dog's Natural Enjoyment of the Exercise

Many dogs enjoy some aspect of performing so much that their natural desire motivates them. For example, avid retrievers consider the dumbbell or glove the reward for retrieving. Some dogs love to jump, so the act of jumping is motivating and rewarding. The dog described at the beginning of this article was obviously thrilled with the glove exercise. His behavior demonstrated his enjoyment of the exercise. Shaking the glove was certainly self-rewarding!

Folks training field trial dogs rely heavily on a dog's natural desire to retrieve a bird. The bird is the dog's reward. This can be a problem when the dog is completely disobedient, finds the bird, and feels rewarded for his performance.

A similar situation can occur in the obedience ring. A dog that loves to retrieve may not care that you are annoyed that he ran around the high jump. He got his reward, the dumbbell. Likewise, a dog that jumps the bar twice on the directed jumping exercise may not care if you're displeased, since he enjoyed sailing over the jump.

Just because a dog enjoys doing a certain activity does not mean that he *understands* that activity is his job. For example, you may believe that your avid retriever understands the command "fetch." However, when the situation is such that he doesn't want to retrieve (when the dumbbell rests against the ring gating), he fails. Most serious competitors teach the dog a correction for failing to retrieve because they understand that even the best dogs don't retrieve in all circumstances.

I have spent 10 years training service dogs for the physically disabled. We always start with a dog that has a natural desire to retrieve, but I have not yet seen a dog that would willingly pick up all of the items we pointed to. These are often items that are not moving, which makes them less desirable to the dog than a thrown object. Sometimes they are an awkward shape, such as a set of keys, an aerosol can, or a bulky article of clothing. While desire can make getting started quite easy, it does not guarantee that the dog understands he must perform the task.

2. Rewards: The Praise or Reward the Dog Receives

Dogs can certainly be motivated to earn a reward, whether that is our praise, a treat, or a toy we hold as ransom for the correct behavior. The problems here are twofold.

- A. Sometimes our rewards are more accurately described as bribes. When the bribe is not present, the dog does not perform. I see handlers make the mistake of bribing most often on heeling and go-outs. At a recent seminar, I was presented with a dog that heeled beautifully in practice, but the handler complained that the dog performed poorly in the ring. She heeled the dog for me, and I discovered she was holding food in her left hand. This was a dog competing in Open. I asked if she felt the food was still necessary to keep his attention and her reply was that she always carried it. I think this is an excellent example of a dog that is performing because he is bribed to do so, and will stop almost immediately when he discovers the bribe is not present.

It is quite common to bribe a dog to perform go-outs by placing an expected toy or treat at the end of the ring. However, it doesn't take some dogs long to discover that in a dog show situation there is no food there. (Dogs are situational-see [How Dogs Learn](#)). This can result in a dog that performs crooked or short go-outs in the ring.

- B. If the rewards offered are vastly different in training than they are in the ring (either in frequency or amount), then the dog quickly realizes that the reward is not forthcoming in the ring and stops performing. There are times in practice that I reward my dog by throwing a toy, playing tug-of war, or giving him food. However, before I enter a show, the dog must understand that the rewards are a bonus, not his sole reason for performing.

3. Corrections: The Correction the Dog Receives from His Handler

Corrections can certainly motivate a dog to perform. Remember, a correction is not a random act of violence, but a negative occurrence that the dog knows how to stop and how to avoid (see [How Dogs Learn](#)). However, if the dog is solely motivated because of his desire to avoid a correction, he will soon discover that during a performance, corrections do not occur. He does not stop performing because he is spiteful or because he wants to get even with you for correcting him, but because he is situational. It is easy to discover that in a show situation, you will not correct him.

4. Habit: The Dog's Habit to Perform

A few days ago, I was watching my husband's dog heel. It is so clear that if she could be interviewed and the question posed, "Why do you watch Brian? Why do you hold your head up while you are heeling?" her response would be, "because that's how I do it." The bribes that initially enticed her to look at Brian are so far in the past that she no longer looks for them or expects them. The leash correction that she was taught as a penalty for looking away is not a threat that causes her to hold her head up. She enjoys the praise and the enthusiastic release that Brian gives her, but it is not the anticipation of that praise that keeps her head up. She heels as she does completely out of habit. *A dog's habit should replace the motivation of the corrections or rewards before he is asked to perform in competition.*

Habit is a very complex issue. We err as dog trainers by not understanding how our dog's performance is controlled by habit. A dog's attitude, his attention, his jumping style, and many of the details of our sport, such as straight sits, fronts, and finishes, should be largely controlled by habit.

- A. **Attitude:** The most important aspect of an obedience dog's performance that is controlled by habit is his attitude. From the first training session, a good trainer creates

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a learning atmosphere that keeps the dog's interest. This dog will become an attentive and concentrated performer because it is his habit to behave in this manner. A trainer who allows a dog to move slowly and become distracted during a training session can easily allow his dog's habit to become one of slowness and disinterest.

If this is of concern, apply the following rule to your training session. Your dog must be playing with you, practicing an exercise, or in a down stay waiting to do one of the first two. Do not allow your dog to wander off while you set up equipment or talk with your training partner. When your dog is waiting in a down stay, go to him to release him and move quickly to the next exercise you intend to practice.

- B. **Attention:** Teaching a dog to pay attention can certainly involve bribing, rewarding, and correcting. However, a dog that is paying attention because of these motivators is not ready for the ring. *Attention, especially during heeling, needs to become the dog's habit before he is asked to perform in competition.*
- C. **Jumping:** A competitive obedience dog will spend lots of time jumping, so take the time necessary to create a comfortable jumping style. My dogs learn to jump on command and are taught to perform directed jumping before they are ever asked to retrieve over a jump. This insures a habit of jumping correctly before the dog becomes distracted by the retrieve.
- D. **Details:** I define a "detail" as anything that costs me a ½-3 point deduction if done incorrectly. The list can include fronts, finishes, pivots, dumbbell pick-ups, speed on a recall or retrieve, etc. Many of the details in our sport can only be performed with precision after hours of practice. That is how good habits become established. For example, it is the dog's habit to sit automatically. He is not doing so because he expects a reward or a correction. He has done it so many times, that he is in the habit of performing an automatic sit.

Repetition is certainly necessary to create a good habit. That's why most great dogs have heeled a hundred miles more than an average dog and done hundreds of finishes more than most of their competitors. Although repetition in a familiar environment can help create good habits, keep in mind that it does not help him understand how to perform in unfamiliar circumstances. There is no substitute for going to many varied training locations to practice!

It is not possible to evaluate the dog's performance described at the beginning of the article without more information about how he performs in practice. However, you can evaluate your own dog's performance and determine why it changes in the ring. Are you depending on the promise of bribes and rewards or the threat of a correction? Are you assuming that because your dog has a desire to perform an exercise that he understands that he must perform, even under demanding circumstances? Are you allowing correct behaviors enough time and repetition to become good habits?