Dog Sports Skills, Book 4
Focus and Engage!

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Dog Sports Skills Book 4: Focus and Engage!

By Denise Fenzi & Deborah Jones, Ph.D.

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About Us

Denise Fenzi

I am a professional dog trainer who specializes in building relationships in dog handler teams who compete in dog sports. My personal passions are Competitive Obedience and spreading high quality information about no-force (motivational) dog training. I travel the world teaching seminars on topics related to Dog Obedience and Building Drives & Motivation. Most of my time and energy is now focused on the development and growth of my online school for competition dog sports -- the Fenzi Dog Sports Academy. Check us out at www.fenzidogsportsacademy.com and see what we might have to offer you!

Deborah Jones, Ph.D.

I am a social and behavioral psychologist, full-time college professor, and dog trainer. My focus is on combining a thorough knowledge of the scientific aspects of learning with the art of applying that information to the effective training of dogs for dog sports. The effective and efficient application of learning theories and principles is still a work in progress for most dog trainers. I have enjoyed competing in Rally, Agility, and Obedience with my dogs over the years. Writing is one of my passions, along with the more recent addition of teaching online classes at Fenzi Dog Sports Academy.

Part One:

The Basics

Chapter One
Introduction

"Focus" has become quite a popular buzzword in dog training circles. Everyone wants it, and training issues are blamed when you don't have it. That may be true, but… what does that mean, anyway? What exactly is focus? Why does it matter so much? And how do you get it?

A closely related concept that has also become popular in dog training lately is "engagement." Again, everyone wants it, and a lack of engagement is blamed for problems during training or showing. But what does that mean? Why does it happen? And what can you do to make sure you have it?

These are the types of questions we will be discussing in this book, the fourth in the Dog Sports Skills series, because focus and engagement are extremely important skills for success in performance events. Even if you have taught your dog all the required skills and behaviors for your sport, without focus and engagement, you will likely be disappointed. People often assume that focus and engagement happen naturally in the course of training sport-specific skills, but that is often not the case.

A Tale of Three Dogs

Not convinced that you need focus and engagement? Here are a few examples based on our experience with students. The stories are true, but the names have been changed to protect the dogs.

Mary and Fido

Mary spent a year teaching Fido the required skills for agility. He was fabulous at home and in class, so she entered her first trial with high hopes. When they got there, Fido seemed a bit nervous, and once in the ring, he was downright distracted. Fido was too busy looking around at all the other dogs and people outside the ring to even notice that Mary was there!

After much coaxing, she finally got him to sit at the start line. She walked away, called him to take the first jump, and… nothing! Instead of moving, Fido froze. Mary continued to call him while jumping up and down until finally Fido stood up and began moving towards her hesitantly, bypassing the first jump on the way.

Fido did eventually complete the course, but Mary had to stay very close to him and use constant verbal encouragement. When they finished (well over time), they walked out of the ring, and Mary told her friends that she was shocked. "He's never done that in training!"

What we have here is an inability to focus. Fido was so distracted by the trial setting that he could not concentrate on what Mary was asking him to do. He used up all his cognitive capacity trying to make sense of everything that was happening around him. And because he couldn't focus, there was no way he could possibly engage with Mary in the activity of agility.

Rita and Spot

Rita has taken several rally obedience classes with Spot. While in class, she liberally used food, toys, and verbal encouragement to keep Spot moving. She was so pleased with Spot's progress that she entered a local trial.

Rita warmed Spot up outside the ring as usual, and everything went so well that Rita could imagine them earning that blue ribbon! But once inside the ring it was a different story. Spot seemed confused, responding to Rita slowly or not at all. She stood when she should have sat. She needed to be told repeatedly to lie down. She lagged behind as Rita moved from station to station. Eventually, she simply stood still, staring into the distance instead of performing a station. Rita was highly disappointed as they left the ring. "She knows how to do all of this!"

Spot was also demonstrating an inability to focus. Spot may have seemed like she didn't

If your dog becomes overwhelmed and unable to focus in a trial environment, do what you can to make your dog feel better!

understand the exercises, but outside the ring, without any pressure (and with cookies and encouragement), she does just fine!

Bob and Bruiser

Bob and Bruiser have been the stars of every obedience class they have taken over the past year. Bruiser learns quickly, responds correctly, and shows lots of energy and enthusiasm when they train together. They've done so well that Bob's instructors encouraged him to enter his first obedience trial.

Bruiser is a very friendly and sociable dog, so when they got to the trial, he was highly excited by the presence of all the dogs and people. He wanted to visit with everyone! He ignored Bob and they bombed the exercises. Bob was extremely embarrassed and unhappy about Bruiser's poor performance. "He's blowing me off because he knows I can't correct him in the ring!"

Bruiser was able to focus… but on the wrong people! Bruiser's total focus on the nice person in the ring with them meant that he could not respond to Bob's cues. It got even worse when the stewards came in as posts for the figure 8 exercise. Bruiser just couldn't understand why they wouldn't talk to him!

If food or toys are masking your dog's anxiety, then the issues are likely to re-appear in competition when these motivators are gone.

Beyond Knowing

When there are failures in the ring, people often consider whether or not the skills were fully learned, and whether they were practiced in a variety of settings. Those are definitely extremely important considerations. Some people also think about whether or not anxiety and stress are part of the problem. If they are, those issues need to be addressed.

But beyond all that lies an even more fundamental issue. In the case of our three dogs, a lack

of focus and engagement were huge contributors to the problems they experienced in the ring. Unfortunately, these trainers probably had no idea what that even means!

Focus is an invisible skill. You can't see it the same way you can see a straight front or a correct contact. You often don't realize it's missing until things go poorly. To make things even more challenging, it is perfectly possible to perform a behavior correctly but without focus. How often have you driven somewhere and, once you arrived safely, not remembered large chunks of the trip? You didn't get lost or have an accident, so you performed the skill of driving correctly, but your mind was elsewhere. You weren't focused.

Or maybe you've had a conversation with someone but were preoccupied about something else. You may have made appropriate and timely responses, but it was probably obvious that you weren't truly engaged in the conversation.

It is not enough to simply know how to do something; you also have to be fully present while doing it. That's where focus and engagement happen, and that's where we want our dogs to be when we are training and showing. Let's look at another example to make this more clear.

Lisa and Baron

Lisa and her dog, Baron, have always worked together with focus. Lisa has been aware of the need for focus and engagement throughout the training process, so she has carefully nurtured it each step of the way. As a result, Baron has been an attentive and eager student.

Lisa worked diligently to prepare Baron for trial settings while still maintaining his enjoyment and enthusiasm in the work they do together. She developed a pre-training ritual that they

Focus and engagement must be present before you begin training. Over the long run you will reap the benefits of this strategy.

practice regularly. On trial day, Lisa stuck to her plan and Baron responded beautifully. They

entered the ring as a connected pair and moved from one exercise to the next without missing a beat. As she left the ring, Lisa was beaming. "I'm very proud of how focused Baron was!"

That's what we want! We want both the dog and the trainer to leave the ring happy and pleased with the experience. That doesn't mean that you will always qualify, but your odds will be much better when your partner is focused and engaged.

Focus vs. Engagement

So just what is focus? And how is it different from engagement?

Well, dictionary.com defines focus as "a central point, as of attraction, attention, or activity." Meanwhile, it defines engagement as "a pledge; an obligation or agreement. The act or state of interlocking." For our purposes as dog trainers, we have tweaked these terms just a bit.

Focus

Focus is the ability to concentrate on the task at hand. This makes it a cognitive ability. In order to focus, you must be able to narrow your attention such that you can ignore other competing demands and attend to just one. There are times when focus seems easy and effortless, when the skill has been well-learned or is highly enjoyable. There are also times when it is extremely difficult to focus, when there are lots of distractions, or you just don't really understand the skill that well yet.

Focus is a lot like love when you think about it. Both focus and love are constructs; internal, abstract concepts that are difficult to observe directly, although you can see evidence of them through behaviors, actions, and attitudes that indicate their presence. With both focus and love, you know when it's there, and you know when it's not. You feel it just as much as you see evidence of it.

Engagement

It's impossible to talk about engagement without discussing focus, because focus is a foundation required for engagement to occur. When it comes to dog training, we consider engagement to be mutual interaction. You and your dog may engage in activities together (such as heeling), or you may direct your dog's engagement toward a task (such as a retrieve). Either way, engagement is only possible once your dog has developed the ability to concentrate and focus on you. Our goal as trainers is to help our dogs develop the ability to focus, which will lead to their ability to engage with us in a wide variety of activities. To develop our dog's focus (and this should not be surprising if you know anything about us), we will be using positive methods.

Gator is trained to focus in an active trial environment.

Focus is Needed from the Start

Focus is important for more than just showing. It also makes it easier for your dog to learn. It makes your job as a trainer MUCH easier as well. If your dog is focused, you won't have to fight against distractions for your dog's attention because your dog will be able to ignore external stimuli and concentrate on you and what you're doing together.

Another benefit of focus is that your dog won't feel pressured or conflicted. Many times our dogs are torn between trying to concentrate on their lessons with us and on everything else going on around them. This makes the process of learning unnecessarily difficult, and the last thing we want is for learning and training to be unpleasant. In order to avoid any negative emotional responses connected to training, we need to help our dogs develop the ability to focus on a single given task and ignore everything else in the environment.

And of course, focus will pay off in the ring. For example, several years ago, Deb was in the rally ring at a busy trial site with her Border Collie Zen. They performed well and Deb was happy with their teamwork in the ring. A friend had videotaped the performance, and when Deb watched the video, she was stunned to hear a dog barking loudly and constantly the entire time they were in the ring. Neither she nor Zen had reacted to the barking, which was quite noticeable! In fact, Deb swore she didn't hear a thing while they were in the ring together. They were both so focused on each other, and so engaged in their task, that the barking was totally blocked out.

The ability to concentrate so completely that nothing else even registers in your consciousness is a skill that takes time and effort to develop, for people and for dogs. It's a very valuable skill that is worth the time and effort required. If you intend to show your dog in trials, you will be doing both of you a huge favor by focusing on focus training first.

Getting Started

This book is organized into three main parts. Because focus is the first step towards mutual engagement in an activity, we'll discuss focus before we tackle engagement. Remember that without focus, engagement becomes a hit or miss possibility. Look at it this way: your dog may engage when the task is fun and interesting, and disengage when it becomes more difficult or requires control and patience. Many dog sports and activities are fun for dogs because they engage their natural interests and desires. Activities such as herding, barn hunt, retriever trials, and dock diving all tap into innate interests for certain types of dogs. These dogs don't need to be taught to focus on the activity in these cases. But sports such as obedience and rally typically do not have that natural interest built in. The required behaviors and skills are not intrinsically compelling to many dogs. In these cases, the ability and desire to focus is absolutely necessary for success.

There is definitely no "one size fits all" approach when it comes to focus and engagement work. We must customize the training plan to the dog/trainer team. While we have a number of exercises and games that we can use to improve focus, we must carefully monitor the dog's reactions and adjust accordingly. Therefore, Part One will start by looking at some of the

factors that will impact the training plan you develop for your individual dog.

In the chapters that follow, we will complete a focus analysis, which will help you understand when and why your dog is struggling to pay attention. Because this will determine how you'll proceed forward in your training, don't skip over the analysis in order to get to the actual exercises themselves. You simply won't get the benefit out of your training if you do that. Read carefully and answer all the questions as completely and honestly as possible.

So, if you're ready, let's get started!

Focus training takes time, but the results are worth it!

Chapter Two
Focus Analysis Overview

You know what you want; you want your dog to focus! But to reach that goal, it's vitally important to take a close look at where your dog stands right now. Analyzing your current situation and correctly identifying the reasons for his focus problems is critical to finding the right solutions. Identifying the issues contributing to your dog's lack of focus can be a difficult task, but it's a valuable one.

A Need for Objectivity

Part of the reason it's so difficult to identify the problem is that it is very hard to be an objective observer of your own dog. You are so intimately involved in the situation that your opinions are quite subjective. You have a lot of history with your dog. You've spent years learning about his behavior and personality, which usually leads to pretty strong preconceived notions and biases. In addition, you probably have a lot of hopes and dreams wrapped up in your dog. If you've always wanted a confident and independent dog, you may not want to admit that your dog is fearful. The reverse is also true; you might be more comfortable thinking of your dog as nervous and showing avoidance behaviors when you're simply not training in a manner that makes sense to your dog, causing him to leave the situation.

The reality is, trainers actually cause a lot of focus issues in a variety of ways, and it's not much fun to recognize that your dog does not want to spend time working with you. Believing that your dog is "easily distracted" or "loves to sniff" is a lot more palatable than "he's sniffing to make me calm down" or "he wants me to go away altogether."

You can't fix these problems if you don't know about them, so what you need is an unbiased observer who is knowledgeable about dog behavior - someone who can see things as they really are. Although you might be tempted to do it yourself using a video camera, being too close to the situation makes it difficult to clearly see things from a totally clean and new perspective. We all struggle with stepping away from our current beliefs and what we already "know." We tend to see what we expect to see. No matter how hard we try, our observations are clouded by past information and experiences. Even highly skilled professional trainers find that getting an outside

opinion is very helpful when they have a training issue. Finding someone who you respect and trust to give you their perceptions can be highly valuable.

Is this dog sniffing because he enjoys exploring or because he's avoiding his handler?

Categories of Focus Issues

Each subsequent chapter will focus on a main category of focus issues. Within each of these major categories, there are many subcategories to consider, but they are only symptoms of the overarching issue. Your dog's focus issues will likely cross multiple categories and subcategories - indeed, that is the most common scenario - so don't stop when you find a problem.

Stress, Anxiety, and Fear

In this category, we have dogs who worry when they are outside of their comfortable training environments. Dogs can either stress down (by moving slowly or not at all) or stress up (by showing hectic or out-of-control behavior). Either way, dogs cannot focus when they are stressed because fear trumps all. Think of it this way: you simply cannot care about eating a snack when you believe a tiger is chasing you. It doesn't matter how tasty the snack is or how hungry you are - basic survival

If these dogs are stressed by the chaotic environment then they will be unable to focus.

trumps everything. It also doesn't matter if your dog's fear is rational or irrational. Your point of view is not relevant because it's the dog's emotions that are under consideration, not your opinions about your dog's emotions. If you identify stress, anxiety, or fear as a cause for your dog's focus issues, these must be addressed first. We'll discuss this more in Chapter 3.

Curiosity

The second category that leads to focus issues is curiosity. Many dogs are interested in what's going on around them. This includes dogs who have one particular interest such as other dogs, as well as dogs fascinated by just about everything - they have never met a tree that they didn't want to sniff or a leaf that they didn't want to watch as it moved on the breeze. Dogs who are very curious about the environment might have that issue compounded if they also possess a high natural activity level, are easily over-aroused in new environments, or tend towards reactivity (aggressive displays) in the presence of specific triggers, such as novel dogs or solitary strangers. These possibilities will be covered in Chapter 4.

Training Issues

The third category of focus challenges can be grouped together as training issues. Dogs often lose focus when they are subjected to unclear, confusing, unpleasant, or insufficient training. If any of these training errors occur, many dogs will move away from the training itself, even if there is nothing better to do or look at out there. We'll cover issues caused by training in Chapter 5.

Temperament

Finally, we'll discuss how your dog's individual temperament can impact his ability to focus in Chapter 6. Each dog brings his own unique genetic package to the table, and while you can influence this to a certain degree, you need to understand your dog's unique personality in order to create the best possible training plan for him.

Temperament is largely innate, and is subsequently affected by experience.

The Analysis

Saying that your dog "needs focus" is simply too vague. In order to make any changes, you need to narrow down the specifics so you know where to concentrate your efforts. Read the next chapters carefully to determine the specific issues relevant to your dog. It's important to diagnose the problem accurately, so be as thoughtful, objective, and honest as you can; the solution for a dog with a fear issue might be the exact opposite of the solution recommended for a dog with curiosity issues.

Don't forget that you need someone who can be objective! Ask a trusted friend, trainer, or mentor to complete the analysis for you and your dog as well. How much of their analysis agrees or disagrees with your own? If there is significant overlap, that's great because you are both seeing the same basic issues. But if there's not, you need to carefully consider the areas that are different. Take your time to ponder the validity of another person's viewpoint and determine how much weight you give their perceptions - and how much bias you carry about your dog.

Being a good dog trainer often means letting go of your ego and some closely held beliefs. This is definitely a difficult task, but it is necessary for successful change. For example, if you keep clinging to the belief that your dog loves agility even though all evidence suggests there are major stress issues, then there is no way things will improve over the long run. We need to be open to hearing hard truths if we want the best possible outcome for our dogs and our training.

Please read these next chapters carefully. Until you understand (and address) your dog's root issues, you will continue to struggle.

When your dog fails to perform, it is critical to identify the root problem.

For those of you who are reading this book because you have a new dog and you simply want to start off on the right foot, that's excellent! You won't have any real "un-training" to do, which is the best case scenario! Go ahead and read the following chapters to understand the pitfalls that might arise, and then move right into the focus and engagement training! This type of training is recommended for ALL dogs, regardless of their natural focus level.

Notes:

Chapter Three

Focus Analysis: Stress, Anxiety, and Fear

Stress, which leads to anxiety and fear, is the most common issue we see in dogs who are not capable of focusing on their trainers and their work. Dogs who display symptoms of stress don't seem very interested in working with you or in learning the behaviors and skills that you try to teach. Fearful dogs may try to work for you, especially if you are using high value motivators, but they will quickly disengage if there is not a steady flow of food or play, or when there are changes in the environment. They often work without any signs of enjoyment or interest. The reason for these behaviors is simple: anxiety and fear ALWAYS trump learning!

Stress

Stress is an uncomfortable emotional state that can be triggered by a huge variety of stimuli, and unchecked stress tends to lead to anxiety or fear. Stress occurs when your dog (or you!) feels unable to cope with an event or situation, or when your dog feels threatened or unsafe. Once stressed, your dog's enjoyment and enthusiasm disappears, which typically leads to decreased performance.

You can use food to mask your dog's discomfort at a show, but the stress will re-appear when the food goes away.

Our experience as long-time trainers is that stress is the most common reason why trained, adult dogs lose focus and the ability to perform in dog competitions and at training events. Many dogs come to view trial settings, particularly being in a performance ring, as a very stressful event.

This Golden Retriever is feeling anxious at the vet's office.

This dog is too stressed to perform well at this agility trial.

Why is this so common? There are a number of possible reasons, but one is often the fact that the handler is stressed and acting in strange and unusual ways. This change in human behavior and emotions is easily observed by the dog and seen as a sign that something very bad is about to happen. Because dogs are very context specific in their

learning, they learn that trial settings and performance rings are places that upset their trainers, so they react accordingly.

Another major reason for stress is connected to pressure, especially pressure to perform when the task is confusing or unclear. When you tell us that your dog does great at your normal training center, we believe you. But in new and chaotic settings, combined with your anxiety and strong desire to do well and qualify, the pressure on your dog is high.

Note the lowered body and head carriage of the dog in front. This dog is concerned.

Yawning can be a sign of stress or boredom.

Note how much of the white portion of this dog's eye is visible. He is not comfortable.

Note the dilated pupils. This is another sign of stress.

Stress signals in dogs can sometimes be quite difficult to read so it's important for trainers to learn about canine body language and to consider context as well. Some things to look for include a dog who pants when he's not hot, avoids eye contact, keeps his head or body low, yawns in an exciting context, licks his lips, shows the whites of his eyes, has large dilated pupils, tucks his tail between his legs, or holds it straight up and very stiff. Keep in mind that all stress signals also have a normal variant. For example, a dog may lick his lips because he is stressed, but he may also lick his lips if he has just finished a meal! There is no reason to assume stress unless the context suggests it!

Some dogs respond to stress by becoming passive and quiet. Trainers call this "stressing down," and in extreme cases your dog might literally freeze and stop moving. Other dogs become frantic, excited, and get "the zoomies." Trainers call this "stressing up."

Is this young dog stressing down or just resting? We need more information!

Grabbing at her owner's clothing and behaving in a frantic manner is a sign of stressing up.

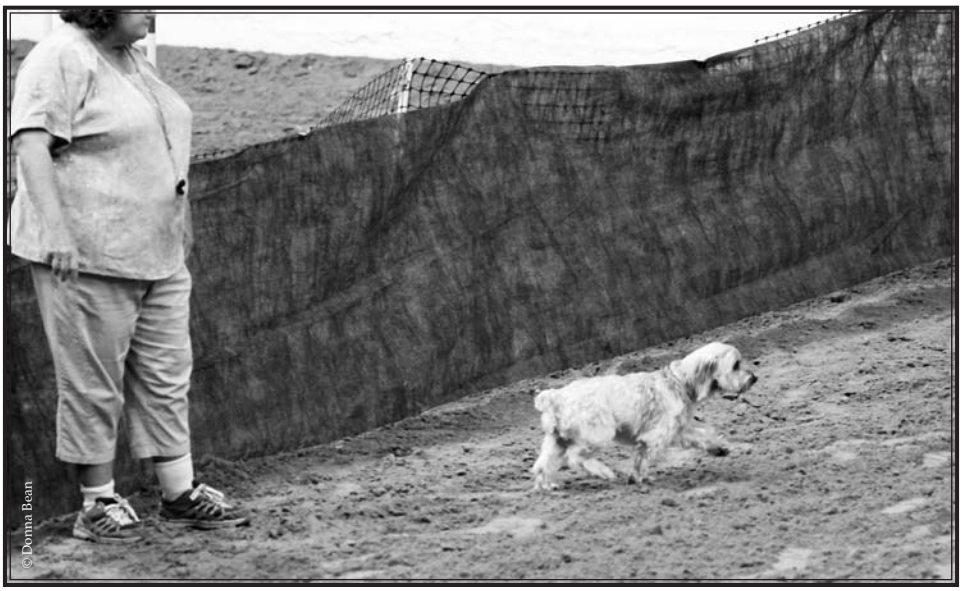
Dogs who perform very well at home or in class, but struggle at the dog show or in novel environments, likely have a stress problem. Likewise, if you find competition very stressful and you struggle to manage your own nerves, it is possible that your dog is responding to your distress with distress of his own. This is often particularly pronounced in exhibitors when doing well or qualifying is particularly important to them, or if the team has experienced a series of failures which correlated to the dog's decreasing performances over time. In these cases, you are very likely seeing focus challenges related to ever increasing stress and pressure associated with competition.

Varying levels of stress and anxiety are almost always present in people and dogs

at some point. In fact, mild stress is normal and might even assist you in remaining mentally sharp! But when the stress goes beyond the category of mild, it can quickly become debilitating. This is especially true for softer dogs who need their handler's support to perform well. If your dog connects an activity, event, or place with stress, you have a huge job ahead of you to change that reaction. Ignoring stress is a bad idea. Left alone, it tends to get worse.

Anxiety

Dogs can be generally anxious and nervous due to temperament, or they can have these responses in specific situations. Once anxiety has been triggered, the ability to learn decreases. Unfortunately, many trainers either don't recognize anxiety or discount it altogether. We often hear trainers tell us, "But he has nothing to be anxious about! Nothing bad has ever happened to him." Or, "Yes, he was attacked years ago, but he didn't really get hurt!" The problem with statements like these is that it assumes that anxiety is a choice or a rational behavior. It's not. Anxiety is an emotion. Dogs (and humans) do not choose to feel anxious - it's not fun to experience these negative emotions! It simply happens.



This dog is sufficiently distressed that he chooses to leave training altogether.

Here's a human example. If you look down and find a spider climbing up your arm, you will probably react strongly by vocalizing and shaking your arm in an effort to get it off. If spiders keep landing on you in a specific environment, it is likely that you will begin to feel very uncomfortable there. The fact that a spider has never actually bitten you is irrelevant; if it makes you anxious to have spiders climbing on you, then knowing that a certain area is infested with spiders will cause you anxiety when you

are there. It is irrelevant if you rationally understand that most spiders are harmless or that your friend insists there is nothing to be afraid of, because emotions are often not rational. They simply happen.

We may know that our dogs are safe in the middle of a crowded dog show, but our dogs don't necessarily know that. It takes a lot of time and effort to get to the point where our dogs learn to trust us and to believe that we would not put them into dangerous situations. Until you earn that level of trust from your dog, anxiety may be a factor in your dog's inability to focus.

Some anxious dogs will attempt to cling to their owners for support whereas others rely on themselves to feel safe, scanning the environment obsessively and showing an inability to relax and settle. Regardless, they cannot focus in this emotional state.

It is important to correctly identify the source of your dog's anxiety and nervousness. Ignoring signs of anxiety or pressuring the dog to "get over it" are not solutions. The anxious, nervous dog doesn't feel safe. This needs to be addressed with a carefully thought out and systematic plan.

Fear

Fear goes a step beyond anxiety and nervousness. A fearful dog actively avoids or drives away something that he perceives as dangerous. It doesn't matter if it truly is dangerous or not. If your dog thinks it is, you need to take it seriously.

This dog's body language indicates tension and stress.
He needs your help to make him feel better!

Minimizing and ignoring fear issues does not make them go away. When you either ignore fear or force your dog to face it in an effort to "prove" that something is not dangerous, you are heading down the wrong path. You can easily end up with total shut down or with defensive aggressive behavior.

Here's another human example. If you are afraid of spiders, as noted above, being forced to allow them to crawl on you so that you can see that no harm comes to you will not lessen your fear; indeed it is likely to drive you to panic. And the person who put you in that situation? That person will be strongly associated with the misery that you experience. You don't want to be the one that your dog becomes afraid of. Do not attempt to make your dog "face his fears." It's dangerous and unkind.

Fearful behavior needs to be taken extremely seriously and worked through thoughtfully and carefully. One unpleasant event can have a strong, long-lasting effect, especially when the dog already has a sensitive or cautious temperament. It can take hundreds - maybe even thousands - of pleasant and positive events to overcome the effects of one negative one. You will need to develop a complete and thorough behavior program in order to undo those unpleasant associations, which will take time and effort. This must take precedence if you ever want your dog to be comfortable and successful in competition.

Fearful dogs usually do one of three things: try to flee, try to fight, or simply freeze. Your dog may only show one of these, or your dog may do each in succession as his options fail to help him feel safe.

Flee

The first way that many fearful dogs react to stressors is to attempt to flee. If they can run away, they will. This might lead them into even more dangerous situations; dogs who flee in panic are very likely to get hurt. The fact that your dog's first instinct is to get away from something he perceives as dangerous is not bad, so make sure you respect what your dog is trying to tell you. Give your dog distance and space from stressors when he needs it.

This dog is heeling in competition, yet the tight leash and lack of contact with the handler suggest that the dog might flee if he were off leash.

One common type of flight in performance dogs is getting "the zoomies." Zooming (racing randomly around the ring or training area) is a stress response based on fleeing. Many people don't believe us when we say this. They often think that the dog

is just excited and displaying his high spirits. We disagree. While it may be perfectly normal for your dog to zoom around your yard to let off some steam and use up excess energy, it is not normal in the middle of a training session or competition. Focused and engaged dogs don't zoom. Stressed and anxious ones do.

These dogs look like they're having fun because it releases tension and anxiety, which feels good. Dogs who zoom are NOT having fun with their training. If your dog was truly comfortable with focusing on your mutual interaction, he would not choose to leave you and go off on his own. If your dog is zooming when he should be working, then he's giving you important information. He's not confident and comfortable with what you are asking of him. He feels overwhelmed.

The key to working with this issue is to identify the precursors to zooming. Look for the patterns and commonalities to zooming episodes. For example, Deb once worked with a team where the dog would start zooming in agility whenever they approached the table. This suggests that there was uncertainty or pressure surrounding the performance of that obstacle. If you address the underlying issue, the zooming should decrease, and the dog's focus should increase.

Fight

Fearful dogs who cannot flee may feel they have no other option except fighting. This tendency often starts as a warning growl or snap towards whatever the dog perceives as the source of danger. If that doesn't work to make the bad thing move away, or if the dog is punished for giving these warning signs, things will likely escalate. These warning signs of impending aggression are giving you very important information, so please don't ignore or punish them. Your dog is trying to communicate that he does not feel safe and, in fact, he feels forced to defend himself.

In the dog world, it is common to hear a dog described as "over aroused" or "reactive." This typically means that the dog has a sensitivity to certain stimuli and responds to them with aggressive displays like lunging, growling, snarling, or snapping. He does not typically react this way when he is not overly aroused, but reactive dogs often have a short fuse and go from relatively calm to over the top in short order. Because the majority of reactivity is fear based, most solutions focus on helping the dog feel more comfortable in the environment and in the presence of triggers that cause overarousal, such as other dogs nearby. Often trainers will attempt to mask or overwhelm reactivity with high value food or toys. While this can give the illusion of solving the problem, it is only an illusion. The dog has not learned to cope with stressors in a healthy manner. He is still in a state of fear and anxiety, and at some point when the goodies are gone, the problem behaviors are likely to reappear.

This Kelpie appears to function when the high value treats are present.
But when they are gone and the dog enters the ring, the stress reappears.

The only hope for a more lasting solution is to learn how to help your dog work through his fear using a combination of classical and operant conditioning. Lowering the dog's arousal level while also helping him learn how to behave appropriately even when overly excited are the keys to dealing with this issue. In general, reactive dogs need enough distance from the trigger so that they are capable of thoughtful reactions. This distance is much further from the trigger than people realize; indeed, the dog should be only mildly aware of its presence. Trying to work the dog "over his head" will simply lead to repeated failures and increased reactivity, or a reliance on food to keep the dog calm. Addressing the dog's ability to focus without the triggers in the environment first, then adding them in a systematic manner, will lead to greater chances for success.

Again, punishing this behavior does not work. While the behavior may decrease, the underlying emotions will only get worse. When your dog's fear finally gets to be too much for him to handle, he may go straight for an attack without any warning - and you will have taught him to do this. If you are at the point that punishment seems like the only option, it is time to consult with a qualified behaviorist to develop a management and training plan.

Freeze

There is a third common reaction to stressful events: freezing. Animals like rabbits and possums (who take it to an extreme) often use freezing when scared, but a freeze reaction can be more subtle than playing dead. It might be seen through slower responses and movement. An extremely common problem that trainers encounter in the Utility signal exercise is the dog who stands perfectly still as the trainer leaves

and turns, watches the trainer give the down signal, and then doesn't move a muscle. Often the dog does not move even with repeated signals. Trainers swear that their dogs respond perfectly to the signal in training, and we believe them. So, what's going on here? Freezing!

A number of stressors combine in this exercise. We call this phenomenon trigger stacking. Your dog may be able to cope with any of these stressors individually, but when they happen at the same time it becomes overwhelming. What are the triggers here? Well, you are in a competition ring. That's stress trigger #1. Then, you have just completed a heeling pattern where you have been completely silent; stress trigger #2. Next, you have left your dog in this unfamiliar place and walked quite a long distance away, possibly leaving him feeling quite vulnerable; stress trigger #3. In addition, there has a been a stranger (the judge) following both of you, and now that person is behind your dog somewhere; stress trigger #4. Your dog has likely been taught to look only at you and is therefore not able to check out the environment for any possible lurking dangers; stress trigger #5. At this point, you might be highly stressed and anxious if you are anticipating failure; stress trigger #6. If you truly believe your dog knows a down signal (and he might in many situations) and you put some pressure on him to perform, that's stress trigger #7. And finally, stress trigger #8: you have no food or toys! Dogs often associate those motivators with stress relief, and now they are gone! All of this is a perfect storm to lead to overwhelming stress and failure.

A dog who freezes can give the illusion of being obedient. He doesn't deviate from what he is specifically told to do, ever. He will perform very slowly and very carefully. He likely gives the minimum amount of effort required. While he does what he is told, there is no enthusiasm or joy in him. These dogs are not fun to train, nor are they fun to watch. They are shut down and working hard not to call any attention to themselves.

The Importance of Environmental Exposure

Getting ready for a performance event includes more than just learning the exercises your dog will be expected to perform. He also needs to be comfortable with the situations he will encounter. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Has your dog been exposed to a variety of situations that will prepare him for what he's going to experience at a dog show?
- Has he worked around large numbers of strange dogs and people?
- Has he spent hours in a crate waiting for his turn?
- Has he been exposed to the sound of loudspeakers and ring gates falling over?
- And if he has been exposed to all those things, how did he react? Did he recover quickly from startling and unexpected events? Dogs shows are full of those kinds of things!

Do not work a dog in a new space unless his behavior suggests that he is feeling comfortable.

Deb's first performance dog, Katie, was in a stay line at a large obedience trial when two birds swooped into the fairgrounds building and flew right in front of the line of Novice dogs. That doesn't happen every day, but it does happen, especially in open buildings or outdoors. At a different trial, Deb watched a sensitive Papillon doing the signal exercise in Utility. Right in the middle of the dog's drop, another exhibitor dropped a metal crate behind the dog, startling her and causing her to freeze.

Dogs with an overall softer temperament are more likely to become overwhelmed with the environment. These dogs have a tendency to stop moving in a relaxed fashion in new and chaotic environments, and do not appear happy and relaxed in busy environments even when you are not working. If your dog cannot relax and play with enthusiasm in a given environment, then he almost certainly cannot work with focus!

Some dogs love the excitement and activity at a trial or class, but many find it overwhelming. They may be slightly tense or nervous, worry about the dogs or the people around them, or be bothered by the noises around them. For whatever reason, they are simply not comfortable in high energy, chaotic settings. They find it difficult to impossible to ignore what's going on around them and focus on the task. It's like taking a child to a loud party and asking him to do math problems. Even if he can do them well in a quiet and familiar setting, he simply cannot shut out all the external stimuli going on around him.

If your dog can play with you without food or toys, he's probably feeling pretty good!

Trigger stacking can be a huge issue at dog shows. Your dog might be able to handle one or two triggers at a time, but when they add up at the same time, it's too much to manage. You usually have a combination of many more dogs and people than your dog is used to seeing, crowding, lots of noise, lots of activity, unfamiliar equipment, crating away from the trainer, and pressure to perform, just to name the most obvious factors. While your dog may be able to cope with one, two, or even three of these possible stressors, for many dogs it becomes totally overwhelming.

A large part of focus is the ability to ignore the things in the environment that don't matter and concentrate on the task at hand. If that's impossible for your dog because he experiences intense anxiety or outright fear or panic, then you will not be successful at a trial unless you have one of those rare days when all conditions are perfect. And those are rare days indeed! Rather than trying to avoid all of the things that are likely to happen at a trial, it would make more sense to begin exposing your dogs to those stimuli at a low level, then asking for easy work so that he can be successful. You can then increase the level of environmental stimuli and, when that is going well, increase the difficulty of the work. This can take many months or years to accomplish, but is definitely worth the effort.

The Role of Pressure in Stress and Anxiety

Even though most people don't mean to do it, it's very easy to pressure a dog to perform. We pressure dogs whenever we put them in situations for which they are not totally and adequately prepared - and preparation goes beyond knowing how to perform the skills and behaviors. We might not even realize that our dogs are not prepared until it actually happens! Often, we have the illusion that our dogs are ready because they do well in familiar settings, or with lots of reinforcement and help from us to succeed. But if they're not truly prepared, adding extra pressure is unlikely to help the situation. It just decreases our dog's level of trust in us.

This dog is already feeling pressure; don't add to it!

After a bit of acclimation she is feeling better. Now it's time to get to work.

We need to consider our dog's emotional readiness to perform at a trial. Dogs who have stable and resilient temperaments are likely to do fine because they will bounce back from unpleasant experiences without any long-lasting negative after-effects. But what about those dogs who are more fragile and sensitive? Have you worked hard to help your dog learn how to cope with stressors and yet still be able to comfortably work with you?

Pressure often intensifies based on the handler's responses to training errors and to the dog show. The more you worry about doing well and concern yourself with forcing responses from your dog, the more likely it is that you are placing excessive pressure on your dog to perform; a recipe for unchecked anxiety in many dogs.

Stress, Anxiety, Fear, and the Ability to Focus

So what does all this have to do with focus? Everything! Focus is absolutely impossible when your dog is stressed. You don't have a focus problem, you have a stress problem. Stressed dogs are beyond the point of being able to focus or function normally and should not be trained until their mental state has been addressed.

Before you can even consider training and showing, you must first consider your dog's emotional state and well-being. Your dog cannot give you 100% in learning or competition situations if he is not comfortable in those settings. We want our dogs to learn that working with us is always safe, enjoyable, and highly reinforcing. That is the only way they will be able to give us their total focus and ignore everything going on around them.

Focus Analysis: Stress, Anxiety, and Fear

Think about the times your dog has failed to be focused on you, then answer the following questions.

1. Is your dog showing stressed body language?
2. Does your dog perform very well at home or in training, but struggle at the dog show?
3. Do you suffer from ring nerves or performance anxiety?
4. Is your dog avoiding you?
5. Is your dog showing a decrease in enthusiasm?
6. Does your dog cling to your side or hide behind you?
7. Does your dog show an inability to relax while at the dog show?
8. Is your dog constantly looking around and scanning the environment?
9. Does your dog run away from objects or situations?
10. Does your dog get "the zoomies" during training or trials?
11. Does your dog growl, snarl, or snap at people, dogs, or objects?
12. Does your dog lunge to the end of his leash?
13. Is your dog "reactive"?
14. Does your dog stop responding to your cues?
15. Is your dog slow, methodical, or unenthusiastic in his responses?
16. Does your dog have a soft temperament, or is he more sensitive than the average dog?

17. Does your dog struggle to play in new or chaotic environments?
18. Did you forget to expose your dog to the types of things he might experience at a dog show?
19. Do you worry that other people at a dog show are judging you, or do you feel like you have something to prove?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, your dog's focus issues may be the result of stress, anxiety, or fear. Indeed, it's quite likely.

Notes:

Chapter Four
Focus Analysis: Curiosity

Sometimes dogs have trouble focusing on the task at hand because of curiosity. These dogs are very interested in the world around them, often preferring to check out the other dogs, people, and items around them than working for their handlers. In this chapter, we'll explore the most common types of curiosity seen in dogs.

Environmental Curiosity

The environmentally curious dog is interested in EVERYTHING. He wants to see what's going on, not because it makes him anxious or nervous, but because he finds it fascinating. He doesn't want to miss out on anything happening around him. Everything is of equal interest: a leaf, another dog, a rock, a bug, a sound… Basically, this dog has the "shiny object" problem, and the world is stuffed full of shiny objects! This is frustrating for the trainer because it is impossible to remove every distraction.

The main reason a dog with high environmental curiosity cannot focus is because he hasn't developed the cognitive ability to concentrate on a single task with any duration. These types of dogs simply bounce from one thing to the next to the next without spending any sustained time on a single thing. Fortunately, the ability to concentrate can be developed with systematic focus training.

You'll know that you have a dog with high environmental interest if he is easily entertained by the world no matter where you take him. These dogs do not miss much, especially when a change occurs. They are slow to get bored with the world, and they rarely check in with their trainers to see what training options might be available. They often spend a good deal of time on each possibility, whether that's staring at moving objects in the distance or sniffing every blade of grass with great care. They tend to show a good deal of frustration if they are not allowed access to whatever might be on their mind at that moment; sometimes they vocalize and lunge towards things to express their displeasure at restraint.

Some dogs with high levels of curiosity are so taken by the world that it dampens their interest in anything that you might have to offer. In the same way that a toddler at Disneyland is not at all interested in sitting down for a snack, some dogs with high

These dogs all exhibit the "shiny objects in the environment" problem.

levels of curiosity have very little appetite or interest in toys when the world is calling - and the world always seems to be calling!

Highly environmental dogs often have a dominant sense. Some will be fascinated by smells, some by sounds, and others by sights. You'll want to know which sense is most intriguing to your dog so you can incorporate that information in your training plan.

If you have a dog like this, you have probably been told that you "need to be more interesting than the environment." We simply don't believe this is true. In fact, it's impossible. There are a million shiny objects in the world, and our goal is not to try

to overwhelm them by acting like a clown on crack. That may work at first, but rarely for very long. Instead, our goal is to help our dogs both develop the ability to focus even in the face of competing stimuli and also to understand when focus is required and when it isn't.

Once we have focus, our goal is to present work in a manner that both sparks the dog's interest and allows him to be successful. The answer for this type of dog is not to forbid or punish interest in the environment, but rather to provide clear structure and guidance about when it's okay to explore and when it's time for focus and work. Providing clear cues regarding a work context as opposed to free time is vital, and to accomplish this, we must provide high value reinforcement for focus and work, particularly in the early stages of training.

Some dogs air scent while others sniff the ground or specific objects.

Sociable Curiosity

Some dogs have an intense interest in other dogs, people, or both. There is a strong genetic component to sociability; certain types and breeds of dogs are more oriented on others, and certain individuals can take that to an extreme. Early experiences can also have a huge impact on the amount of sociability an individual displays. Most people want their dogs to be outgoing and friendly with others, so they encourage sociable behavior when the dog is young. This can unintentionally condition a dog to believe that training settings are actually social events. Many puppy classes allow dogs to have free play with other pups before working with their people. While there is nothing wrong with puppies socializing with each other (as long as it is a safe, controlled environment), some puppies learn that other dogs are fun and people are

all business and kind of boring or unpleasant. Doggy daycare is another venue in which dogs learn that being around each other is a cue for playtime. For example, Deb had two dogs in a class who attended daycare regularly from the time they were puppies. They simply could not be convinced that class was about working with their owners as opposed to interaction with the other dogs. This was quite frustrating for both the dogs and their owners!

Some dogs are very curious about other dogs whereas other dogs are more drawn to people.

While we don't want to punish our dogs for being friendly, we do want to teach them that there is a time and a place for that type of activity. Be thoughtful about when, where, and how you allow or encourage your dog to interact with others. Set up clear differences in context and environmental cues between play time with others and training time with you. We want our dogs to stay on task and engaged with us until they are released from work. Then, a well-deserved break with permission to play with a canine or human friend might be the right training choice. Using that desired interaction as a reinforcer can make a very strong impression on your dog!

One of our goals with focus and engagement training is to create so much enjoyment and excitement about working with us that it never occurs to the dog to disconnect in order to seek out someone else (canine or human) for interaction. To accomplish this goal, we will need to consistently provide our dogs with work that is interesting, challenging, and highly reinforcing. Initially, this will need to be done AWAY from environments that have attractive alternative options. Remember, if you're in a highly stimulating environment (whatever that means to your dog), you can't compete because you will not win. But in your living room? You have an extremely good chance to make you and your work very important to your dog! That's where you'll want to start,

adding the challenge of other dogs and people at appropriate distances as your dog shows readiness.

Keep in mind that the goal is not to be the most "interesting thing out there." The goal is to set up environments where your food, toys, and personality make it easy to win.

Cautious Curiosity

Certain dogs show interest in the environment, other dogs, and people, but it's not a happy and excited interest. Instead, they are cautious and suspicious. They are in approach / avoidance conflict. These dogs want to investigate, but they do not want to interact. They want to know more about something they have encountered because they are concerned that it's not safe. If this type of dog is not handled correctly, he is likely to become fearful or nervous.

These dogs are curious but slightly reserved. That's okay; allow them to adapt and feel safe on their own time.

Dogs like this need to explore their environments thoroughly before they can feel relaxed enough to ignore the world and focus on work. This concept, which we call acclimation, will be discussed in depth later on, but for now, what you need to know is that acclimation is the opportunity to freely explore the environment before being asked for focus. During acclimation, dogs should be free to walk around, looking and sniffing to their heart's content. They may need to examine every inch of the environment. That's fine. This acclimation period is helpful for all dogs, but it's especially necessary for dogs who are cautious and concerned.

One of Deb's Border Collies, Star, has a very high need for acclimation due to concerns

about the environment and the people in it. Deb plans acclimation time into her schedule on trial days. Star will often get two or three acclimation walks of about ten to fifteen minutes each around the rings and general working area. During these walks, Star is allowed to sniff the perimeter of the ring, walk around any equipment sitting outside the ring, and, if possible, stand close to the judge outside the ring. Most judges don't realize that Deb is doing it on purpose; it just looks like a dog and handler taking a relaxed casual walk.

If your dog is concerned about other dogs or people in the environment, it needs to be addressed. Dog shows are typically busy and crowded, so your dog will need to learn how to tolerate, if not enjoy, the presence of others. Because strange people are a particular concern for Star, Deb spent a lot of time allowing Star to approach and sniff people, but only after asking the people to totally ignore Star while she investigated them. When Star approaches a person, she doesn't want to interact. She wants to gather information and then move on. This is a hard thing for many folks, including some dog people, to understand, but there is a definite population of dogs out there who feel this way. Allowing them controlled opportunities to investigate lets them learn that the world is a safe place.

Curiosity is not the Enemy

Curiosity about the environment and those in it is perfectly normal, but some dogs take that interest to an extreme level. We do not forbid exploration or acclimation, but work it into a clear training structure. We want to work with our dogs, not constantly fight for their interest and focus. Our goal is to help our dogs develop the ability to concentrate on us and what we're doing together. Once that is accomplished, we can instill a habit of focus in spite of competing environmental factors.

Focus Analysis: Curiosity - Attraction Based

1. Is your dog interested in "shiny objects?"
2. Is your dog easily entertained by the world everywhere he goes?
3. Does your dog notice everything that goes on around him?
4. Does your dog frequently stare at moving objects?
5. Does your dog need to sniff every square inch of his environment in order to relax?
6. Does your dog get frustrated if he can't investigate an interesting object?
7. Is your dog so interested in things around him that he won't eat or play with you?
8. Have you been told that you need to be more interesting than anything else?
9. Did your dog go to a puppy class with free play with other puppies?
10. Does your dog regularly go to daycare or the dog park?
11. Is everyone your dog meets an opportunity to make a new friend?

Curiosity - Safety Based

12. Does your dog want to investigate things, but not interact with them?
13. Is your dog cautious around new people, dogs, or in new environments?
14. Is your dog both attracted to and avoidant of new experiences?

If you find yourself nodding in agreement to any of these questions then curiosity could be a major factor in your dog's focus challenges.

Notes:

Chapter Five
Focus Analysis: Poor Training

Sometimes dogs simply opt out of work.

Sometimes, a dog's failure to focus has nothing to do with the dog - it has to do with the trainer. When training is done poorly, dogs often get confused or frustrated, with some dogs checking out entirely. It's much easier to look around, sniff things, or just ignore confusing information than it is to figure out what the heck the trainer wants.

In this chapter, we present some common training mistakes people make. Although it's not possible to be perfect all the time, if you find yourself doing some of these things more often than not, your dog's focus issues might actually be your training issues!

Lumping Instead of Splitting

Historically, dogs have been trained with big chunks of information. Rather than breaking exercises down into small pieces and helping the dogs digest each piece before creating chains out of these tiny behaviors, trainers showed their dogs entire exercises and hoped for the best. Heeling was taught by keeping the dog in position (either with collar corrections or a cookie) as they went through left turns, right turns, changes of

pace, and so on. No effort was made to teach the dogs each of these behaviors one at a time before pulling them together into reasonable chains of behavior.

This dog is learning to find heel position with his front feet on a disc.

Today, we know that great training demands breaking behaviors down into pieces. Take heeling for example. Left turns are taught with pivots - often using a disc. Straight sits at heel are taught with a platform, and tuck sits are taught separately before bringing them into heeling. Changes of pace are taught as a two-part process; first dogs are taught to accept the handler's change of gait, then the actual pace is changed. This is what it means to "split" training into tiny, digestible pieces. While this process sounds slow, it is actually much faster over the long run because dogs are better able to learn each small piece very quickly. In addition, there are no holes in the final picture that would require time-consuming and frustrating retraining. And if holes do emerge, trainers simply isolate the problem area from the chain and strengthen that piece.

Dogs vary dramatically in their need for excellent training. Some dogs manage to figure out what we want in spite of old-fashioned "lumping." That these dogs tend to stay focused throughout their training is a tribute to their genetic package and temperament as opposed to any particular skill of the trainer. But many other dogs require more of their trainers. They are not able to pull the pieces together when information is given to them in lumps. As a result, they struggle to learn. They often experience a good deal of frustration, which expresses itself as avoidance and lack of focus.

This situation has a way of leading to an unfortunate cycle in which the trainers work harder and harder to get their dogs' attention - either through corrections or cookies - and the dogs spend more and more energy trying to avoid the corrections and take advantage of the cookies, yet learn relatively little because they aren't actually engaged in the task. Most dogs find this approach to training stressful because they are aware that their trainers are not pleased with them, but have no idea WHY their trainer is unhappy. Some dogs simply opt out altogether; they are not concerned about their trainers, but they are concerned about their own comfort and well-being - and they do not want to be there!

One of the main reasons Denise stopped using compulsion in training and started to focus on teaching handlers better training skills instead was because she was struck by the fact that most training problems had been created by the handler. Either the handler had skimped on foundation skills, or they were maintaining the problem with poor handling skills, or they were making poor reinforcement choices.

Make sure you aren't begging your dog to work with cookies!

It takes time to develop great training skills. We assume that each person is doing the best they can, and that once they know better, they will train better! Unfortunately, if your best isn't particularly good, then your dog will struggle - and focus is often the first thing to go.

Lack of Clarity

Clarity means that something is clear and easily understood. A lack of clarity suggests confusion and uncertainty - and this can create focus issues. Ask yourself if you are certain that your dog understands what you are trying to teach. Sometimes you have to tweak techniques to find one that makes sense to your particular dog, but be careful that you don't try approach after approach in quick succession. Dogs who have been exposed to a variety of different types of training or training methods may be confused. They don't know what to expect. This is especially true of "crossover" dogs (dogs who have previously been trained using forceful or coercive methods). When you change your training approach, these dogs are often uncertain and confused. They need time to learn, understand, and trust the new training system. The "kitchen sink" approach is rarely effective and it usually leads to focus problems.

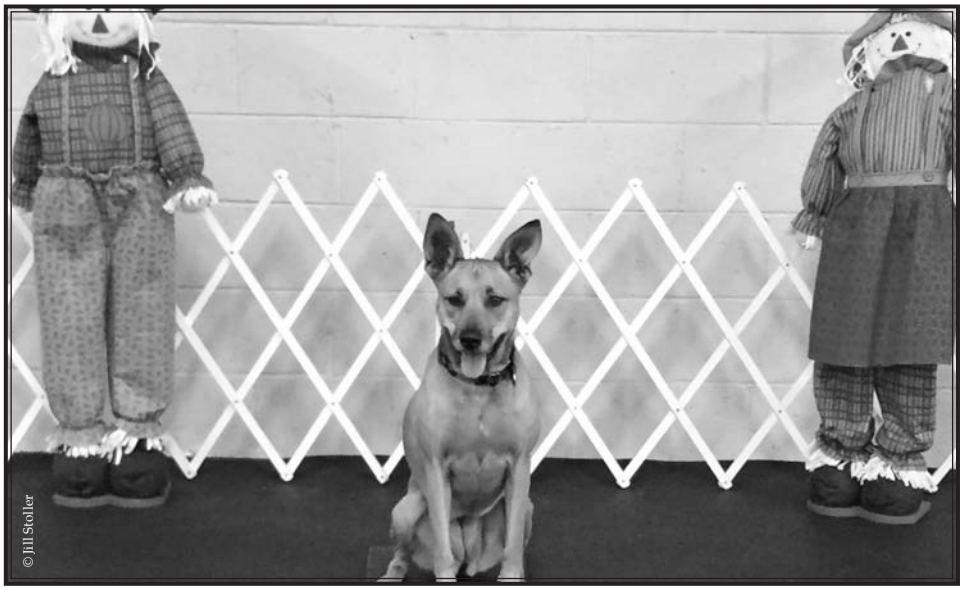
If you're not sure if you are being clear, tape a session of you working with your dog. When you watch it, turn off the sound. Do you think it is clear and obvious, based on your training set-up, what you are asking your dog to do? Could a dog-savvy observer clearly identify your training goals? If not, rethink your plan.

Lack of Fluency

Highly successful trainers work well past the point of initial understanding; they work to fluency - the point at which behaviors and responses become automatic regardless

of context. This takes a lot more time and repetition than most folks think it does. If your dog is not responding the way you expect in new or different environments, it could be that you have not trained to fluency yet. If your dog has to think about his response to your cue, you're not there yet.

A good example of this is the weave poles in agility. By the time they enter their first trial, most young dogs have done them correctly in training, possibly even done them very well, but they still require conscious thought and effort to get it right. In other words, they are not yet fluent in weaves, and as a result, they often fail them in trials. It's not that they can't do them at home, but once the added stress and excitement of a trial is added, the exercise falls apart. That's a normal function of insufficient fluency.



Tia is working with distractions to improve her fluency on this exercise.

Focus comes with fluency! And fluency comes with repetition, especially when done in a variety of environments. If you aren't sure if you've trained to fluency, ask yourself if your dog has been exposed to the types of things that might happen at the show - and if he's been able to work through that situation. For example, focusing on you when you are about to enter a competition ring is more than just sitting next to you attentively. Your dog needs to be focused even when there is a table with two or more strangers sitting there. He needs to be focused even when there is a judge in the area you are about to enter, another dog working in that ring, and, very likely, other rings going on right next to that. Your dog needs to be focused even when handlers are calling commands, throwing dumbbells, and other dogs are running.

If your dog has never seen these things until the day of the dog show and then shows a poor ability to focus in the ring, you need to ask yourself if this is a focus problem...

or is it a training problem? If you have not shown the trial picture to your dog, and if your dog has not shown that he knows how to perform correctly in that situation, then it is very likely that your root issue is a fluency issue as opposed to a focus issue.

This book cannot go through all of the steps necessary to achieve fluency, but we can suggest that you take a very hard look at the sorts of challenges that your dog will face when competing - and then make a plan for creating fluency! Completing 500 retrieves or weave poles in your backyard is a good start, but doing more of the same is pointless if what your dog really needs is to see weave poles or retrieves in new locations, and with a stranger watching you!

Reducing Reinforcers Poorly or Not at All

Reinforcers tend to become a crutch for trainers. They work so well and so reliably that trainers keep using them long past the point that they are still necessary or even desirable. If you reinforce every behavior in training, but none in the ring, your dog will quickly learn the difference and react accordingly. The ring will become the specific place where nothing good ever happens, so why bother paying attention? Long before you think about entering competitions with your dog, you should be working on longer chains of behaviors without reinforcers.

There are no food or toy reinforcers in the competition ring. Is your dog prepared for that?

Once again, the root problem is not about focus, it's a training issue. Rather than trying to fool your dog into believing that you have cookies in your pockets, teach your dog to work even when there isn't any classic reinforcement! This book will help you with this process, especially during the engagement phase of training where we will work with our dogs for varying lengths of time between reinforcers. When our dogs become active partners and engage with us, then their need for external reinforcement decreases. Working with us becomes a pleasant and enjoyable activity in itself, and that's our ultimate goal!

Using Pressure

Pressure can come in many forms. The most obvious is putting pressure on a dog to perform when he is not comfortable with or sure of what you are asking. But failing to adequately prepare your dog for the pressure of trial conditions is also a huge mistake. When you want to do well at a trial, or even if you just want to qualify, it is very easy to unintentionally convey your anxiety and concern to your dog - and this is also a form of pressure. If you combine that with any of the previously discussed training or environmental issues, things are likely to go downhill very quickly. It's not fair to expect show quality behaviors unless you have truly prepared your dog for those types of situations.

A lot of specialized training was required to allow this Whippet to accept the pressure of a trial.

As the "lead partner" of your working team, it is your job to set the emotional tone for the experience. Every single time you go to a training class or a trial, you are instilling and strengthening an emotional response in your dog. It will be impossible for your dog to focus and engage if that response is, "Oh no! Not again!"

Room for Improvement

No one is a perfect trainer, but even so, we need to take total responsibility for the experiences our dogs have while training. We need to set them up for success to ensure that they are well-prepared for the challenges of competition.

Always remember that it was your idea to train this particular sport, and your idea to enter a trial. If you want the best possible chance for success, make sure that your teammate is properly prepared for the tasks you are asking him to do. And if things don't go as well as you hoped, then step up and take responsibility for the outcome. Don't blame your dog. It was your training, after all. Take a step back, analyze what went wrong, and design a plan to work through it.

FOCUS ANALYSIS: Poor Training

Ask yourself the following questions. If these apply to your situation, your dog may not have a focus problem, but you might have a training problem!

1. Do you tend to lump the training of behaviors together instead of splitting information into tiny pieces?
2. Do you try to take shortcuts in training and hope for the best?
3. Have you trained your dog in a variety of environments?
4. Do you tend to give up quickly on an old training method in favor of a new one?
5. Are you a new "crossover" trainer?
6. Does your dog make mistakes regularly, even in his most comfortable environment?
7. Do you think that knowing a behavior at home is "good enough" for a trial?
8. Has your dog been exposed to the kinds of things he will encounter at a dog show?
9. Has your dog shown that he can work with you despite all those things?
10. Are you still regularly using large quantities of cookies in training?
11. Are you hoping that you can fool your dog into thinking a reinforcer might happen in the ring?
12. Do you use pressure in training?
13. Do you hope that your dog will qualify at a trial even though you know he isn't really ready to do so?

Notes:

Chapter Six
Focus Analysis: Temperament

Dogs are born with innate qualities of temperament.

While it is absolutely true that the things we do as trainers have an enormous effect on a dog's ability to focus, learn, and perform in a variety of places, it is also equally true that each dog brings an inherited genetic package to the table. We cannot change our dog's basic temperament, and we need to learn to work with these tendencies rather than denying them or fighting them. Just because you want your dog to be outgoing and sociable doesn't mean that he is.

While the debate rages on about the relative importance of nature (temperament) and nurture (what we do), for our purposes, let's just say that both matter. If you acknowledge and respect your dog's basic nature, it will be much easier to design your training to help him perform at his best.

Temperament is a complex topic. Research in humans has shown that there are five main behavioral characteristics that are inherited and tend to be stable throughout life. These are:

- Openness to experience (curious vs. cautious)
- Conscientiousness (efficient and organized vs. a more easy-going nature)
- Agreeableness (friendly and compassionate vs. cold and unkind)
- Extraversion (outgoing vs. reserved)
- Neuroticism (sensitive/nervous vs. secure/confident)

These categories exist along a continuum, with each person having his own balance of, for example, curiosity vs. cautiousness. Although these have not been studied in dogs, we can see some parallels in terms of a dog's openness to experience, amount of introversion or extraversion, and relative levels of neuroticism. Since we've already discussed curiosity in Chapter 4, in this chapter we'll focus primarily on the latter two. We've also added a category about a dog's relative need for and desire of physical activity as there seem to be wide genetic variations based on breed. Because this is a book on focus, we'll look at these categories in terms of how being at one end of the spectrum or another might affect a dog's ability to focus his attention on you, including your training and performance goals.

Introverted Dogs

Dogs, just like people, can be born with more introverted or extroverted temperaments. Extroverted dogs tend to be the social butterflies we discussed briefly in Chapter 4, while the introverted dogs are, by nature, more comfortable with less external stimulation and living in quieter settings. Introverted dogs will never be the life of the party. That doesn't mean they can't come to enjoy public training settings and trials, but you will need to give careful thought to keeping them comfortable in those settings.

One of Deb's dogs, Star, is highly introverted. She's clearly happiest with stability and routine. She has developed the ability to enjoy trials, but Deb needs to be aware of how overwhelming and draining they can be for Star. She has learned to protect Star from too much activity by being thoughtful about where she sets up Star's crate, making sure she gets plenty of time to rest between work sessions or ring time, and limiting warm up routines or potty breaks so that Star doesn't become exhausted by too much exposure to the show grounds.

Introverted dogs can be strong, enthusiastic workers, but they have a clear preference

for working in familiar environments. Although they are perfectly capable of working in new places, they tend to struggle after short periods of time, making multiple classes in a day or multi-day trials a nightmare. They often ask to go back to their crate, or might even be reluctant to leave home. Anxiety and fear are more common with introverted dogs, so review Chapter 3 closely if you have an introverted dog.

Sensitive Dogs

Confident dogs feel capable of performing the behaviors that are requested. They are adequately prepared for the rigors of training and showing. A lack of confidence can come from a number of possible causes, including poor training, not enough training, or inherited tendencies.

By nature, some dogs have more of a sensitive temperament. They want to do what you ask and they seem to care quite a bit about your reactions. Any indication that you are unhappy or disappointed affects them very deeply - even if you're not upset with them! These dogs also tend to worry about things.

This dog is sensitive and will need a careful plan to introduce him to the realities of competition.

With sensitive dogs, you always have to be very careful to monitor your responses to errors. Typically, if they think you are unhappy, they shut down. In addition, because these types of dogs quickly connect training with unpleasant emotions, you will need to work hard to convince the sensitive dog that training and showing is always enjoyable and fun.

Sensitive dogs also tend to have a very high need for emotional support from their owners. They will look to you often to see how they should respond to possible threats in the environment. You will need to work hard on any ring nerves you have, and be calm, confident, and collected for your dog's sake.

Natural Activity Levels

Another aspect of temperament to consider is a dog's natural activity level. Many times this tendency is related to breed and type, but there are exceptions to every rule. Yes, there are low activity level Border Collies out there. That's not the norm, but it happens.

Dogs with a low need for physical activity were born to be couch potatoes! These dogs need a really compelling reason to put out the energy necessary for training and trialing. Lots of people would be very happy with a dog with a low energy level because they are usually easy going and fit into busy pet households very well.

Some dogs always want to play!

But for those of us who want to participate in active dogs sports, this can be a problem. We want a dog with plenty of physical energy to devote to training and trials. It's helpful if your dog's preferred energy level matches your preferred dog sport. If there's a big mismatch you will have to work hard to build up your dog's desire and stamina for the task. And you may always be fighting an uphill battle. You will need to manage your dog's time and energy expenditures quite carefully to get the best he has to offer.

On the other hand, a dog who naturally needs lots of physical activity needs to move. He's ready for action and doesn't put much thought into what he's doing as long as he's doing something. He may get so caught up in DOING that he's just not capable of THINKING. This is the type of dog who needs physical exercise to take the edge off before he can concentrate.

These dogs may also have a relatively short attention span. They can only concentrate for a limited amount of time, making sustained cognitive effort difficult. These dogs will need lots of breaks (probably to run and blow off steam) in between harder mental work.

Response to Stress

There are two classic responses to stress; some dogs simply stop moving and appear vaguely catatonic, while other dogs become hyper excitable and move A LOT! We discuss this here because, like a dog's relative levels of extraversion, curiosity, sensitivity, and need for movement, each dog's general response to stress seems to naturally default somewhere on the continuum between these two responses. It is worth considering what your dog's typical response to stress is like.

The first end of the spectrum is the dog whose response to stress is to stop moving and try to become invisible; we call this "stressing down." Classic signs that a dog is stressing down are lack of attention to the handler, slow or no responses to cues, lack of speed and enthusiasm, and an overall demeanor that screams, "I do not want to be here!"

This dog shows plenty of energy which can be channeled into work!

As a general rule, people read this behavior correctly. When their normally bouncy, happy dog is staring at the ground and barely functioning, most handlers recognize that the dog is not happy. That's a great thing because correctly identifying the source of your dog's behavior is critical to improving it!

At the other end of the spectrum are dogs who "stress up." These dogs do something totally different under stress; they start moving endlessly, often exhibiting as much energy as possible. Classic signs are heavy panting, wide open eyes with dilated pupils, spinning, barking, leaping on the handler or out into the environment, and if off leash, running wildly and with no purpose.

Unfortunately, dogs who stress up are often mistaken for happy and excited as opposed to stressed and dysfunctional. As a result, rather than working to alleviate the source of the dog's distress, the owner is often encouraged to channel that behavior into work or play. While this may give the short-term illusion that the dog is cooperating, it often falls apart once the dog is off leash in a trial setting, where stress levels are higher, or where the toys or cookies are no longer present.

No matter which way your dog tends to react, the truth is simple. Stress is stress. Stressed dogs should not be working at all, nor should they be redirected to food or toys. They should be moved further from the source of their discomfort until they are behaving in a thoughtful and rational manner. At that point, feel free to resume training.

Working with Your Dog's Temperament is Key!

It is critical to know what your dog looks like when happy and when distressed. This dog is happy!

Although you can't change your dog's inherited tendencies, understanding your dog's basic emotional package is very useful. It will help you make decisions about how fast to progress, where to train, and what to expect under different circumstances. Even if your dog's natural temperament includes challenges that make it harder for him to focus, if you make wise training decisions, he CAN learn to improve his attention skills.

Being realistic and using an understanding of your dog's temperament to set up excellent training opportunities is smart. Using your dog's temperament to make excuses about why you aren't going to work to improve your situation is not. Instead, it will prevent you from making any progress at all. Work with what you have and maximize your dog's capacity to learn and work!

Focus Analysis: Temperament

Ask yourself the following questions about your dog's general temperament and behavior.

1. Is your dog an introvert?
2. Does your dog prefer to stay home rather than go to busy places?
3. Does your dog's performance get worse and worse over the course of a trial weekend?
4. At dog shows, does your dog prefer to hang out in his crate?
5. Does your dog seem unusually sensitive to your moods?
6. Does your dog need high levels of emotional support?
7. Does your dog worry about being wrong or making mistakes?
8. Is your dog a natural couch potato?
9. Does your dog need a lot of motivation to get going?
10. Would your dog prefer a long nap to a long walk?
11. Does your dog have a lot of energy?

12. Is your dog always up for a walk?
13. Does your dog get so excited to be moving his body that he forgets to use his brain?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, your dog's focus issues may be the result of his genetic package. Don't worry! Although you can't change genes, you can work with them!

Notes:

Chapter Seven

Making Sense of Your Focus Analysis Results

So you've read the chapters, asked yourself some questions, and maybe you've discovered that your dog has more than a focus problem. Maybe your dog's lack of focus is a symptom of a much more fundamental issue. Whether your dog's issue stems from one category or several, let's take a quick look at how this book can help you, and how it can't.

Stress, Anxiety, and Fear

Because of the emphasis we will place on the importance of acclimation, this book can help with anxious or fearful dogs if the fear is relatively mild and based mostly in the novelty of working in new situations. We will teach you and your dog a structure for taking in new situations so he can feel safe.

If your dog's anxiety and fear is more extreme and ingrained, or if your dog was born with a genetically fearful temperament, then your situation is more complicated. In fact, teaching your dog to focus is impossible. Fear relates to a dog's safety needs, and safety is not a choice. It trumps any training that we might try to apply. If your dog is genuinely fearful then you need to address that problem directly in any place that fear manifests itself; that topic is well beyond the scope of this book because fearful dogs need a comprehensive training plan to help them become more comfortable and confident in a wide range of places. For dogs who are fearful to the point of panic, you should seek help from a professional. Focus training with a truly distressed dog is not only going to be ineffective, it is cruel.

If your dog shows worry in public then work your focus exercises at home where your dog is comfortable.

You can still do these exercises with a fearful dog, but do NOT do them when the dog

is experiencing fear. In those situations, you will want to work through your carefully designed training plan for the fear, not add in additional challenges in the way of focus training. Your focus training can take place in situations in which your dog is calm and confident. Later, as your dog is less fearful, you can expand your focus training to new environments.

Curiosity

This book will be highly effective with dogs who struggle to pay attention because they are interested in the world. These dogs are perfectly confident and like to work with you, but they like lots of other things as well. If you carefully work through this book, paying special attention to completing each and every exercise in a wide range of environments while also slowly increasing the challenge levels of the environments, you will see enormous improvements in your dog's behavior.

Training Issues

This book cannot fix the poor training decisions you are making that cause your dog to disengage. However, this book CAN help you see what good training looks like, simply by observing the way we have laid out the exercises. This book contains a thoughtful and well-designed training plan, arranged in small, easily digested pieces of information, and given in incrementally more challenging environments.

If your training skills are fine but you find that your lack of genuine and personal interaction with your dog is causing disengagement, then please consider reading Book 3: Play! In addition, pay careful attention to the engagement portion of this book. That is

Keep your warm and personal interactions with your dog front and center at all times!

where we really emphasize bringing in your personality and genuine appreciation for your dog (and your dog for you!) to help you attain the working picture of teamwork that you want.

Temperament

If you read through the temperament chapter and found that some of your dog's focus issues are more likely a result of innate temperament than anything else, this book can still help you. No one can change your dog's temperament, but good training will bring out the best in your dog. We believe that instilling focus in a dog should be non-negotiable and come before you move forward with any other training. This will help you maximize what you have to work with.

Multiple Causes

And what if your dog is in the most common category of all: focus issues arising from a variety of causes? Then this book can definitely help you! Focus training gives dogs confidence as long as it is being applied appropriately in the correct environments at the correct times. As a result, focus training will help a dog with mild fear issues to become more confident. Focus training will take dogs who are simply curious and move their ability to pay attention forward by leaps and bounds. Focus training will help you develop your skills as a trainer, and finally, the engagement work that finishes this book will help you and your dog move forward with a degree of teamwork that you may have never thought possible.

While this book can help the vast majority of dogs, it cannot create miracles. You will have to be an active partner in your dog's journey, always asking yourself if your dog is ready for the next step, and if you have set up your training sessions to maximize success. Are you working in the right location? Are your expectations reasonable? Are you just as engaged in the training session as you are asking your dog to be? Before you grab a dog and start to train, think carefully about all of the tools that we have given you and how that will apply to your situation.

Speaking of tools… we have two more topics to consider before we get into the actual exercises. In the next chapter, we'll discuss choosing your working environments, and in the one after, we'll coach you in the best ways to respond to failure. Once you've mastered those two things, we can get to the fun part - training!

Notes:

Chapter Eight

Selecting and Acclimating to Working Environments

All the focus training in the world will not work if you do not thoughtfully and carefully select your dog's working environments. It's also vitally important to correctly acclimate your dog to those environments. Understanding these concepts will greatly influence how successful you are in using the remainder of the information in this book.

Selecting the Right Training Environment

Successful training requires you to choose the right training environment for your dog's level of training. It's important that you always select an environment that is fairly mild in terms of distractions and stressors because this allows your dog to settle in and concentrate on you and your lessons.

Which is easier for YOUR dog? A large outdoor park with lots of smells or an indoor space with a slippery floor and echoes?

To choose an environment that is mild for YOUR dog, you'll want to take two things into consideration. First, think about your dog's senses (smell, sound, sight, and touch). And second, think about what your dog likes to do (for example, is he always sniffing or always staring?). Be careful not to confuse an environment that is mild by YOUR

definition with one that is mild by your DOG'S definition. Many dogs will find the front of the grocery store much milder than a park - if they are not distracted by visual sights, that is.

Your dog will tell you if you've selected the right environment by his behavior. Terriers who live to sniff and chase squirrels are likely to give much better focus at the grocery store than at a park, but your sight and sound sensitive border collie might have a complete meltdown in such a crowded public space. Know your dog. Think about what makes sense for your team at this stage in your training.

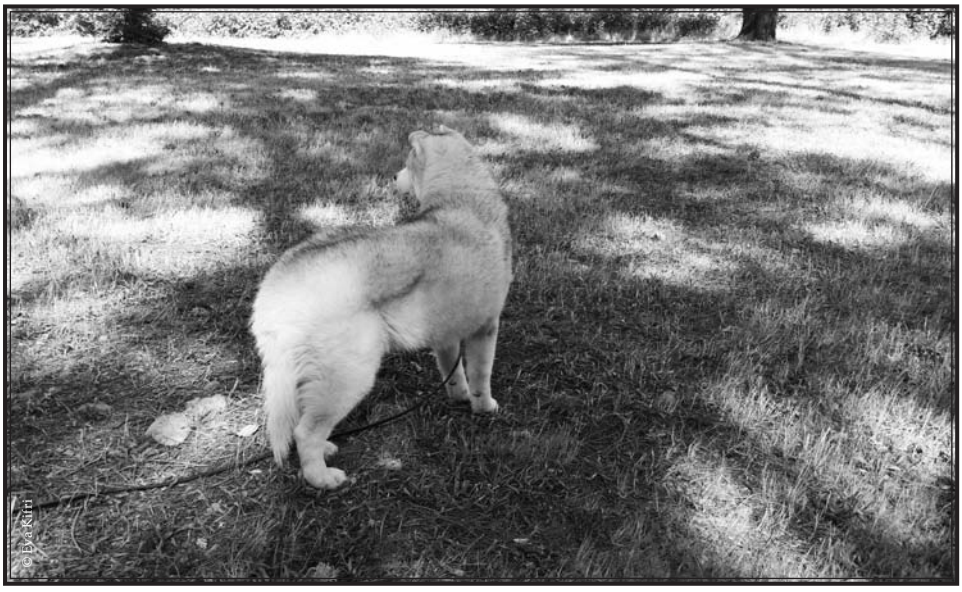
Now that you've found a good spot for working, you need to consider how you'll introduce your dog to this spot. That's where acclimation comes into play.

The Importance of Acclimation

Acclimation is exactly what it sounds like: the time that we give a dog to adapt (acclimate) to the environment. The scientific term for this is habituation. In this process, novel environments become less and less interesting the longer your dog is exposed to them.

Humans and dogs alike need to acclimate. If you think about it, the first thing you do when you go somewhere new is "take it all in." You quickly identify the feel of the place in terms of temperature, spaciousness, lighting, and most importantly, safety. If you find yourself in a place where you feel uneasy or unsafe, then you will be unable to focus on anything else until that discomfort either resolves or you leave the area.

Parents and teachers know they need to add in a bit of extra time when attempting to go somewhere new with a child. For example, if you wanted to read with your



Let your dog look around before you start training.

child in a meadow near a stream, acclimation time is not optional. You might be able to get that child to sit and look at you, but until you allow her to look at the flowers, dip her fingers in the water, or listen to the birds singing, you will not have her brain. Forcing a child to listen to you read when her mind is elsewhere is a waste of time. Actually, it is worse than a waste of time, because soon that child will be scheming to get around you - to take quick, furtive looks around, or to reach for some leaves when you aren't looking. The more exciting the place, the longer the process of acclimation will take - quite possibly to the point that the child will exhaust herself in the process and have no interest in your book at all!

Dogs go through a similar process. When they arrive somewhere new, they need a period of time to take it in. A dog who is less mature, unusually sensitive, fearful, or simply inexperienced (in other words, most young dogs) will likely need even more time to adapt to the new space. Dogs were not bred to be naturally comfortable in dog show environments. They are understandably overwhelmed when they enter a room with hundreds of strange dogs and people who may or may not be friendly! Your dog relies on his growing familiarity with new places, the process of settling in (acclimating), and you as a stable source of support to develop comfort in each new place.

With children, we give them time to adapt to new places. We recognize they need to feel safe. We select suitable environments when we want them to learn. We also know that a child is much more likely to pay attention if the child asks us to read to her rather than the adult insisting that the child sit down and listen.

Let's give our dogs the same courtesy. Select your training environments so that your dog can learn and function. Train focus skills in your most familiar environment, probably your own home or training yard. After you master a step of focus training in one place, you can start looking around to practice those same skills in a new place. But not just any new place - select an environment that is only mildly distracting, and then allow your dog to acclimate before even thinking about attempting your focus work. As you work through the foundation focus exercises, you'll quickly transition to letting your dog ask you to work rather

Acclimation allows your dog to feel safe!

than the reverse. The first time you see your dog look up at you with bright eyes and a willing attitude, asking to work, you'll begin to understand the difference between a dog who is engaging his brain and one who has simply been trained to stare at your face whether he wants to or not.

The Process of Acclimation

Acclimation works best when you have a structured method of introducing it to your dog. For our focus work introduced in Part Two of this book, the first step will ALWAYS be to acclimate to any space that we expect our dogs to work in. As your dog becomes more advanced, we will introduce ways to acclimate that do not include walking through the actual working area itself. This skill will be introduced in the third part of this book. For now, though, we will always allow our dogs to explore potential working areas.

Start by choosing an area. You define what this area is; just because you are in a park does not mean that the entire park is your working area. Mentally block off an area of maybe 50 square feet of space. Evaluate the potential of that space by thinking about the factors that will capture your dog's attention. If your dog is fascinated by grass, trees, and squirrels, head for a more open area like a tennis court where there is less vegetation. But if your dog is highly visually aware and tends to stare at movement, then maybe the tennis match going on next door would make that a poor choice!

Now that you have a place in mind for your acclimation, give your dog up to 20 minutes of time to thoroughly explore that space. Use a leash to prevent your dog from going too far, but do not use the leash to coerce attention. Simply allow your dog to explore as much as he wants - sniffing, staring, and listening to his heart's content. Your job is to follow along at a relaxed pace. Remember, your dog is satisfying both his basic curiosity and his need to feel safe. He does not need to run through the space off-leash with his best doggy buddies, having the time of his life. The point of acclimation is not to entertain; it is to satiate! Make your choices with this in mind.

Work up to challenges over time. Do not begin your sessions next to the squirrels!

Adding New Working Environments

After you have worked through a few focus exercises with success at home, you will want to work in new environments. These areas should become more challenging over time, but that challenge should increase at the rate your dog can handle. For some of you, that may be a different room in your own house. For others, it may be going a little way down the street. Regardless, the change should be as mild as you can arrange. Learn to think about dog training as increasing challenges in very small increments of change!

Is your dog ready for a public park?

Let's consider a few of the things that might change when you work in a new environment. To do this, we'll use a number scale from 1 to 10 to discuss the value of that environment. If your dog is totally interested and fascinated by the environment, we'd call that a 10, and if your dog is oblivious to what's going on around him, we'd call that a 1. Your house is probably a 1.

Because familiarity reduces the novelty of something, acclimation, by definition, reduces the value of a place. When you first show up at a new park, your dog might be at an 8 in interest, but after ten minutes of exploring his thirty foot square, he will use up that interest and come down to a 3. If you moved to a new place in that park, it probably wouldn't be an 8 because he has already done some exploration of that new territory with his eyes and ears, but it's still going to be higher than a 3 because he has not thoroughly explored it. So let's say that might be a 5.

Now, let's give another number to your dog's emotional comfort. If your dog is very stable and rarely flustered, then he might experience no nervousness in that park, so we'd call that a 1. But if your dog was in the vet's office where he had experienced major trauma in the past, we might call that a 10 in terms of anxiety.

You also need to consider the value you offer as a source of support to your dog. If this is a dog you don't know, then you likely have no value at all. If you've consistently put the dog into uncomfortable situations, you might even have a negative value (yikes!). But if you have a good relationship and your dog believes you are his advocate and

protector, your value might be much higher. Therefore, the same trip to the vet might create an anxiety level of 10 with a stranger but only 5 with you.

Finally, what is the value of your motivator? Play might be very valuable to your dog (10) or it might have no value at all (1). How about your food and toys? Your choices of which food or toys to use will make a difference!

What is the value of your emotional support to your dog?

Each of these factors has a value, and all of them work together to set up an environment that is either appropriate or inappropriate for your dog's training session. While you do not need to go through this valuation process at each new training location, you should be aware of the relative values of each of these considerations. If your session does not go well, evaluate each one. What changes could you make to increase your dog's chances of success with your next outing?

Over time, you will find that your dog habituates to new environments more and more quickly. Indeed, it might get to the point where your dog hops out of the car, looks around for ten seconds and then begs you to work. The good news is that your dog is now stable and comfortable and willing - in that specific environment! At the same time, you must be working towards your end goal: the competition ring. Until your dog is showing extreme willingness and readiness to work in very challenging environments, you will need to take your dog out of your mutual comfort zone and work in a new place. For example, if your dog is fine in an empty parking lot, now it's time to go to a parking lot that has a few people there. If your dog can function well on cement, start looking for environments that have some vegetation. If your mildly fearful dog has mastered working 100 yards away from the dog park, it's time to move ten yards closer.

Unless you purposely push yourself, it's very easy for us as trainers to inadvertently stay within our comfort zones. We like watching our dogs when they are attentive and happy! It's fun! And it takes a lot less time! But over the long run, your training will not progress if your dog doesn't learn to function under challenging circumstances. Remember, we are training for the competition environment, and dog shows are far from sterile environments!

When Your Dog Is Nervous

It's always okay to reassure your dog, especially in new or chaotic environments!

Although it's perfectly fine to use higher value motivators to overcome relatively high levels of curiosity, be careful if your dog's curiosity is due to nervousness. If your dog's uncertainty is a 7 and the food or toy is a 10, it is true that your dog will engage. But it is also true that your dog is still feeling unsure and that he's learning to work in an anxious manner. That is a bad habit you do not want to create. Someday, when you are asking your dog to work with no motivators present in competition, his fear of the world will become suddenly overwhelming. Acclimation and selecting training environments that generate extremely low levels of worry are much better strategies than attempting to overwhelm worry with high value motivators.

If your dog is fearful, work to reduce the fear - that is always your number one priority. Remember that fear is not a choice. Solve your dog's fear issues in new spaces by giving the dog more space from whatever is worrying him. If your dog is feeling fearful, then you cannot get true focus, and if you cannot get focus, you cannot get truly voluntary work!

Keep this order in mind:

1. Deal with your dog's emotional well being first,
2. Give your dog a choice in the matter of whether to engage or not, and
3. Move into work only when your dog is ready.

The Opposite of Acclimation

Sometimes dogs become more and more nervous the longer they are in a particular space. If this happens to you, it means your dog is not acclimating to the space; your dog is sensitizing. Sensitizing is the opposite of acclimating. The environment you picked made your dog either so uncomfortable or so excited that he isn't ever going to become comfortable or bored. He's just going to become more nervous or hyper.

Any time your dog's behavior deteriorates, take another look at the space you have selected. If you attempt to start training your ball-crazy dog on the sidelines of a Little League game, it is very unlikely that your dog is going to get bored and start looking at you. Rather, your dog is probably going to build up more and more excitement and frustration, dooming your training plan for the day. If your dog is fascinated by ball play, pick the furthest corner of the park from the ball game so your dog can see that a ball game is happening, but not well enough that it even occurs to him that he could play, too.

If your dog is not excited and attracted to the distraction and instead demonstrates signs of anxiety - either shutting down or stressing up - then you have also picked an environment that is causing your dog to sensitize rather than to acclimate. Just leave. There's no point in waiting longer and there's even less point in trying to jolly your dog out of it.

And finally, if your dog is neither stressed nor curious, but starts to become agitated or disengaged after you begin work, take a hard look at your training. Are you being clear? Are you engaged and interesting to interact with? You don't have to be "more interesting than the environment" but you can show a little personality and enthusiasm so that your dog feels valued!

We'd suggest videotaping your dog's behavior if you suspect that you chose the wrong area for training. This will allow you to review your dog's body language critically and make a better plan for next time.

Moving From Acclimation to Work

Once your dog has had the opportunity to thoroughly explore your intended working environment, take a close look at his behavior and body language. If he seems calm and relaxed, it's time to move from acclimation to focus work. But before you do that, there's a very important stage that comes between those two activities: a short break from the environment. This break can be done by moving away from the working area and sitting quietly for a few minutes, or it can be done by crating your dog while you gather your training supplies. Either way, the purpose is to make a clear distinction between acclimation time and training time. Once we begin training, acclimation time is over, and we will not go back and forth between the two. The break makes this crystal clear to your dog.

As with all training, we raise criteria and make changes over time, when our dogs are ready for those changes. In the last section of this book where we discuss engagement training, we will discuss moving a dog from offered focus directly into engagement

training. To do this, we simply stand still and wait until the dog offers to engage. At that point, we will also introduce the idea that your dog will no longer be allowed to thoroughly explore the working space. But for now - acclimate, acclimate, acclimate!

Notes:

Chapter Nine
Responding to Failure

Should you try to train this dog right now? NO!

As you work through the exercises in the next part of this book, you will encounter failure. One moment your dog will be carefully watching you, and the next your dog will be staring at a butterfly in the distance. Hey, failure happens. Instead of being discouraged, consider failure as information; something needs to change! End the session and do a bit of troubleshooting before you go back to your focus work. But whatever you do, there's one thing you should NEVER do...

NEVER TRY TO TRAIN AN UNFOCUSED DOG! NEVER!

Breaking this rule NEVER ends well. Notice all the "nevers" we've used here? It's that important! If your dog is not focused, trying to force a training session will end badly. You will be frustrated and your dog will be conflicted. He certainly won't learn the lesson you're trying to teach, and he may learn many things you didn't intend. He may learn to work with half his brain somewhere else. He may learn to avoid you and even come to dislike training. He may learn that working with you is less fun than other things going on around him. None of these things will improve your relationship or your training.

In early training, we follow the "five second rule." If your dog is momentarily distracted but voluntarily reconnects with you within five seconds, you can continue on with your training. You should not do anything to encourage your dog to reconnect; that's part of his responsibility in the working partnership.

However, if your dog does not reconnect with you, or if he has two disconnects within the same training session, there is clearly an issue. Attempting to train when your dog is not fully engaged is a mistake. Your dog will learn that he can get by in training while only giving you partial focus. This will never hold up to the rigors of a dog show, so you need to address this now.

So what should you do? STOP TRAINING! Don't try to save the session. Stop. **If your dog loses focus for more than five seconds, or if your dog glances away two times during a session, end the session.** Do NOT do anything to encourage him to re-engage with you. Instead, be calm and neutral. Give your dog the cue that you use when you turn him "off" (you will learn the "on/off" exercise soon), even if he's already disengaged. Your tone is very important, especially with sensitive dogs. Ending the session is not punishment, and there's no benefit to conveying disappointment or unhappiness to your dog.

Here are some ways you can can end the session; pick the one that is most convenient. While this is not designed to be a punishment, it is important that your dog cannot self-reinforce or continue to focus on the distraction during this time. Choose the option that makes the most sense without causing your dog to feel stressed or uncomfortable.

- Simply put your dog in his crate or leave him loose in your house for a few minutes while you go sit down in another area and relax.
- With your dog on a short leash, go sit in a chair and relax. Don't pay any direct attention to your dog for a few minutes.
- Put your dog on leash and give the leash to a person you trust to be neutral and ignore him. Move away from your dog, remaining in sight but ignoring him while you do something else.
- Put your dog in his crate. If it's practical, get another dog out for a fun, quick play or training session. This MAY be a punishment for some dogs. If you think your dog enjoys working, but just doesn't have his head in the game, watching you train another dog may change his mind. However, even a short amount of crate time by itself is a good option.
- If your dog has been trained to relax on his mat, have him lie on it for a few minutes while you sit close by.

Taking a break from training will allow you to reconsider your approach for the session.

Taking a few minutes away from training after a loss of focus is more important for YOU than for your dog! It is your opportunity to reconsider your approach to the failed session. Think about what was happening and develop a new plan going forward. Ask yourself the following questions, and then decide what you need to change about the session to set your dog up for success.

- Do you need to move further away from distractions or stressors?
- Do you need to increase your acclimation time in this area?
- Should you reduce your training time?
- Do you need a different reinforcer?
- Are you being clear and fair in your expectations?
- Should you take a longer break to play or relax?
- Is your dog acting differently than usual?
- Is it possible he doesn't feel well?
- Are you being too serious in your work?

Your troubleshooting and decision making at this point are very important to future training success. Your dog's inability to focus told you that ***something*** needs to change. Your job is to figure out what that ***something*** is and make the necessary adjustments. You'll know if your analysis was correct if you make the changes and your dog is

successful. You may need to experiment with several options to find the one that works. If things do not get better quickly on your second session, it's time to call it a day.

People have a very hard time ending a training session. There is a pervasive myth that you need to end on success. That is not true. When your dog cannot focus, it's much more helpful to simply stop training than to try to salvage a bad session. Take a break, think through the problem, and come back with a well-considered plan for change.

Ideally, as you and your dog develop focus and teamwork, the need to end a session will decrease and eventually disappear altogether. However, don't ever hesitate to end a session that is going poorly. The bigger error is to continue training without a focused partner.

We know it's hard, but if your dog has lost focus, don't do anything to "help" your dog, like calling his name, making noises, or applying a correction. The temptation to do so is overwhelming - indeed, even while Denise or Deb watches, 95% of handlers STILL try to help their dogs, and that is understandable. You set this time aside to work with your dog and dammit, you want to work! Watching a dog disconnect and wander is frustrating to say the least, especially if you went to some effort to find a spot and set up a training session that never happens.

Don't help.

The problem is… well, that's exactly the problem. We're not trying to teach your dog to respond to your cues to pay attention when you want it - that's the easy part, and honestly, you've probably already tried that. If you want to teach your dog to take

responsibility for the chance to work, then you have to end work when the dog opts out. You have to give up control, an idea that does not come naturally to many dog trainers.

If your dog seems grateful or thrilled to have a break, give that some serious thought. Although some dogs are extremely environmental and truly prefer to stare at nothing than work with you, these dogs are really quite rare. It's more likely that these dogs are avoiding work because they don't find work much fun. You may have thought that you had laid out a fun training program for your dog, but in reality, you probably added pressure. Your dog gets to decide what's fun, not you. Maybe you keep trying to get your dog back, even when his behavior suggests disinterest. Maybe you were "gently" pulling on the leash. Maybe you don't even know that you're doing it! Regardless, you haven't let your dog choose - take responsibility - and until you do, your situation will not get better.

Take a moment to consider your underlying training philosophy. If you've been taught that dogs must learn that they don't have a choice in training, you will find our solution to put the dog away and change something is impossible to apply because it goes against your beliefs about why dogs work for us. Whether you're aware of it or not, you'll sabotage your own program. Then again, if you're reading this book, it is also possible that you may be at a point where you are beginning to realize that traditional approaches aren't really working for your team. If you're ready to reconsider your entire training program, not simply your dog's lack of focus, read on! Part Two of this book is all about teaching your dog to focus.

Notes:

Part Two:

Let's Get Focused

Chapter Ten
The Focus Foundation

Here it is - the first set of exercises! These will build your focus foundation, so don't skimp on them. Choose your training environments wisely, remember to acclimate, and above all - have fun!

Exercise 1: Rapid Fire Treats (RFTs)

Purpose: To establish the very first baby steps towards focus. Once that is accomplished, this exercise can be used as a diagnostic tool to determine whether or not your dog is ready to work in any particular situation.

In this exercise, you want to reinforce your dog as fast as you can with ten treats. Even though it sounds simple, that doesn't mean it's easy. Funny how it always works out that way! The important thing to understand is that you are NOT teaching a specific behavior; you are conditioning an automatic positive response to focusing on you. This will help establish the habit of positive mutual engagement between you and your dog.

Judy is ready to practice rapid-fire treats with Quest.

Use your marker and feed the 10 treats as quickly as possible.

Start with a quiet setting; your dog; ten small, soft, tasty cookies; and a clicker if you use one. Feel free to use a verbal marker such as "yes!" rather than a clicker if you'd prefer. You may sit or stand. Start marking and treating your dog, no matter what he's doing. If he doesn't look at you, that's fine - as long as he takes the cookies. Your goal is to get rid of those ten cookies as quickly as possible.

Once you have finished giving all ten cookies, give your dog a verbal release like "okay" or "all done." You can also toss a cookie for your dog to chase and eat if you'd like. If your dog comes back and seems eager to continue, go ahead and start RFTs again right away. Release again after the ten treats are gone. You can repeat this up to three times in a session.

Some trainers have questioned the use of a marker in this exercise because you are not actually marking a specific behavior. That is true; all your dog has to do is take and eat the cookies until you stop offering them. The marker helps with classical conditioning. (Remember, in classical conditioning, we are establishing emotional associations, while in operant conditioning we are reinforcing behaviors.) We want our dogs to develop a strong positive association between us and both the primary (food) and secondary (marker) reinforcers. That positive association naturally creates focus.

When your dog is eagerly taking the cookies in one location, it's time to move to a slightly more challenging one. You will continue to use RFTs in every new setting because it helps establish your focused connection. It also tells you if your dog is truly capable of working in a location. If your dog cannot do RFTs, then trying to train will not go well. Change something! Your dog probably needs more acclimation, and if he still is not interested in your treats, you are very likely working in too difficult of a spot for his stage of training.

Troubleshooting

If your dog completely disengages and will not take the cookies, take a break for at least a couple of minutes. You may need to change locations if there are too many distractions.

If your dog does not re-engage with you after you have released him from a round of RFTs, try increasing the value of your reinforcer. It's best to start out with really high value food rather than starting out lower and raising the level.

If your dog loses interest about halfway through the exercise, cut down to five cookies for a few sessions.

If your dog is totally focused on the treats in your hand, put them somewhere out of

sight like behind your back or in a pocket. You want to be able to access the treats quickly, but not have them directly in your dog's face.

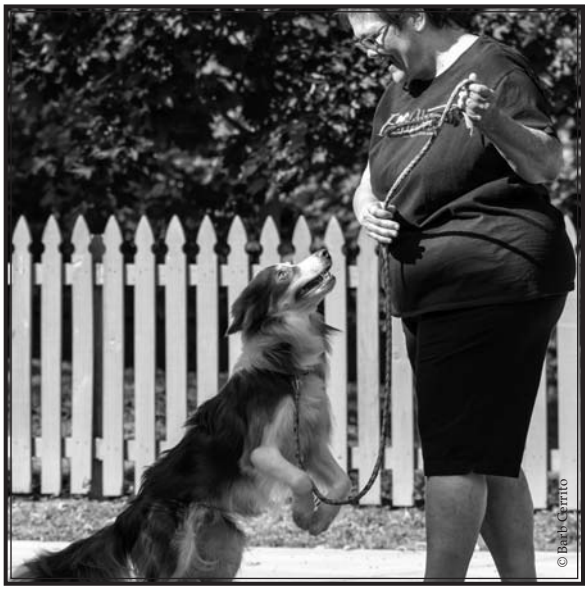
Exercise 2: Captured Focus

Purpose: To draw your attention to the numerous focus opportunities that you miss in day-to-day interactions with your dog. Also, to help you determine what types of non food reinforcers work best for your dog.

We're switching gears now! Rather than inducing focus with delicious treats that we hand over for free, we want your dog to learn that reinforcement comes in many forms, and that he has the power to cause you to pay attention as a result of his behavior!

Your dog focuses on you numerous times throughout the day, and most of these instances go unnoticed. Now it's time to start paying more attention to them. We don't expect you to be constantly ready to reinforce with a clicker and cookies. Instead, reinforce with whatever you have available. It might be praise, petting, personal play, or a quick game with a toy. Use whatever is at hand. Just be sure that you get the message across to your dog that you saw his focus and you appreciate it.

Judy is missing a great opportunity to capture focus.



Be ready to capture focus with with praise and play.

This exercise will help develop mutual interaction and engagement based on reinforcers other than food. It will also encourage your dog, not you, to initiate focus. Your job is to capture it and respond in a positive manner.

Troubleshooting

The biggest issue that people report with this exercise is that their dogs start focusing on them all the time. We think that's a very good problem to have! If you are busy and don't have time for a sustained interaction, that's fine. Simply tell your dog he's good, give him a pat or two, use your release word, and go back to what you were doing.

If your dog does not react well when you respond to his focus, think about exactly what it is that you are doing. Are you being too enthusiastic and overwhelming? You may have to change your intensity and energy levels to more closely match what your dog is comfortable with. Are you doing something that your dog really doesn't seem to enjoy all that much? Experiment with a variety of actions to see what seems to draw your dog to you the most. Some dogs enjoy calm and quiet stroking, while others enjoy more vigorous physical interaction. This is where you learn what works for your dog.

Exercise 3: Offered Eye Contact

Purpose: To show your dog that he can initiate positive interactions by looking at you. He has the power to start the process!

At this point, your dog should be starting to focus on you more often in the house. If you've been taking the Rapid Fire Treats game to a variety of environments, you should also see an increase in your dog's focus on you in new places. Now you're going to introduce your dog to the idea that eye contact can actually start the game!

Take your dog to a simple environment and make sure he knows that you have delicious treats available. Don't do anything, just wait. Eventually your dog will look up at your face, hoping for a cookie. That starts the game! Immediately mark and treat. Continue to mark and treat as long as your dog continues offering eye contact, up to five treats. After those five repetitions, toss a cookie away from you, then wait for your dog to eat that cookie and return. If he offers eye contact, play again! Repeat this game several times. Remember, we want this to be fast paced and worth your dog's while. It's always better to leave a game with your dog wanting more!

Quest is initiating lovely eye contact!

Helo is offering nice eye contact outside.

Troubleshooting

If your dog never makes eye contact, there are two things to try. First, before you begin this exercise, set yourself up for the best chance of success by choosing the right location. You want a place where nothing else interesting is going on. Make sure your dog sees you prepare your treats for the exercise. Then just wait - that's the second thing. Patience is really a virtue here; some dogs will take longer than others, but be ready to reinforce the instant your dog makes eye contact.

Exercise 4: Turning On and Off

Purpose: To develop structure and consistency in your interactions with your dog. To add clarity to expectations about "work time" and "free time." Also, to practice developing early engagement skills.

In this exercise, you will work on manipulating your dog's level of arousal and excitement. We refer to the dog being "on" when he's in a state where he's ready to learn and work. When he's "off," he's free to chill out and relax. Our goal in this exercise is to help our dogs move between these two states.

Think about what you can do to help your dog move into his "on" state. Energy, excitement, and enthusiasm are typically achieved with activity and movement. If you have a toy-motivated dog, you can easily use toy play to move your dog into a more excited state. Playing tag or catch me games often get dogs interested and engaged. This is unique to each dog, so you may need to experiment a bit. Go back to what you discovered your dog enjoyed in Exercise 2 (Captured Focus) and use those activities

and reinforcers now as prompts to initiate interaction.

The opposite is to turn your dog "off" and let him know he's free to relax and disengage. In the "off" state, your dog is allowed to do anything he wants as long as he's not getting into trouble. Looking at distractions, sniffing, and exploring are all fine for this state. You are not expecting any focus or mutual activity while your dog is "off." Use consistent verbal cues as well as body language to indicate that you are done interacting and your dog is free to disengage. A cue like "okay" or "all done" would work. When you want your dog "off," give the verbal cue, end eye contact, turn away from your dog, and relax your body. Ignore your dog for a short time after the "off" cue is given.

Deb offers the toy and engages in play with Star for 10 seconds.

Then Deb gives an "all done" cue, stops playing, and removes both the toy and her attention for 10 seconds.

Practice by spending ten seconds in the "on" state, then transitioning to ten seconds in the "off" state, and repeat. If ten seconds seems like too much for your dog, feel free to drop each state to five seconds to get started. In addition to changing your dog's arousal states, this exercise helps your dog to understand the difference between "working time" and "free time." Once your dog is in his "on" state, you MUST give him 100% of your attention until you tell him he's "off." This is important. If you are totally consistent, your expectations will be very clear to your dog.

Troubleshooting

If your dog won't turn "on," carefully consider your approach and intensity level. Being too intense is overwhelming to more sensitive dogs. Then again, being low key might be boring! Your job is to experiment with a variety of approaches until you find the one that sparks your dog's interest. It can be helpful to videotape your attempts at interaction and then review them carefully. This can help you see things from a different perspective, which is quite valuable.

If your dog won't turn "off," that's another one of those good problems to have! This means that your dog would rather continue interacting with you than disengage. While it's a good problem, it still needs to be addressed. Your "off" cue needs to be clear and consistently followed by a short period of no interaction. It's okay if your dog remains focused in the "off" stage; you gave him permission to relax and he didn't take you up on it.

You may find that it is helpful to have two release cues. The first release cue tells your dog that he is done temporarily, but is still "on call" in the short term. This is a good cue to use for a momentary release (with or without a treat toss) when you expect to go back to work relatively quickly. That's the cue you should use in this exercise. The other cue would be a "session over" cue that says you are totally done with training for a while; your dog has punched out on the time clock and can do whatever he normally does without being ready to jump back into training at any moment. When you give this cue, it is helpful to sit down and do something that clearly communicates to your dog that you are moving on to another activity, like picking up a book.

Notes:

Chapter Eleven
Adding Behaviors

We have not written an entire book on focus to create a dog who only looks at us in order to get a snack. We train focus so that we can move to the next step: getting behaviors from a dog who is waiting expectantly for a chance to earn a reinforcer. This chapter will introduce the idea that once a dog is focused, we can ask for behaviors before we hand over a cookie.

Exercise 5: Focus + Behavior

Purpose: To connect the offering of voluntary focus with the opportunity to train and earn reinforcers.

Start in a familiar, low distraction location and have five to ten cookies ready. Wait for your dog to offer focus as you did in Exercise 3, but this time, do not treat right away. Instead, ask for a simple and well-known behavior. Once the behavior is performed, mark and treat. Use a verbal release and a treat tossed away from you to tell your dog he's done with that repetition. Wait for him to return and focus again, then repeat! You can ask for a variety of different behaviors (but only one at a time for each repetition) as long as they are things your dog can easily perform without error. We want lots of success, so make this easy for your dog! If things are going well you can do up to ten repetitions of this exercise in a row, then take a short break to let your dog relax or play.

Note that we are NOT reinforcing the focus directly. Instead, we are asking for a behavior, which allows the dog to earn a reinforcer. This will teach our dogs the all-important connection between focus and work. It also teaches your dog that after a cookie toss, the way to re-engage with you is to return and offer more focus.

As explained in Exercise 3, it is vitally important that your dog initiates focus, not you. Doing anything to get your dog's attention totally negates the value of this exercise. This exercise is teaching your dog a fundamental lesson - focus is the gateway to work, and work leads to reinforcement!

Zen offers focus so...

...Deb asks for a behavior...

...reinforces it...

...and releases him with a treat toss.

Troubleshooting

If your dog does not respond within 2 to 3 seconds, responds with an incorrect behavior, or responds with a poor version of the behavior, the best thing to do is to release with a treat toss and wait for focus again. Do NOT tell your dog he is wrong! Also, do NOT repeat your cue. The lesson here is that focus leads to the opportunity to earn a treat. Of course, we don't want to reinforce something that is incorrect, so simply release your dog, toss a treat to reset him, and wait for focus again. If your dog usually responds well to that cue, you can try it one more time. If your dog makes an error on the same cue twice, that tells you that you need to take that behavior out of the rotation for this exercise and work on it separately.

Many people believe that throwing out free treats for incorrect responses to cues teaches the dog not to respond, but this isn't true. If your dog fails to respond to a known cue more than twice, there is already a problem with the behavior. You need to work on it separately. Throwing out the occasional free treat to reset your dog will not negatively affect his training. Instead, it "unlocks" your dog so that he begins to respond and move more comfortably - which leads to the behaviors you are looking for.

Exercise 6: Adding More Work to Focus

Purpose: To add duration to your focus training sessions. Also, to establish teamwork and flow from one event to the next.

You've already been combining well-known behaviors with focus work, one at a time, in Exercise 5. If you haven't done so already, make sure your dog is capable of performing Exercise 5 well in a variety of locations before starting this exercise.

We will now add short work sessions to our training. You will not release your dog with a treat toss after each successful behavior; instead, you will simply cue a new behavior and keep right on going!

You will need four to five cookies for each session. As soon as your dog focuses on you at the start of the session, give a cue, mark the behavior, and reinforce. Then give the next cue, mark the behavior, and reinforce. You will do a total of three to four cued behaviors, then end the session by turning your dog "off" using your release word and a treat toss. Note that you are not releasing between behaviors as you were in Exercise 5; you simply continue on to another behavior.

Zen offers focus.

Deb asks for a down.

Deb reinforces the down.

Deb asks for a stand.

Deb reinforces the stand.

Deb asks for a sit.

Deb reinforces the sit.

She then ends that round with a treat toss.

We want this to be a very smooth flow from one thing to the next, so mentally prepare for how you will proceed. It would be very helpful to practice this sequence without your dog a few times first. The sequence is: dog offers focus / cue, behavior, mark, treat / cue, behavior, mark, treat / cue, behavior, mark, treat / cue, behavior, mark, treat / release.

Then wait for focus and begin again! You can repeat this sequence two or three times in a session as long as things are going well.

Troubleshooting

If your dog is having any issues maintaining focus for the duration of this exercise, start with two behaviors (rather than four), and increase the number as he gets the idea. Also, don't forget to take a look at your environment! You should be teaching this sequence in your most comfortable training area before you attempt to generalize to new locations, and as always, you should be allowing adequate acclimation time in each new environment.

If your dog makes a mistake in response to a cue, release him with a treat toss and start the sequence again. We don't want to repeat the cue or try to fix the issue within a focus session. If your dog makes another error on the same behavior, take that behavior out of your focus work for now and address the problem separately.

Exercise 6+: The Advanced Version (Reducing Reinforcement within Focus Work)

Purpose: To introduce a method for reducing reinforcers by chaining behaviors within a session.

When you are able to perform Exercise 6 successfully in a variety of locations, you can add the challenge of Exercise 6+. This is NOT a requirement to move on to the next chapter, however, you'll need to consider reducing reinforcement if you want to compete, and this exercise will get you started on that process.

In this exercise, you will add a small behavior chain into the middle of the sequence. It will be the first time in focus work that you are asking for two behaviors before reinforcing. Set up the same way as you did for Exercise 6, and begin by reinforcing the first behavior. Choose your dog's most reliable behavior for the second cue, something that already has a heavy reinforcement history. Then, instead of reinforcing the second behavior, chain it to the third, which you will reinforce. Then use a treat toss release to end that repetition.

As the second cue in this session Deb asks Zen to stand.

Once he stands she asks him to lie down and then she reinforces the two behavior chain.

And releases him with a treat toss.

It's important that you start this exercise exactly as described, with the second behavior NOT reinforced and the third one reinforced. Doing it this way sandwiches the chain in the middle of the training sequence, surrounded by reinforcement. This is the easiest way to successfully transition into a behavior chain. Many dogs find it helpful to receive a verbal reward ("Good!") to mark the correct response that is not reinforced with a cookie.

The sequence looks like this: dog offers focus / cue, behavior, mark, treat / cue, behavior / cue, behavior, mark, treat / release.

Troubleshooting

If you run into any problems in this exercise, a treat toss release and restart is always appropriate.

Chapter Twelve
Adding Duration and Movement

Until now, we've worked on focus with stationary exercises and very quick repetitions, simply because this makes it easier for the dog to succeed. This also allows us to build up complexity and difficulty slowly. Now it's time to ask for more!

Exercise 7: Building Duration

Purpose: This exercise will help your dog develop sustained stationary focus and concentration without the need for prompts or lures.

We'll start asking for more by increasing the amount of time our dog offers focus before we reinforce. In order to accomplish this, we will begin by reinforcing on a variable duration schedule, which is a fancy way of saying that we'll give treats at unpredictable times.

Start in a familiar location, and have ten cookies available. Choose an amount of time that you think your dog can remain focused on you; if you aren't sure, it's better to underestimate than to overestimate. One second is plenty long! Wait for your dog to focus. Once he does, silently count to one second. If he was successful, mark and reinforce. Wait for focus and silently count to two seconds before marking and reinforcing. Then wait for focus again and silently count to one. Mark and reinforce. See how we varied it just a bit? The first one was short enough to be successful. The second one pushed the boundaries just a touch. The third one was easy again. Continue stretching out the duration just a little bit at a time, while being careful to be random and unpredictable in your reinforcement. Here's an example: one second, two seconds, one second, three seconds, two seconds, one second, four seconds, two seconds. If your dog is unable to remain focused between reinforcements, that tells you to drop down to an easier level or to change to an easier location.

Your goal is to get a nice solid five seconds of focus duration. That means that you may have some repetitions as high as seven or eight seconds, and some as low as one or two seconds. Keep up the variability, and don't rush to this goal. Take as long as your dog needs.

Because our focus exercises require eye contact, be careful not to unintentionally give a "hard stare." This is actually quite common when people are concentrating, so consciously work to soften your eyes and your expression. Smile, and maybe even avert your gaze slightly.

Our ultimate goal is to build sustained focus into competition behaviors.

Even when we can't always return that focus.

Troubleshooting

The biggest problem that comes up with this exercise is that your dog might look away on the repetitions when you are trying to increase duration. If your dog does this, it tells you that your expectations were too high. Lower your criteria to the place where your dog is capable of being successful. That might mean a half second. Do two or three low duration repetitions and one just slightly higher before moving back to several lower duration reps.

Some dogs, especially those who have done quite a bit of shaping, may begin offering behaviors in this exercise. This is a signal that you are not reinforcing early enough and often enough. It also means that your dog is having trouble telling the difference between a shaping session and a focus duration session. Consider practicing focus work in different areas from where you do your shaping work. You can also change other context cues, like notably changing your posture. For example, Denise does most of her shaping sitting on the floor or in a chair, while she does focus work standing.

You might also find it helpful to have your dog in a specific position, like sit, when you begin.

For some dogs, the concept of getting reinforced for being still and concentrating is not familiar to them. In these cases, it's best to drop your criteria very low and get in a LOT of quick reinforcement at the very beginning of a session. You can then increase duration in teeny tiny increments. Any time your dog starts offering behaviors, it's a clue that you are pushing for too much duration.

The value level of your reinforcer is important in this exercise as well. If it's too low, it won't be worth the effort, especially in an exercise that is not that intrinsically interesting. But if it's too high, it might put your dog in an excited state of arousal, which works against our goal of calm stillness for this exercise. It's important to find a moderate value treat for this exercise.

Finally, some dogs simply find stationary work dull. They do it, but it seems to depress their spirit and enthusiasm for work. Hang in there! In an upcoming exercise we'll be alternating dull and exciting.

Exercise 8: Moving Focus

Purpose: Combining focus with movement. This exercise also gives your dog the opportunity to make repeated decisions regarding offering focus within a training session.

Once you have established a short duration of focus with an average of five to seven seconds, you can add some movement. This is NOT formal heeling; you're simply moving around together. If you have trained or will be training formal left-side heeling, you might want to practice more right-side movement to help your dog recognize the difference. You can also move backwards away from your dog, or back and forth from side to side.

This exercise is easiest if you can do it in an area where your dog can be off-leash. If that's not possible, dropping the leash can be helpful, just be careful not to step on it or get your feet tangled up in it.

Deb makes a quick turn away and Zen works hard to keep up!

Start out by waiting for focus from your dog. Mark and reinforce the initial offered focus, then start moving away from your dog. Do NOT say anything to your dog. If he moves with you, immediately mark and reinforce. Start moving away with purpose and speed. Again, don't do anything to cause your dog to move with you, but reinforce when he does. Don't expect too much at first; a single focused step is a good start. You simply want your dog working to stay engaged and moving with you.

As your dog starts to understand this exercise, you can make it an exciting game. Try to move quickly and erratically. Make surprising twists and turns and pace changes. Reinforce him for focusing and keeping up with you.

Deb is trying hard to "lose" Zen.

But he insists on keeping up!

This exercise can be tricky to do alone. Often, your dog is focused but out of your line of sight (either off at an angle or behind you), making you miss lots of reinforcement opportunities. If you have a friend or training partner you trust, let them do the marking while you offer your dog the treat at your side and move away again.

A fun variation is to do a treat toss away from you, then start moving as your dog gets the treat. As soon as your dog finishes the treat and looks in your direction, mark that focus (even if your dog is at a distance), do another treat toss in a different direction, and start moving away again. This will encourage your dog to add speed and enthusiasm

to this exercise. It is also extremely helpful for dogs who get stuck and simply watch as you move, as if they are waiting for permission to move. This is particularly likely if you've done a lot of impulse control work and your dog needs a release to feel free to move.

Troubleshooting

If your dog doesn't move when you do, he may be confused and think it's a stay exercise. To counteract this, you can reinforce the initial focus, release your dog with a tossed treat, and then start moving. Be ready to mark him for even looking in your direction after he eats the cookie. Then proceed as described. This process usually breaks the confusion about whether this is a stay or a moving exercise.

Exercise 9: Quick Change

Purpose: To teach your dog to quickly respond with changes in behavior and arousal levels as we alternate between stationary and moving exercises.

In this exercise, you will work on teaching your dog to quickly move back and forth between movement and stillness. As always, start this exercise in a familiar location without any distractions. The entire exercise requires twenty treats. Begin with Exercise 1 (Rapid Fire Treats) for five treats, then immediately transition into Exercise 8 (Moving Focus). After several seconds of moving focus, mark and treat, then repeat with several more seconds of moving focus until you've given five more treats. Stop moving and transition back into Exercise 1 and provide five rapid-fire cookies. Then back to Exercise 8 and moving focus for five cookies. Your cookies should be gone now, so release your dog. If you want to increase movement in your dog, feel free to throw cookies for the moving portions of the work.

The order is:

Exercise 1 (RFTs) for five cookies

Exercise 8 (moving focus) for five cookies

Exercise 1 (RFTs) for five cookies

Exercise 8 (moving focus) for five cookies

Release

Begin with 5 rapid fire treats.

Then go directly into moving focus for 5 treats.

Then 5 more rapid fire treats.

And another round of moving focus for 5 treats.

Troubleshooting

Typically, this exercise is harder for trainers than for dogs. YOU need to focus in order to count cookies and remember what to do and when to do it. It's a very challenging exercise, but it's a really good one for both you and your dog. If you find it overwhelming, simply drop down to one set of RFTs and one moving focus session, then release, until you get a feel for the flow of this exercise.

Your quick movement from stationary RFTs to moving focus should be enough to encourage your dog to move with you. However, if it's not, you can do a treat toss release after your RFTs, then start moving.

Notes:

Chapter Thirteen
Distractions and Other Challenges

By this point, you should have a pretty focused dog in familiar, low-distraction settings, so it's time to move towards a more realistic competition picture. This will include two things: adding distractions, and reducing reinforcement.

Exercise 10: Adding Distractions

Purpose: Provide trainers with general guidelines for adding distractions and raising training challenges while increasing a dog's confidence and success rates.

Adding distractions will make things more challenging for your dog, but we don't want it to be so hard that the dog can't be successful. The way to accomplish this is to add increasing distractions slowly and systematically. There are three main variables to consider when you add a distraction:

- Proximity - How close is your dog to the distraction? Closer is harder.
- Intensity - How strong is the distraction? Larger, louder, faster, or otherwise just more novel things will be more intense.
- Duration - How long is your dog exposed to the distraction? Longer is harder.

Choosing the right proximity, intensity, and duration will depend on your dog, but as a general rule, you should only increase one of these at a time. If you are very close to a distraction, it should be quite mild. On the other hand, if the distraction is very intense, you will want to be much further away. You will also need to temporarily drop your criteria for duration and movement. Go back to short duration, stationary exercises at first. When that is going well, add movement back in.

Adding distractions allows you to be creative. You can use toys or food containers placed around the room. You might have other dogs or people in your working area, maybe even someone playing with another dog close by. Try going to a new environment. Work with whatever you have available to develop situations that test your dog's ability to focus without causing him to fail repeatedly.

The open gate to the back yard is too much of a distraction for Helo. Deb needs to rethink her choice of training location.

Judy is using the bowl as a distraction for Smudge.

You may have to adjust your distance from the distraction or the intensity of the distraction to get to the right level. For example, let's say that you know that your dog can focus for ten seconds when there are no distractions, and you decide to add a distraction in the form of a plate of food on the ground. A good place to start would be with a low-to-medium value food (intensity) twenty feet away from you and your dog (proximity), and then only asking for two seconds of focus (duration).

Once your dog is successful, you could move closer to the plate (proximity), while lowering the value of the food (intensity). Next, you could increase the value of the

food slowly (intensity) while remaining at the same distance and asking for the same amount of duration. Finally, you could attempt focus work for twenty seconds (duration) at a greater distance from the plate (proximity).

When you feel confident in your dog's ability to withstand each of these changes in criteria one at a time, begin combining them. For example, you might use a higher value food for a longer period of time, but further away. Eventually, you will be able to obtain focus even when you are very close to the distraction (proximity), with high value food (intensity), and for a sustained period of time (duration).

Troubleshooting

What if your dog doesn't acknowledge the distraction? Don't worry, your dog knows it's there. Often, trainers worry that their dog hasn't seen the distraction if the dog doesn't have a clear and obvious reaction to it. That's unlikely. Dogs notice everything in their environments. You don't need to put the distraction directly in front of your dog's face to make sure he's aware of it. Just assume that he knows it's there and continue training.

If your dog won't look away from the distraction, end the session and then reevaluate the appropriateness of that distraction. It's possible that the combination of the location, any activity in the environment, total length of working time, and the distraction itself are too much. Try to minimize those factors in your next session.

Exercise 11: Reinforcement Removed from Trainer

Purpose: To teach your dog to continue working even when he's fully aware that you do not have any reinforcers on your body.

In general, it's easy enough to keep your dog's focus as long as your dog knows that you have cookies or toys available. In the early stages of training this is just fine, but we need to move beyond this for competition. Trainers typically make one of two mistakes when they try to get their dogs to focus for long stretches of time with minimal external reinforcement. Some simply never move beyond this initial stage of training. They continue to have obvious reinforcers available and use them liberally, which creates the illusion of focus. This works until they find themselves in a situation (like a trial) where they don't have any reinforcers… or any focus. The external reinforcers were artificially creating it. Other trainers stop reinforcing focus either too soon or too abruptly. Rather than having a plan for fading out reinforcers over time, they simply stop using them. These trainers also find that they lose any focus they had very quickly.

The answer is to take the middle-ground. Make sure you work through all the early focus exercises and do plenty of repetitions of each, reinforcing liberally to establish the habit of focus. Once that is established, you can thin out the amount of reinforcement you provide as well.

The first step to fading out reinforcers is to get them off your body. They need to be in a location close at hand, but not on you. Put ten cookies in a container, show it to your dog, and let him watch as you put the container about five feet away. Make sure your dog cannot take the food on his own; put a lid on the container if necessary. Now step away from the food and wait for your dog to offer focus. As soon as he does, mark it, and move to the container to give the food reinforcer. Then step away again and wait. With each successful repetition, move about five more feet away from the food container. Remember: don't do anything to encourage your dog's focus. He has to offer it freely in order to get you to mark and treat.

It's important to get the reinforcers off your body.

Limit both the duration of focus and any distractions when you start this exercise. The location of the reinforcer is the distraction.

In different sessions, put your cookies in different places around the working space. You can also add a second container of food in a different place in the room. Randomly go to one container or the other to get a treat. You can also repeat this process with a toy.

Troubleshooting

If your dog remains focused on the reinforcers, lower your criteria so that your dog only needs to glance away from the reinforcers rather than making eye contact. Even an eye flick away from the goodies gets reinforced in the beginning. Reinforcing anything other than obsessing on the location of the reinforcers will result in more instances of looking away from them. From there you can then alter your criteria to looking in your direction, and ultimately eye contact.

Chapter Fourteen
Let the Games Begin!

Once you and your dog have mastered the basic focus exercises, it's time to move on to focus games. The games differ from the exercises in several important ways.

First, they are less precise than the exercises. The proper execution of the focus exercises is crucial to success. Timing and criteria must be good in order to establish the habit of focus in your dog. Even small errors lead to a lack of progress. The games are much more forgiving. Mistakes made here are not fatal.

Next, the games are also more open to creativity and customization. We will give you general guidelines for each game, but they can always be altered as necessary to fit your specific situation.

Finally, although these games have been deliberately designed to help your dog learn, they are still games, and games are meant to be fun for everyone who is playing. If one of you isn't enjoying the game, then it's not right for your team. Feel free to experiment and make changes until you're both having an excellent time. For example, some of these games involve the use of food. Others involve toys. And some involve hands-on personal play. If your dog does not enjoy the suggested reinforcer it's fine to experiment with other options. If you find that a game simply doesn't work for you and your dog after you've made some efforts to customize it, then it's fine to skip it and move on to another. There are plenty of options.

In the following pages, you will find six themes with three games each, for a total of eighteen games. Each theme represents a vitally important aspect in developing a healthy personal and working relationship with your dog while providing a structure for your future training sessions. Embedded in each game are useful skills and concepts. Although these are not the main focus of the games - the main focus is to have fun together - they are a lovely side effect!

So get ready to have fun with focus games!

Theme 1: Fun

Purpose: To develop a mutually enjoyable interaction in an easy and stress-free manner.

Fun is everything in dog training! Unless you're both having fun, something is wrong. Teaching behaviors in a strict and serious manner and then trying to add the fun later rarely works well; fun needs to be the foundation for your training. All three of these games are about encouraging speed and enthusiasm, AKA, fun!

Game 1: Two Treats Game

Run back and forth chasing cookies! How fun is that? The two treats game is fast paced, exciting, and easy to learn. To play, toss a cookie in one direction and verbally encourage your dog to get it. Then, call your dog; when he looks your way, toss another cookie in the opposite direction. Cookies are thrown back and forth, with you in the middle of the game.

This game can also be played with two toys, although that can be a bit more complicated. In order for the two toys game to work, your dog has to have a strong desire for the toys and be willing to return and drop the toy so you can throw the second one.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Visually track a thrown object
- Learn a verbal cue for permission to get food from the ground
- Reorient to you quickly after eating a treat off the ground

Star is keeping an eye on that cookie!

Deb tosses a cookie and encourages Star to chase it.

Star reaches the cookie and eats it.

Deb tosses a cookie in the opposite direction to continue the game.

Game 2: Cookie / Toy Race

This is another fast paced and exciting game, but it adds an element of control by making the dog wait for a short time before he can race to the prize! Start by holding your dog back by the chest, harness, or collar. Then place or throw a cookie away from him; tease him a bit before you let him go get it. When you do, race with him towards his prize - but let him win, especially if he's a bit sensitive. Use LOTS of praise at the end of the game.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Focus on a tossed cookie or toy while stationary
- Develop active resistance to restraint (commonly known as the opposition reflex)
- Builds desire to explode forward quickly when released

Deb restrains Star by pushing lightly on her chest.

Star takes off!

Star beats Deb to the toy!

Game 3: Come and Go Game

This is similar to the two treats game except this time, the second treat comes directly from you after a recall. Toss out the first treat and encourage your dog to get it. Then, call your dog back to you for the second one. Toss another treat, call your dog back, and so on. There is no need for a formal front when your dog returns; just hand over a cookie!

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Visually track a thrown object
- Learn a verbal cue for permission to get food off the ground
- Respond quickly to a recall cue after eating a treat off the ground

Deb tosses a cookie for Zen to chase and encourages him to "get it!"

Zen chases and eats the cookie.

Deb calls Zen back to her.

Zen returns to Deb for another cookie.

Theme 2: Baby Steps

Purpose: To split interactions down into teeny tiny pieces. Also, to introduce different types of personal interaction.

Splitting (breaking behaviors down into tiny parts in order to teach bigger exercises) is one of the most important concepts in good training. Trainers who split are typically much more successful than trainers who lump (try to teach in big chunks). These games introduce the idea of action (from you) and reaction (from your dog). This is the basis of a training relationship.

Game 4: Peek-a-boo!

Most people have played peek-a-boo with a baby. Although it's a pretty natural game to play, it actually teaches babies a concept called object permanence, which is the idea that things continue to exist even when we no longer see them. The skills we are instilling in our dogs are slightly different, but just as important.

You can play by covering your face with your hands, covering your dog's eyes with your hands, or by using another object, such as a piece of paper or a book, as a barrier between you and your dog. Experiment to see what your dog likes best. Verbally tease your dog while doing this by saying, "Where am I?" Then suddenly remove your hands with a big flourish. "Here I am!" Praise and pet your dog. As your dog understands the game, you can slowly increase the amount of time your eyes are covered, which builds anticipation even further.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Seek out eye contact with you
- That you do things that are surprising!
- Continue focusing on you even when your face isn't visible
- Builds excitement for a release

Peek-a-boo!

Hiding Zen's eyes.

"There you are!"

Game 5: Hide and Seek

This is another common childhood game that most of us have played. Instead of hiding your eyes, you hide your entire body. To play this game with your dog, he needs to be able to wait while you go out of sight to hide. If he cannot do that, you can have another person hold him (but ask the helper to be totally neutral and not interact with your dog). Keep talking to your dog as you go out of sight. Once you are hidden, call him to come find you. Praise, pet, and play when he does. Make your hiding place easy at first by just hiding around a corner. With repetition, you can begin to hide in more and more challenging places, but be sure to give your dog plenty of help finding you so he can be successful every time.

Hide and seek can easily become a two person recall game. The first person hides, calls the dog, and reinforces highly when the dog finds her. While this is going on, the second person will hide, then call the dog, reinforce, and then back to the first person! This is also a great way to wear out a young dog or puppy!

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Wait for a release cue
- Be persistent in searching
- Finding you results in a reward

Hide and Seek

Star waits while Judy hides.

Star is released to find Judy.

There she is! Star found her!

Game 6: Gotcha!

And yet again, we have a variation on a game that many kids have played. Gotcha! is like tag, but with extended interaction. Reach out and LIGHTLY tap your dog's shoulder, then jump away while verbally encouraging him to come towards you. If he does, lightly tap the other shoulder or a hip, and jump away again. You want to continually be moving away from your dog as he comes towards you.

Very sensitive dogs may not like it if you move into their space too abruptly, so be sure to keep the interaction playful and non-threatening. If your dog does not move towards you at first, he may simply be unsure or confused. Use lots of inviting body language and verbal encouragement to entice him into your space.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Introduction to physical tactile play
- Mutual engagement without food or toys
- To raise and lower arousal levels during personal interaction

Deb reaches in and taps Zen on his side.

Zen twists away.

And then comes back for more!

Theme 3: Get Moving!

Purpose: To develop and maintain a focused connection using movement.

In the earlier games we encouraged our dogs to move in order to develop enthusiasm and excitement. Now we are going to introduce our movement into some new games.

Game 7: Stop and Go

This is an imitation game. Your dog moves when you move, stops when you stop, turns when you turn. Your goal is to be unpredictable, fast, and exciting. Although this game will ultimately improve your heeling, it isn't work, so make sure it doesn't resemble formal heeling. Move with your dog on both sides, back up with your dog in front of you, slam into halts, and then run forward. Change direction suddenly and race away. It's not about precision, it's about your dog trying to keep up with you. Use lots of praise and random cookies to keep your dog's interest high. Feel free to suddenly whip out a hidden toy for a quick tug game.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Develops focus with movement
- Pay close attention to changes in your body language
- Encourages sustained interest in you as you move

Stop...

... and go!

Stop and Go

Stop...

... and go!

Game 8: Race Me!

This game is similar to the toy/cookie race, except you are not racing towards any particular thing. Instead, this is a short sprint forward with your dog to see who wins.

To play, either ask for a short wait (for the more driven dog) or use restraint to engage the opposition reflex (for the less driven one). Use your voice and body language (lowered, tilted forward, and ready to run) to excite your dog, then take off running with an enthusiastic, "Go!" You and your dog then run together! Feel free to use verbal encouragement and praise.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Impulse control while waiting for a release cue
- Parallel movement (running together)
- Encourages speed and drive forward

Race Me!

Star races Deb.

Game 9: Stalker

Predators stalk their prey. They stop, lower their posture, visually orient on their prey, and move very slowly towards it. Dogs use this same body language when they initiate play with each other, and we humans can imitate it to initiate a game.

To engage your dog, walk into the room and stop, holding perfectly still. Make eye contact with your dog, slowly lower your posture so you are bending forward, then hold still again. As you continue looking at your dog, advance towards him one slow step at a time. Watch carefully for your dog's reaction. Ideally, your dog will notice and seem interested; if so, turn your body away quickly, and run away while calling him. You can also back up and encourage your dog to jump on you. Praise, play, and pet.

This should be fun, not scary! If your dog seems concerned, alarmed, or avoids you, then your body language is too strong. You can temper it by making "softer" eye contact and turning your body sideways, rather than facing towards your dog. Your goal is to engage your dog's interest solely by changes in your physical movement and behavior.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Engagement can be initiated without verbal cues
- You will learn the appropriate combination and intensity of physical cues to gain the dog's interest

Deb is using "stalker" body language.

Stalker Continued

Star responds positively by moving towards Deb.

Deb backs away and encourages Star to jump on her.

Theme 4: Control Yourself!

Purpose: To introduce and strengthen self control in an enjoyable and cooperative manner.

When we talk about teaching our dogs self control, we are often focused on teaching them to stop doing things. Stop jumping, stop moving, stop barking, stop sniffing, and so on. However, if we turn this around and focus on what we do want, it becomes much more fun. That's the goal of this set of games. We get the behavior we want and our dog gets the reinforcer that he wants. Once dogs learn this concept, they become highly cooperative in their interactions with us. Doing what we want always pays off well for them - they just need to be patient and show a little control.

Please note: In all three of these games, we do not use any trained cues like sit, down, wait, stay, or leave it. We are allowing our dogs to discover what works, not telling them what to do. The only verbal cue we use is the marker or release to get the food. Your dog's body position is not important, so don't ask for anything specific.

Game 10: Slow Treats

The slow treats game is exactly like it sounds: treats move towards your dog very slowly. In order for the treat to make it to his mouth, all your dog needs to do is hold still and wait for your verbal cue to take it.

Begin by holding a treat in your hand at shoulder height. In the beginning, mark and reinforce your dog for simply holding still and not jumping to try to get the treat. When he understands this, move the treat an inch towards him, mark, and deliver the treat to his mouth. It is important to move the treat quickly to the dog's mouth once you mark so that he doesn't move to the treat. As long as he holds still, the treat keeps moving towards him.

Continue to move the treat closer to your dog as he is successful in holding still and waiting. If he moves towards the treat, slowly and smoothly move it back to shoulder height and wait. Once he settles down, begin moving the treat towards him again. As your dog shows an understanding of this game, you can make it more challenging by moving the treat closer and closer, eventually all the way to his nose, before giving him permission to take it.

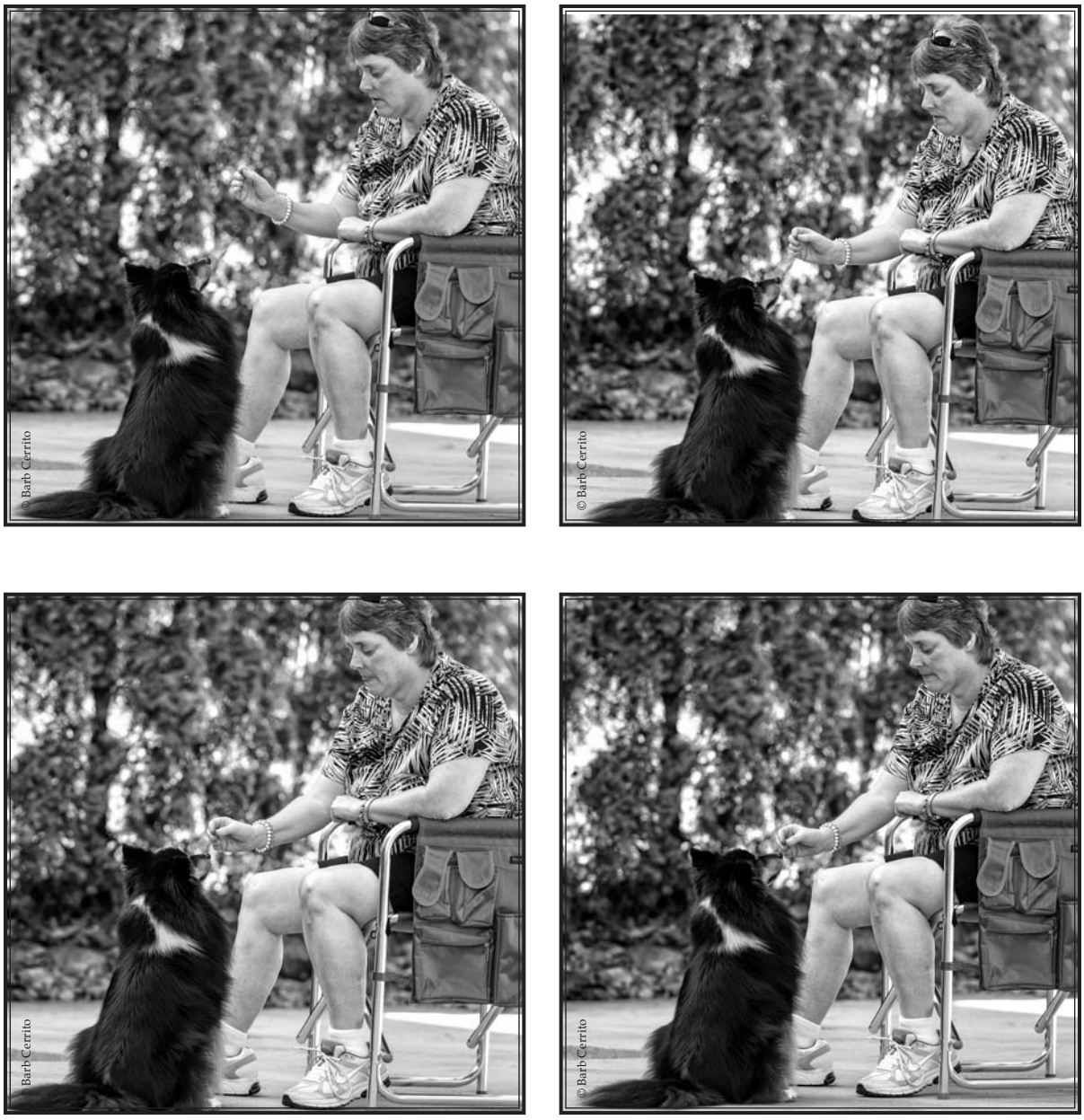
Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Wait for verbal permission to take something he wants
- Trying to take something without permission makes it go away
- Voluntarily inhibiting movement pays off
- You learn to raise and lower criteria based on the dog's behavior

Slow Treats

Slow treats starts with a cookie held at shoulder height.

Because Quest held still Judy quickly marked and delivered the treat.



When your dog understands the need to wait you can move the cookie closer and closer to him before marking and treating.

Game 11: Zen Bowl

The zen bowl is a bowl with a few treats in it; your dog must wait for permission to go to the bowl and eat the treats. Put some treats in the bowl and slowly begin to lower it towards the ground. If your dog moves towards the bowl, move it back up to shoulder height, wait until he settles, and begin moving it towards him again. The goal is to be able to set the bowl on the ground while the dog holds perfectly still and waits for permission to get the treats.

Just as you did in the slow treats game, split that goal into a number of small pieces. Start by simply holding the bowl and, as soon as your dog is still, use your verbal marker and quickly place the bowl on the ground for him. Then hold the bowl up and move it an inch towards your dog. If he remains still, mark and place the bowl on the ground. Continue to move the bowl slowly towards the floor over a number of repetitions.

If your dog is moving towards the bowl before the verbal release, you may be making it too hard, too soon. It's better to be successful at an easier level than to fail repeatedly at a harder one. A game is no fun if you repeatedly lose, so any time there are two errors in a row, make the game easier.

Once you get to the point that you can set the bowl on the floor while your dog waits for the verbal release, you can add a bit more challenge by waiting for him to look away from the bowl and towards you before giving him permission to get the food.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Focus on the bowl
- Eventually, move focus from the bowl to you
- Wait for verbal permission to approach the bowl
- Voluntarily inhibit movement towards something he wants

Judy loads the zen bowl.

She then lowers the bowl to the ground.

Quest realizes that focusing on Judy is the target behavior.

Judy gives Quest verbal permission to eat the cookies.

Game 12: Food on the Floor

The food on the floor game is the same concept as the zen bowl, but without the bowl. This actually makes this game more difficult because the food is right there and not contained in any way, which is very tempting for most dogs.

Follow the same process as you did with the zen bowl. You can make it easier in the early stages by placing the food further away from your dog. Food that is closer is much more tempting!

In an advanced version of this game, you can toss food on the floor rather than place it calmly.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Focus on the food
- Eventually, move focus from the food to you
- Wait for verbal permission to take the food
- Voluntarily inhibit moving towards something he wants

This is a big challenge but Zen is experienced with this game.

Stepping behind Zen adds to the challenge.

Adding distance between trainer and dog adds even more challenge.

Finally, the verbal release!

Theme 5: Fun and Control

Purpose: To balance fun and control by moving between arousal states.

Being able to easily move between arousal states is very important in training and showing your dog. Sometimes you want your dog to chill out, while at other times you want him to be ready to spring into explosive action on a moment's notice. These games provide practice in moving between those two states.

Game 13: Crazy Dog!

In this game, the goal is to move the dog back and forth between an excited state and a state of steady anticipation. This game definitely needs to be customized to your dog's temperament. Some dogs have a very difficult time getting excited; they need lots of encouragement to become excited and enthusiastic. Other dogs are all too ready to go over the top and need help calming down enough to wait for a cue. They may become overly physical and vocal during the excited stage, so their natural tendencies may need to be tempered a bit.

To play, find the level of interaction intensity that works to get your dog into an enthusiastic and playful state. Once you do, play with him in that state for a short time, then give him your release cue, and end your interaction with him until he relaxes into a calmer state. Once he is calmer, the reward is that he gets to play again! These changes in arousal levels are neither natural nor easy. Many dogs seem to get stuck in one state or the other. This game will give you an opportunity to start working through that process.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Move from an excited to a controlled state and back again
- Pay attention to your cues about changing states
- You learn how to most successfully influence and alter your dog's arousal states

Deb encourages Zen to get "crazy." It doesn't take much!

Crazy Dog!

Now she asks him to lie down and waits for him to relax a bit.

Game 14: Challenges

Continuing with our basic goal of cooperation rather than conflict, we introduce distractions as a series of challenges that our dogs can learn to win. By setting up a series of increasingly difficult challenges, dogs learn that ignoring the distraction is the key to ultimately getting what they want. Distractions tend to cause cognitive conflict in dogs. They want to have or interact with the distraction, yet they are also trying to do what we are asking of them. This is a most unpleasant state to be in. This game will teach the dog that the presence of distractions is a signal that work will be highly reinforced.

The challenge for the trainer is to determine the appropriate level of distraction. You want to be just challenging enough that your dog notices the distraction, but not so much that he cannot function around it. As your dog is successful, you can increase the level of challenge in small increments. So, if he can function and work with treats on a table in a container, what if you put those treats on a chair? Next, try putting them on the floor. If he can do that, put them on a table with the container open... then a chair with the container open… then on the floor with the container open. You might decide to use the distraction as your reinforcer, or you might reinforce with something you have in your pocket.

If your dog fails to work through the challenge, you will need to decide whether or not the challenge is at an appropriate level. You might try a second time, but if he fails

twice, then you must make it easy enough for him to succeed on the third repetition. Repeated failure means that something needs to change so that success can occur. No one likes to fail over and over, including your dog! Do not punish failure; adjust your training so that failure is a rare event.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Voluntarily ignore valuable reinforcers in the environment
- Inhibit the desire to take what he wants
- Continue to work with you even when distracted
- You will learn how to gauge the appropriate level of distraction

Zen has learned to concentrate on heeling in the presence of distractions.

An open container is more challenging than a closed one.

Game 15: Explosions

Explosive movement is unexpected and surprising. For explosions, you will either be still, then race forward encouraging your dog to join you, or you will be moving very slowly, then dramatically increase your speed. Either way, run forward for five to ten steps, then praise and play with your dog. In the beginning you can use some verbal cues and prompts to let your dog know that something exciting is about to happen by saying, "Are you ready?" After you take off, verbally encourage him to follow. Be sure to reinforce highly to keep him active and enthusiastic. As he comes to understand the game, you can drop the verbal prompts and just suddenly take off, laughing and running. Your dog will learn to anticipate the explosion, causing him to pay closer and closer attention to you and to your movement.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Remain focused on you even when nothing exciting is happening
- Always be ready to spring into action
- Pay close attention to your body language

Unexpected super fast about turn.

Accelerating forward.

Zen works hard to keep up!

Theme 6: Surprise!

Purpose: To use variability and unpredictability to keep training fun and interesting.

Game 16: 30 Second Jackpot

Many trainers are very stingy when it comes to reinforcement. They dole it out carefully and sparingly. They may be in the "one behavior, one cookie" pattern, which, let's face it, is predictable and boring. Everybody loves surprises, including your dog! This game is like winning the lottery.

Choose a behavior that your dog knows well and performs fairly automatically, like a sit. When your dog responds, the 30 second jackpot starts. Reinforce your dog (either with continuous food and praise or with continuous play) for at least 30 seconds. You may want to have someone time you at first; thirty seconds is much longer than most people think.

You need to be continuously engaged with your dog during the 30 seconds - no mindless feeding or tugging! Talk to your dog the entire time, telling him how marvelous and smart and clever he is. Feed one small cookie after the other after the other. Tug with energy and excitement. After the 30 second jackpot is over, you will likely find that your dog wants to continue to interact with you. Perfect! That means you did it right!

Play this game at least once a day. Strive to be random and surprising with it.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Reinforcement can be surprising and unpredictable
- Sometimes there's a huge amount of reinforcement for an easy behavior
- Responding to you pays off!

Quest can hardly believe his luck at getting a 30 second food jackpot!

Thirty seconds of tug is a great jackpot for Zen.

Game 17: Mix it Up

As trainers, we tend to fall into predictable patterns fairly easily. We reinforce the same way, with the same thing, time after time. Often, we go with what's easiest and works most of the time, which makes sense. But like people, dogs can fall into a rut, too. Many people have a dog who will only work for food, usually because food is what is offered 99% of the time. The 1% of the time when toys are offered seems strange and unusual to the dog, so it doesn't go as quickly and smoothly, and the trainer goes back to food.

In this game, you will purposely mix up the available reinforcers. Gather three to four different types of food and toys. Make sure your dog sees you get them ready. Ask your dog for an easy, well-known behavior and, when he responds correctly, mark it and choose one of the reinforcers. When you're done reinforcing, place it back with the others, but don't use it again. Ask for another easy behavior and choose a different reinforcer. Continue until you've used them all in that session.

Not knowing which reinforcer he will get next is what makes this game interesting for your dog. It also allows you to expose him to a wide variety of reinforcers and gauge his reaction to determine his favorites.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- There are lots of different reinforcers in the world
- It's fun to be surprised!
- You may discover new reinforcers for your dog

Which reinforcer will Zen get? It's a surprise!

Game 18: Hidden Treasures

Some trainers have gotten into the situation of having to "show the goods" before their dogs will work with them. No cookies = no work. This is not going to be helpful when it's time to go into a competition, so this game will teach your dog that he will get reinforced even when he doesn't see the reinforcer.

Before you bring your dog into your training area, hide three to four reinforcers, scattered around the area, but out of your dog's reach. You can put food in open containers up on shelves and put toys behind other objects.

Bring your dog into the area, ask for an easy and well-known behavior, mark when it is performed, and then go to one of your hidden caches to get a reinforcer. Repeat, going to a different spot for the next, and the next. Not only does your dog not know what he's getting next, but he also won't know where it's coming from! This game adds interest and excitement to what might be lackluster responses.

Skills and Concepts Your Dog Will Learn

- Just because reinforcement isn't visible doesn't mean it's not there.
- Working without obvious reinforcers leads to surprising reinforcement.

These reinforcers are not well hidden. Zen found them!

Part Three:

Engagement

Chapter Fifteen
What is Engagement?

Engagement training is a dance. It's a constant questioning of, "Are you ready for this? How about this? Are we having fun? Are you enjoying our game? Can you engage with me in our house? Our backyard? The front yard? In the middle of the woods with squirrels all around?" As you continue through this part of the book, you should be asking yourself these questions and setting up your sessions accordingly.

On the surface, engagement training seems simple. You will work through several stages of engagement, none of which takes more than 60 seconds, in a variety of environments. Indeed, if you have a talented performance prospect (one who is stable, easily motivated, interactive, and who has low environmental interest), and if you have good foundation skills (you know how to play with your dog and you've already done the focus exercises in part two), you will breeze right through.

But if you have a dog who sees ghosts, who is only moderately interested in food and toys, who thinks that watching the grass blow in the wind is interesting… well, you'll need to learn patience and to celebrate each and every success, no matter how small. But don't worry, we'll be right here, helping you through it.

Before we begin, let's talk about what engagement training is and how it's different from focus training.

What is Engagement Training?

Engagement training is the process of teaching your dog to take responsibility for starting work and then ACTIVELY pushing the handler to begin interaction. For this book, engagement training will be laid out as a multi-stage process with one specific end goal - a dog who will enthusiastically seek training opportunities regardless of location, stressors, or the presence (or lack thereof) of visible classic motivators like food and toys. Done well, what sounds like a very simple process will try the trainer's patience, test her mechanical skills, and stretch her comfort level. We will ask you to give up control and to have faith in the end result. Engagement training is simple, but it is definitely not easy.

How is Engagement Different from Focus?

There is no way to truly ferret out the topics of engagement and focus because they are so tightly intertwined. Both focus and engagement share exactly the same foundation concepts. For both focus and engagement, the role of proper acclimation is crucial; you must have a dog who is comfortable in his environment before you can expect him to be focused or engage with you. Both focus and engagement can be learned and improved. And both require a dog who chooses to interact with his trainer. So how are they different?

Engagement training emphasizes movement towards the handler!

For engagement training, we will be looking for enthusiastic and focused MOVEMENT towards the handler. We call this active engagement. We will be looking for your dog's full body reaction to the exercises; eye contact, ears forward, and an engaged brain

won't be enough. Engagement requires that your dog is on his feet, has a distinctly wagging tail, and that he is actively pushing you (mostly mentally, but also somewhat physically) to begin work.

In other words: all active engagement requires focus, but not all focus requires active engagement.

Why the Emphasis on Movement?

Think about how you feel when you play a card game. Now compare that to how you feel when you engage in a physical sport such as walking, running, soccer, or even fast-paced dog training. Both require focus, and both are highly enjoyable, but the activities that require movement require a completely different level of adrenaline. Movement sharpens your reflexes and makes you highly aware of small changes that are relevant to your engagement in the game. On the other hand, while a game of chess sharpens your mental focus, it may actually dull your physical reflexes.

We emphasize movement and strong personal interaction because dog sports require movement and active connection with their human teammates - that's why we call them sports! While some dog sports do have passive components (such as the long stay exercises in obedience), the primary emphasis of all sports is on movement and interaction.

Engagment training will pay off in competition.

Because engagement is both acquired AND trained through the process of building a positive attitude towards work, it is a foundation skill that should be taught right

along with skill building exercises for your specific sport. In one session you might be working quietly on a nose touch with your young agility prospect (requiring focus, but not high levels of handler engagement), while in another session you might be working on encouraging your dog to bounce around you with enthusiasm for 30 seconds in a pure engagement training session, and in a final session, you might be working on a fast run across a board on the ground. In this third session, you'd use your engagement training to build useful energy, and then you'd transfer that energy to the running contact training. In a case like this, you could easily have three training sessions of only a few minutes each in one day.

Including engagement early in your training will pay off when you are working on exercises where you want maximum speed and enthusiasm, when you want to practice a particular exercise with maximum drive, or when you want to start reducing reinforcers. In each case, you want as much movement originating from the dog as possible. A dog who goes from bouncing in front of the handler directly into heeling is going to bring a lot more speed, power, and enthusiasm to the work than a dog who sets up in a sit and then steps out calmly into the first step.

Is Engagement Training Really Necessary?

It is possible for dogs to be successful in a variety of dog sports without engagement. Dogs can certainly learn to go through the motions, especially if they come with a stable genetic package and you do a lot of pattern training. But you wouldn't be reading this book if you were satisfied with that. We want dogs who show a joyous, excited picture of teamwork, and who want to be with us as much as we want to be with them.

There are those rare teams that seem to turn out that flashy performance without effort. Some dogs do not require engagement training because of their genetic temperament, and some handlers inadvertently teach engagement simply as a function of how they naturally approach training. For most of us, though, engagement is something that needs to be carefully considered and trained, and that is what we'll be doing here - teaching engagement in a systematic fashion, regardless of your dog's innate temperament. We want the qualities of play, praise, handler interaction, classic rewards, focus, and energy to become so tightly bound together that they cannot be differentiated. When you have that, you have a fully engaged dog.

Chapter Sixteen
What Does an Engaged Dog Look Like?

Engagement can look very different depending on the current intensity level of your interaction with your dog (for example, engagement will look quite different if you and your dog are running and doing a lot of personal play than if you are moving more slowly or using praise), but there are a few core features of engagement. In this chapter, we'll go over what engagement looks like, whether or not you should use trained cues during your engagement, and how to balance engagement and arousal.

The Core Features of Engagement

There are four general characteristics we look at to determine if a dog is engaged with his handler. When you are working with your dog, ask yourself the following questions:

1) Where is your dog looking? It doesn't matter what you're doing; if you're scratching your dog's butt and trying to engage with him, but he is clearly looking at something else in the world, you do not have engagement. On the other hand, if your dog is looking up or back towards you, even if it's not necessarily at you, and clearly enjoying what you are doing, then you do have engagement. Where the eyes and nose are pointing is an indicator of engagement, but it is only part of the picture.

Even though this dog is facing away from the handler, they are clearly engaged!

2) What is your dog's demeanor? Depending on the interaction, the dog's demeanor may be intense (ears forward, focused, pushing in) or more relaxed (ears relaxed, open mouth, softer movements). Neither is better than the other, and in fact, our personal ideal is to have both. Inside the obedience ring, a more relaxed form of engagement is often needed so as not to alarm the judge - especially when in a tight space- but we might want more energy when we're in a more open space or setting up for an active exercise. However, if your dog's demeanor is depressed or stressed, you do not have engagement.

An engaged dog will have a bright and open expression; ready for action!

3) Is your dog showing any forms of avoidance? If your dog is walking away, panting, sniffing random spots, or avoiding you in some other way, STOP WHAT YOU ARE DOING. Not only is your dog not engaged with you, but he's desperately trying to stop the interaction. Developing engagement takes time. You need to learn to balance your energy with your dog's, so try scaling back so you're less overwhelming. Go for tiny bits of play and reinforce with a cookie as needed.

This dog is not yet ready to work; the world is still more interesting.

4) Who is driving the interaction? An engaged dog will be at least as involved as the human. This means that if the human pushes on the dog's chest, the dog should resist and push back with just as much force. If the human is using trained cues or tricks as part of the interaction, the dog should be performing them with a good deal of joy and

energy, not simply going through the motions. A high hand touch is great, but if the dog is not showing enthusiasm for the task, it is not engagement.

All of these dogs are engaged with the handler!

Using Trained Cues During Engagement

When we're working on pure engagement training, we prefer not to use trained cues or tricks as a way of interacting with our dogs. Over the long run, doing so makes it hard to tell if the dog is working or engaging. Instead, we prefer a picture that looks like a child and dog playing with each other, or the way two dogs look when they are interacting - no training required. It could be as quiet as two dogs jaw wrestling in your house or as rambunctious as two dogs playing chase in the yard. Regardless, they are mutually engaged with no cues or expectation of a correct response required on either side.

Sometimes simple tricks can encourage engagement.

That said, if tricks allow you to start the party of engagement, and it is something that your dog understands and gives him comfort, then do it! Just be sure to look at your dog's demeanor. If you ask your dog for a spin and it makes him even more excited, then use it! If your dog does a hand touch, but seems to be performing strictly for a cookie, then drop that from your engagement repertoire. Over time, see if you can work towards more pure engagement and fewer tricks, but remember that success is really about developing a plan that works for your team.

Mouthing or Biting During Engagement

We are often asked if it's okay for a dog to put his mouth on human skin. That's a personal choice. If the biting is not hard and does not bother you, you can ignore it. If it bothers you, address it! Allowing a dog to put his teeth on you in play does NOT make him more likely to bite "for real." Keep in mind that dogs naturally use their mouths as an extension of energy and a method of interaction. When dogs play with each other, they use their mouths - that doesn't make them more likely to get into a dogfight later on! If you have a zero tolerance policy, it would be the same as playing with a child and saying neither of you could use your hands. Yes, it is possible. No, it's not easy.

Sometimes, though, a dog is so mouthy that it's painful, or is over-aroused and unable to work. In those cases, we have several pieces of advice.

First, put a toy in your dog's mouth. When you play, focus on the personal play, but play with the toy just enough to keep the dog interested in holding the toy in his mouth. This gives your dog's mouthiness a focal point while you learn how to play at a level that feels

A toy is an easy way to keep your dog's mouth busy!

right. If the dog drops the toy, stop all movement but stay engaged by encouraging him to get the toy again. As soon as he picks it up, start up where you left off. If you're consistent, your dog will learn to play while holding an object.

If your dog refuses to hold toys, have food on your body when you engage in play. As soon as your dog goes too high, redirect him to food and lower your intensity level on your next attempt. Food tends to act as a calming influence on dogs. If you are working at stage four engagement (more on the stages soon!) and work is a part of your repertoire, then try asking for work as your dog appears about to become excessively mouthy; reward his work with a cookie. Develop this sequence gradually so your dog has a chance to learn what you have in mind.

Change the type of play. For some dogs, games of chase bring out hard biting while for other dogs physical wrestling causes it. Sometimes trying out new games makes all the difference!

Physical wrestling often brings out mouthing.
Change your play if this becomes a problem.

Try getting lower and keeping the dog more at your sides rather than facing you. Most biting happens when we face our dogs. When dogs play "bitey face," they are facing each other. Stop playing that way and see what happens; the biting often decreases with just that change. In addition, when we are above our dogs, we are not handicapping ourselves, so the dog is more likely to become highly aroused and use teeth to level the playing field. Try getting down at your dog's level. Often, when we reduce our presence, the dog doesn't feel the need to ratchet up the intensity.

Go soft and passive if your dog gets too aroused. Turn and look away. This lets the dog know that it's not fun to play so rough. The natural tendency when our dogs get too rough is to face them and get larger, but reducing your energy and showing avoidance behavior is more likely to reduce your dog's energy level.

Barking During Engagement

Is barking good or bad? Well, it depends. Can you identify why your dog is barking? Does your dog even know that he is barking? Is your dog a natural barker/talker by breed and nature, or does it only occur at very high levels of arousal that you will not reach in the ring? Can you stop it by putting something in the dog's mouth? And if so, does he remain quieter if the object is no longer in his mouth? Is your dog frustration barking?

Dogs like to bark! Watch carefully to see what behaviors elicit barking so that you can begin to eliminate them.

As you can see, there is no single answer to this question. Some dogs simply cannot play at any level of intensity without loud barking. For those dogs, make sure that your praise-based engagement is very strong. Although you can use higher intensity engagement when it won't matter (at home when training), it won't be considered acceptable in many trial settings.

Most barking is due to uncertainty or frustration; the dog is unclear on what you want. If you're not sure if this is the case for your team, videotape your work and look at what happened immediately before the barking started. If you gave an unclear cue or were working on a newer concept, the barking is almost always distress and can safely be taken as information that you need to make some changes in your training. If this is

your dog's reason for barking, then ignore the barking and split the work into smaller pieces so you dog is being rewarded more often and is having an easier time learning.

You will need to address the barking if your dog is a "happy" barker. If you think your dog could develop a habit of barking within work, then you must end work immediately when the barking starts. Go back to a lower level of engagement. If you do this every single time from the very first bark, you'll be able to get a handle on it. If it's been going on for months or years, your dog is probably unaware that he is barking. While you can try to end the behavior chain, it probably will not work. At that point, your best option is management; manage your engagement interactions in competition settings so that your choice of activities do not elicit barking. Worst case scenario, you will not use engagement work within the competition ring or close enough to the ring that you will disturb others.

How Physical Should an Engaged Dog Be?

The purpose of engagement training is to build drive, determination, and energy into your dog. For most dogs, this means encouraging them to be demanding about interacting with you. We want them to jump up, push you around, and refuse to take no for an answer. But what if your dog is already very demanding and you don't want to encourage that further? Or, what if your dog is very large, or you are very small, or it simply wouldn't be physically safe?

Train the dog you have.

It may not be desirable to encourage high levels of energy in some working teams.

At its core, an engaged dog is one who is clearly expressing that he wants to work. This might involve your dog jumping on you, but it doesn't have to! You can use a wide range of behaviors like hand touches, spins, leaping straight up in the air in front of you, play bows, and so on. You'll be most successful if you choose behaviors that are an outgrowth of your dog's natural play styles, but you should also take some time to think about which behaviors you want to encourage, and which ones might make you regret engagement training down the road. Although barking can be an excellent indicator of a dog who wants to do something with you, as we've already discussed, in some situations, you will want to immediately curtail any vocalizations.

Here's an example of how this might work. If you hold out your hand, most dogs will move towards it (if your dog doesn't, teach a hand touch behavior). When your dog really wants to jump on you but you don't want him to, try substituting a hand touch. Any time your dog moves towards you during engagement, offer your hand. When he touches it, reward him. You can repeat this, moving your hand higher so that he has to jump in the air, alternating between hands, or have the hand be a moving target. Whatever you do, remember that the goal is to create determination and energy.

If you look over your options and discover there are NO physical behaviors that you would find acceptable, then you might choose to teach your dog that eye contact is the only way to start work. If you think this might be you and your dog, when you read the chapter on the stages of engagement, pay special attention to stage two. Cutting short the amount of playful engagement and moving directly to work (stage four) will also help to reduce the amount of active physically demanding behavior from your dog.

Remember, engagement is about the interaction between the two of you, so do not use punishment to stop your dog's behavior, even if it's too rough for you. Instead, use your body language and physical space to discourage rough behavior - for example, by stepping sideways or leaning over towards your dog when he tries to jump on you - or you can simply end the session. But do not yell at him or become physical in return, or you'll find that your dog will refuse to engage at all.

Ultimately, it's not our standard on engagement and interaction that matters, it's yours. Find ways to balance his enthusiasm with your safety.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Notes:

Chapter Seventeen
The Human Half of Engagement

So far we've discussed when the dog looks like what he's engaged, but he's only half the team. Now let's switch tracks for a moment and take a look at the handler.

What Does an Engaged Human Look Like?

Have you ever had a conversation with a person who never took their eyes off you as they listened? If so, you know it's hard to turn away from that person because you are magnetized to each other, which is an amazing feeling. Now compare that to a conversation with a person whose eyes are drifting around the room. While we might stay in the conversation, we certainly don't get the sense that our conversation is interesting to the other person, which affects how we feel about ourselves. And if the person starts off by giving you their full attention and then suddenly turns away from you to chat with another person - that is downright demoralizing! You'll probably avoid getting into deep conversations with that person in the future.

One of the quickest ways to teach your dog to disengage is to disengage yourself. What is your dog learning when, for no reason that he can discern, you find other things to do or other people to talk to in the middle of your work with him? You are

communicating that he is less important than those other things. Handlers have good intentions when this happens. One common scenario is that they just want to ask their training partner a question. In their mind, training hasn't stopped at all - after all, they're talking about what what they were doing with their dog, but the dog is left hanging, trying to decide what he should do. Some dogs (bless their hearts) will stare at their person and wait patiently, maybe even trying to get their attention by pawing or barking at them. Other dogs will wait a little while before wandering away, usually disengaging faster and faster over time. Most dogs will drift in and out. They walk away, look back to see what you are doing, and then turn away again.

You are effectively telling him that he can go ahead and find something to occupy himself. That will backfire when you need to disconnect for a few brief seconds in the ring to greet the judge or hand over your leash; your dog will assume that you're done with him, and he is quite likely to follow your example by disengaging from you. If you're lucky, your dog will snap back immediately to work when you want. If you're not lucky, your dog will find something fascinating to watch in a nearby ring and will not be the least bit interested in returning to you.

Engagement must take place in the ring, even if you are not looking directly at your dog!

Work extremely hard not to disconnect from your dog! If you need to re-arrange equipment, speak with an instructor, or in any way put your dog on hold, let him know! You can put him on a passive stay for a few minutes, crate him, tie him up nearby, or simply release him from training altogether. But DO NOT ignore him while he tries to figure out if there is a chance to work at that moment or not.

Whose Responsibility is it Anyway?

Sometimes handlers feel pressure to make something happen when training is not going well. They feel that they are supposed to engage their dogs. This is incredibly common when a handler has gone to great lengths to set up a training session. It's even more common during a class or in a public setting. People start to feel desperate and try to force a few more minutes of interaction from the dog. They might try to

overwhelm the dog's interest in the environment, his exhaustion from a long day, or even his worry, by being a cheerleader.

When a dog opts out and says, "No, thank you, not now," people often start begging. And begging is bad.

Do not beg! Simply match your dog's energy when you play.

Begging is what happens when we bring massive amounts of energy - much more than the dog has at that moment - in an effort to force the dog to engage. Even if the dog agrees to go along with it if you bring out the "big gun" food, toys, and energy, it is a disaster waiting to happen. Begging does NOT hold up when those things go away and you want work, because it teaches you both to rely on having those intense reinforcers front and center at all times.

The truth is, begging is force in disguise. "Force" means to make something happen against the other party's will. Although we often think of force in training as using corrections, we can force a dog to do something through food and toys. Either way, the point is the same - the dog is not given a choice. He wants to opt out and you're not letting him.

But really, it's worse than that. Begging is the absolute antithesis of engagement training because you are creating a problematic dynamic that you then have to resolve. Begging doesn't make the dog change his mind and become lively and animated. He isn't CHOOSING to interact with you; he simply wants what you have to offer. You are making your dog think that he only enjoys interacting with you when you are ratcheting it up and bringing out amazing options. Better to simply go home for the

day so the dog has a neutral experience - nothing good happened but nothing bad happened either. When you add begging, the dog is either forced to work or he just opts out. Either is the wrong lesson for the dog.

A dog choosing to opt out is normal. Think of it like this: you might like cake, but you don't want cake all the time. If we make a cake and offer it to you, you'll probably opt in, but if you're doing something else, you might not. If we follow you around trying to get you to eat cake, pushing it towards you, begging you to try it, we become an irritant. You might take the cake just to get us to stop bothering you, but you didn't actually want that cake. You're going to be annoyed, and you will probably avoid us in the future.

However, if cake is a special treat that requires you to come to us and ask politely for a piece, well, now we have a new dynamic! Now YOU are doing the begging, trying to figure out how to get that treat. Over time, the special experience of sharing the cake with us will become so positive that you might start wanting that cake when you're not even hungry. Eating cake has become a joyful habit for you! But this will not happen on the first day, and definitely not if we force it on you.

Maybe you go somewhere and your dog has zero interest in you. It's okay! Dogs do not learn everything they need to know about engagement in a few days. It is a process that will involve fits and starts. Be patient and you will see a positive change OVER TIME. But begging? That's not engagement.

We believe that training is a privilege for your dog! It is fun! They get to use their brains! They get to play with you and eat yummy cookies and play with toys. Do not drag your dog into Disneyland - allow him to enter by opening the door and giving him the choice to walk through - and then he will discover that he made a good choice.

Training should be fun for both of you; there is no reason to beg!

Chapter Eighteen
Can Engagement Really be Trained?

In the next chapter, we will introduce the stages of engagement training. You will notice that we reinforce engagement training with food and toys as much as necessary, which many people question. If we use food and toys in engagement, they ask, is it really reinforcing in and of itself, or is the dog simply engaging in order to earn reinforcement? Put more scientifically, is engagement a primary or secondary reinforcer?

The answer to this will depend quite a bit on both your dog and your training. Dogs have uniquely evolved to form relationships with humans. They almost always find engagement with a human reinforcing whether or not toys and food are involved. If you doubt this, ask yourself how your dog responds when you come through the door after an absence. Most dogs will be happy and enthusiastic at your return. This is engagement! The dog has chosen to put out the energy to get off the couch to come to greet you!

Of course, it's not always so simple, especially when you get out into the big, wide world. When you come home and your dog engages with you at the door, there probably aren't any other interesting alternatives - no fresh grass to smell, no birds to watch - and furthermore, there are no strings attached. The dog did not have to do anything; it was just pure interaction.

Although the vast majority of dogs will engage with you simply for the sake of engagement, the strength of this natural tendency to engage with humans varies between individuals. Some dogs would show that same level of enthusiasm for greeting their owners at the door regardless of the alternatives. Engaging with their humans is more important than eating a snack, playing with a toy, or darting into the yard to look for squirrels. Other dogs have less natural engagement. They are happy to engage when there is nothing better to do, and as long as no strings (work requirements) are attached. If you were to ask one of these dogs to sit before you pet him, he would prefer to simply walk away rather than offer a behavior to gain your attention.

The training plan in this book will work for both types of dogs, although you will need to tailor it to your dog's natural level of engagement. With either type of dog, you will reinforce your dog's choices to engage with you using food and toys as needed - but only to the extent needed. If your dog is simply thrilled to have your attention for the sake of your attention, then you will not need to use food and toy motivators much at all. But other dogs (most dogs, actually) will require classic reinforcers to back up engagement, especially once they are out in the real world where more enticing options exist. Over time, you will be able to ask for engagement and work before that reinforcer, but you'll need to be patient.

Working through the stages of engagement will take an investment of time and energy on your part. It's worth it. If you enter a competition ring with a dog who is willing to engage with you without looking for a cookie or a toy, then you start off on a much better foot! Furthermore, dogs who value the engagement itself will have an enormous advantage over dogs who only engage to get the final reward because they are being rewarded in the ring! Moving between exercises in the competition ring will be much

Dogs vary in their interest in engaging with a human.

much easier, and your dog will be able to work for longer stretches of time without feeling discouraged.

Having a dog who values engagement for itself is a factor of temperament (high natural levels of engagement), human training (do you play in a way that your dog finds reinforcing?), and skill building (have you trained your dog to complete several rounds of the engagement/work cycle before receiving a final classic reward?). The good news is that only temperament is innate; you strongly influence the rest.

Only temperament is innate. The rest is up to you.

The Link Between a Conditioned Emotional Response and Engagement

If you want to turn out a truly fantastic and crisp performance that combines accuracy with enthusiasm, you need both movement and energy. One of the ways we get this is through habit. If your dog develops a habit of only working on motion-oriented tasks when he is enthusiastic and engaged, that becomes his natural demeanor when he's asked to perform. We call this habit of working with joy a positive Conditioned Emotional Response (CER).

CER's are classically conditioned; this means the dog does not choose it, and neither does the trainer. The trainer can create circumstances that make a favorable (or less favorable) CER more likely, but ultimately, a dog's CER to work is built over time by his emotional reactions to whatever is happening.

Here's an example. If a trainer spends 90% of her training time working on calm, thoughtful activities and only 10% on speed and movement based activities, that dog is very likely to approach training in a calm and thoughtful manner. This will become the dog's habit. On the other hand, if a different trainer spends 90% of her training time working on energetic activities and only 10% on calm and thoughtful ones, that dog's habit is likely to become movement.

Both dogs might be trained with kindness and excellence. Both dogs might truly enjoy their work. But the way the dog is likely to move into the training area will be very different. The one trained with movement is likely to be moving, and the one trained with concentration is likely to be watching. Neither option is better than the other; different trainers vary with how much energy and movement they want incorporated

into their dogs' work.

Your training choices are significant in creating your dog's reactions, so train accordingly! This is why we are so careful to reduce stress in training. Let's say that three trainers are training their dogs to perform a series of tasks. One trainer relies on setting the session up for success and uses positive reinforcement (cookies and toys) to mark good work. Another trainer thinks it's important that her dog knows when he's wrong, so she relies on active punishment (physical corrections or verbal disapproval). The third trainer doesn't use corrections, but spends a lot of time using negative punishment (taking away the dog's cookies, or using time outs in a crate) to mark failure. How does this affect the dog's CER?

Playing with toys within work often creates a very excited and energetic dog.

Unpleasant methods, which includes both active corrections (+P) and taking away things that the dog wants (-P), build an element of worry and stress into the training. If a dog receives a leash pop when he looks away during training, learning to watch the handler becomes stressful, regardless of whether or not the dog learned what is expected. Pleasant methods (structuring training for success and rewarding generously) build enthusiasm, clarity, and excitement to work.

If engagement is to become reinforcing in and of itself, instead of what it predicts in the way of reinforcers, then you need to be mindful of the CER your dog is developing through your engagement training. We want your dog to enjoy his engagement training, and to be successful the vast majority of the time! While we will offer solutions for dogs who choose not to engage, we want those events to be extremely rare. Instead, we want to structure our environments to create success, and to continuously build upon

those successes with measured challenges.

Making mistakes can aid learning when experienced in small doses because the dog becomes aware of consequences. However, repeated failure can have an enormous impact on your dog's CER. Dogs with an unhappy conditioned emotional response are not likely to choose to engage with you. Remember, dogs do not choose how to feel about you and your time together - it simply happens. Dogs choose to engage when it feels good to be with you, so it is your responsibility to set up engagement training so that your dog feels good and wants to be there!

Notes:

Chapter Nineteen
The Stages of Engagement

Now that we've discussed what engagement is and why we want it, let's talk about how to get it. We will teach engagement in small amounts over four distinct stages. No matter which stage of engagement you're working on, there are a few guidelines you should follow. First, keep each engagement lesson to less than five minutes, not including acclimation time. Second, until your dog understands the basic process, start work in very comfortable environments where you don't have to worry about fear issues or curiosity. It will be easier if you work your dog on leash or in a small and confined space. Third, during the waiting period, stand still and wait for your dog to engage; you will resume movement with strong interaction during the reward phase. Finally, don't forget acclimation when you're in new places!

The Stages

Stage 1: Handler Starts Engagement

In the first phase, the human starts engagement by showing the dog a combination of personal interaction along with classic food and toy reinforcers.

To do this, acclimate casually for a period of time. When you are both ready, start in your quiet, familiar area, get out a bunch of cookies, and feed them to your dog quickly while both of you are moving. Because YOU are starting engagement, put the cookies right under your dog's nose if you need to. As you do this, back up so that your dog is following the front of your body while eating the cookies. You can (and should!) talk to your dog, touch him, and interact with him, but don't be overwhelming. The more you use the cookies as a toy, the better! (To get ideas for using food as toys, please see Book 3, Play!) The goal is to keep your dog

In stage one of engagement, put the food right in front of the dog's nose!

moving, excited, and engaged while focused on what you are doing together!

If your dog enjoys other forms of play or interactive tug-type toys, you can absolutely use those, but choose something where your behavior and chosen motivators hold your dog's attention for about ten seconds. If you can't engage your dog for 10 seconds with your current choice of motivator, then switch to a higher value motivator, verify that there is nothing else to do in the environment, and make sure that you aren't overwhelming your dog by accident!

Toys are absolutely fine for stage one!

No matter how you choose to engage with each other, remember that the dog should not be asked to DO anything other than eat or play! No cues. No tricks. No work. Just engagement. If you have worked through the focus portion of this book, this should be easy. You are taking your basic focus skills and adding movement and personality. No big challenge there!

When you finish one rep of about ten seconds (with several rewards), signal with your hand, a verbal release, and your demeanor that your dog is free to choose what to do. Denise uses the phrase, "Take a break." Then, stand still and wait. If your dog DOES NOT LEAVE when you offer a break, then go right back to engagement; if your dog chooses to stay with you, he will be rewarded for that! If the dog leaves, that's fine too. Remember, he gets to choose what to do. Just wait twenty seconds or so, and then use your cookies and toys to magnetize your dog for another round. Be sure to MOVE when you interact with your dog!

Repeat this process in a new space - possibly only a few feet away!

This stage is meant to teach the dog that you have toys, food, and fun, and to help you find ways to use those motivators most effectively with your dog. However, stage one is only done to teach you how to use food and toys to interact in a positive fashion with your dog - DO NOT CONTINUE WITH STAGE ONE ONCE YOU HAVE THOSE SKILLS. If you continue stage one engagement over the long run, you'll set yourself up for a lifetime of working harder and harder to get and keep engagement - or you'll resort to corrections to maintain attention when your dog is no longer a puppet being manipulated by your reinforcers. That is the exact opposite of what engagement training is meant to accomplish.

So do not continue with stage one as part of your training once you know how to play with your dog with food, toys, and personality. It will set your training back. Instead, it's time to move on to stage two.

Stage 2: Dog Starts Engagement

The next stage of engagement occurs when you shift responsibility for starting the session from the human to the dog. This shift is critical because it allows you to assess the dog's readiness to work and his overall comfort level in an environment.

When Tia is ready she will ask for engagement. The handler's job is to wait!

Return to the same place that you had easy success in stage one. At this point, setting up an environment where you are likely to "win" is quite important. Choosing a dull environment (maybe a 2 out of 10 on the curiosity scale), will cause your dog to get bored faster (and thus more interested in interacting with you) than if you choose to work at Doggy Disneyland.

Before you start, have some food or toys hidden on your body. Do not let your dog see you put the rewards on your body; we want him to assume that you have access to reinforcement by your training demeanor. With your dog, walk into the area that you have selected. Acclimate him to this area by walking around it casually. Once your dog is ready, stop moving, face your dog, and wait. A short leash will aid this process. Be still and quiet; eventually your lack of movement will become the cue that you are now available for engagement. Don't worry about what your dog does before engaging with you; sniffing and sightseeing are just fine at this stage. Stand still!

Your dog should orient to you fairly quickly based on both your focus work and your stage one engagement training. If he doesn't, you picked too difficult of an environment. Either increase the acclimation period, or better yet, choose an easier location.

Once your dog turns back to you, wait for him to maintain eye contact for two seconds before rewarding. This length of time is important because we don't want "drive by" attention. The reward should involve the active process that you learned in stage one, which is at least ten seconds long and involves movement regardless of whether you use toys, food, or play. Hold the reinforcement in your hands but out of sight (behind your back or inside your closed fist). Use your movement and enthusiastic tone of voice

to add value to the classic rewards once you start the reward process.

Be sure that your energy is at whatever level best suits your dog. Make an effort not to go over the top with energy, especially if your dog is softer. Instead, match your dog. If your dog offers a 2 in terms of focus and energy, don't start at a 10! Work that up to a 3, then 4, and then 5 as your dog shows a willingness to engage with you.

After two seconds of eye contact it's time for your party!

After your dog makes eye contact for two seconds and you reward while moving and engaging for about ten seconds, you'll need to end this repetition to start a new one. To do this, stand still (that's how your dog knows you're available) and signal to your dog that he is free to take a break; if he doesn't leave, go right back to engagement.

Your dog will soon learn that the route to gaining reinforcement is by making a choice to engage the handler. At this stage, that is defined by eye contact and an engaged demeanor.

At this point you will find videotaping extremely helpful. As you watch, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are you counting out two full seconds of eye contact before you start the reward period?
2. Is the reinforcer out of your hands when you start?
3. Is your reward period at least ten seconds long?
4. Are your feet moving continuously during the reward period? Are your dog's feet moving continuously as well? Remember, a significant difference between focus training and engagement training is movement, so make sure that both of you are really moving!
5. Are you rewarding with an amount of energy that is comfortable for your dog? If you look hysterical and your dog looks overwhelmed, scale back!
6. Is there a distinct change between your acclimation period (walking casually), your waiting period (standing still facing your dog), and your reward period (moving backwards with your dog, praising and rewarding continuously)?

Stage 3: Dogs Starts and Sustains Engagement

It's time to move to the third stage when your dog clearly understands stage two. You'll know he does when you arrive at your training space and your dog quickly turns to face you with his ears up, tail wagging, and a bright, expectant attitude. Expectant is important! Your dog's behavior should strongly suggest that he knows eye contact is going to get him a reward! Many dogs will also begin moving towards you since they know that you'll be moving as you reward.

In this third stage, we introduce two new ideas: the dog must show sustained engagement, and he must move energetically in the direction of the handler before rewards are available. Now is when the difference between focus and engagement training will become quite apparent. The dog's behavior and choices are everything; an ever increasing amount of energy and determination to get the party started is required.

Using the same simple location as before, repeat stage two, except with one change in how you reward. After your dog makes eye contact, begin backing up and talking and interacting with your dog for several seconds BEFORE you get out a classic reward and hand it over via your stage one method. This means that the reinforcer should not be in your hand until after your dog has made eye contact, and after you have engaged with him with your praise and personal play for several seconds.

The goal is to teach the dog to have sustained interest in engaging. Start easy! Do only a few seconds of engagement (dog moving towards you expectantly) before you get out that reinforcement to enhance the interaction! If your dog checks out before you have a chance to reward, end the repetition and start over again, maybe shortening the period of interactive time in order to set him up for success. If your dog fails twice in a row, something needs to change. Review the appropriateness of your location, how much interaction you are expecting before reinforcement, and the value of your engagement package. Make sure that you are interesting, but not overwhelming!

In stage three, your dog must insist on engagement!

When that feels comfortable, it's time to begin shaping an increase in your dog's energy level. Although we have been accepting generic movement in our direction, now it's time to ask for more. If the dog is offering an energy level of 3, then we want to see a 4. How do we get that? The same as any other shaping activity! We are raising criteria in small steps and building on success.

Although this will look different from team to team, generally speaking, to increase your dog's energy level, you need to increase yours. If your dog is giving a 3 in energy, offer a 4. Now you'll expect your dog to offer a 4 as well before you reward. Try talking to your dog and weaving slightly as you back up. Many dogs get just a bit frustrated, and as a result, do something "more." Reward that! Your dog might speed up slightly, or jump at you a bit, or make a frustrated sound. Reward anything that indicates the dog is becoming slightly more engaged.

Over time, you will ask for more and more enthusiasm. Some dogs will begin to jump on their handlers. Some dogs will play actively, play bowing and bouncing. Some dogs will wag their tails and move forwards, bumping their body into yours. Some dogs will follow in the front of the handler's body with a more quiet demeanor - but they remain connected. What matters is not how you define engagement, but whether or not your dog appears to be mentally and physically connected to you and interested in your company. It is totally normal for dogs to start out a bit slow and tentative, then build up intensity when they understand the game.

Jumping on the handler is a very common way for a dog to indicate a desire to engage.

A play bow from a dog means...I'm ready!

Stage 4: Dog Asks for Engagement and Work

In the fourth stage of engagement training, we expect some kind of formal work before offering any classic motivators. The ideal sequence would be that the dog briefly explores the environment (acclimates), chooses to engage without getting a reward (stage two), stays engaged for a period of time (stage three), and then either offers active work such as heeling or responds instantly to a subtle, preferably nonverbal request on your part - all without seeing whatever motivator he is working for until the end of the entire chain!

In the fourth stage the dog asks for work.

To move into this stage, you'll repeat stage three, but you'll add one change. After you interact for a short period of time, do one of the following:

- Become quieter and more still (but continue to make contact), or
- Continue to engage with your dog but change your demeanor so that it occurs to your dog that he might want to offer a behavior. For example, turn your side to your dog with your hand in a formal heeling position, or walk near a platform or jump and indicate with your gaze that he might want to offer that, or
- Ask for a behavior that does not require a verbal cue. For example, pat your side to get your dog to come into heel position or look at your toes to get your dog to come to front position, or
- If your dog doesn't get the subtle approach, go ahead and use a verbal cue - but only if you're absolutely certain your dog is going to do it by the way he's looking at you.

As soon as you get the behavior, reward with the classic motivator immediately!

Every time your dog chooses to engage and stays engaged long enough to earn a reinforcer, you may decide to release your dog to the limited area to make a new choice. Remember, stand still and just wait for him to choose to engage again. On the

other hand, you do not need to release your dog back to the environment if your dog is engaged, brilliant, and highly focused with no conflicting desires. You can simply start another round of engagement. Slowly increase the expected interactive time of stage four engagement from a few seconds to up to a minute. A minute of engagement means the total time from first eye contact to the end of the working period.

Troubleshooting the Stages

Regardless of the stage, one of the most common reasons people struggle to get engagement is that the environment is too difficult for the dog. He may be fearful, or he may simply be curious, but either way, you will need to change the environment so your dog can be successful. Don't accept lesser quality engagement (lowered criteria) just because the environment is more difficult! Once you've finished stage one, do not go back to begging or bribing! Instead, ask for fewer seconds of quality engagement before rewarding. You can also move back and forth between stages two, three, and four depending on the environment. For example, you may be working on stage two in a very interesting environment, while at home, you're working on stage three or four. But you should never allow your dog to check in and out because the environment is more challenging; change the environment or ask for an easier stage!

The most common reason for lack of engagement is an environment that is too difficult for the dog's stage of training and maturity level.

If you are having trouble in stage one or two, it's usually because the environment is too difficult, your dog is not interested in your motivator, or you are being overwhelming, which is driving your dog away from you. Change something.

If your dog disengages before the reward during stage two, three, or four, simply release him back to the environment. Limit what he has access to; having him on leash during engagement training makes this easier. However, if your dog is off leash, you can still reduce some options. For example, if your dog stopped working because he wants to greet a person who just entered the training area, ask the person to ignore your dog - or better yet, to leave. Meanwhile, you should simply stand still and wait; this indicates that he has another chance to re-engage. When he does, start the entire

process over again.

Make sure your dog wants the motivator that you select for your reward!

The most challenges come up during stage three, and most of the time it's because the trainer asked for too much sustained engagement before the classic reward. The key to success in stage three is to increase criteria very slowly! There is no advantage to moving from five seconds of engagement to 45 seconds in a week - take your time! If you add two seconds a day, you'll still get to your end goal, and your dog will be much clearer on your expectation for sustained engagement.

Finally, sometimes the best answer is to end a session entirely. Walking away from training so you can do some thinking is often highly beneficial. Your dog is learning on all repetitions. On the ones where he performs to criteria and earns a cookie, he is learning what works, and on the reps where he does not meet criteria by disengaging, he is learning what does NOT earn a cookie. Just because your dog was not successful and did not get reinforcement does not mean that your dog was not learning!

Stage Summary

The stages of engagement (and how we introduce each one) are repeated below in a more abbreviated format for your convenience.

Stage 1: Handler Starts Engagement

Take your dog to a quiet, familiar place, and use food, toys, play, and/or your personality to keep his attention on you for about ten seconds. The dog is not expected to do anything or offer any behaviors. After ten seconds, tell your dog to take a break, move to a new location, and then repeat the process. Be sure that you and your dog are moving continuously during the ten seconds of interaction.

Stage 2: Dog Starts Engagement

Take your dog on leash to a quiet location. Stand still. When your dog engages you with eye contact, wait two seconds and then reward as you did in stage one, moving

continuously. After ten seconds, tell your dog to take a break. Then stand still and repeat the process.

If you're frustrated, end training entirely. Sometimes a nice walk is the best thing for everyone.

Stage 3: Dogs Starts and Sustains Engagement

Return to your quiet location, stand still, and wait for the dog to show a desire to interact. This time, instead of coming up with food or toys immediately, engage the dog with a combination of voice, movement, and personality - whatever is most useful to bring out determination and energy – before rewarding him.

Stage 4: Dog Asks for Engagement and Work

Once again, start in a quiet location. Repeat the above steps. This time, after a period of sustained engagement, allow your dog to either offer a simple behavior, or subtly request some easy work. Once your dog has both engaged with you and offered some kind of work, reward him.

Reminders

- Each stage should be worked thoroughly until your dog offers that option easily and quickly.
- Do not move to the next stage until your dog remains engaged easily and with confidence at the prior stage.
- Walk casually for acclimation, stand still when you are ready to engage, and add movement when you interact.
- If the dog disengages at any point, simply allow him to explore the boring and limited space on a short leash. Do not try to keep your dog with you by begging. Stand still and wait.

Chapter Twenty
Handling Disengagement

Failure to maintain engagement should be rare once your dog understands the pattern - if you are working in appropriate environments and acclimating sufficiently. However, disengagement (what happens when your dog begins to engage but then disengages before you complete the entire cycle to a classic reward) does happen. This is also called failure. It is not disengagement when your dog is paying attention to something else before the cycle starts, or after it finishes. He is allowed to do whatever he wants before he asks you to engage (with the exception of stage five, which we'll talk about soon) and after you have released him. It only becomes disengagement when your dog has asked to engage with you but then leaves before he's completed the repetition and earned the reward.

The way we handle disengagement will vary a bit both by the stage you're working and by your dog's level of experience. Let's look at the options.

Disengagement for Novice Dogs

When a dog is first learning about engagement, if he fails you will simply start over with the current stage of engagement. Do not let the dog explore the area again unless you believe your dog had not adequately acclimated in the first place. If that's the case,

go ahead and use a clear "you are free" cue. Go back to acclimation and actively walk through that area with your dog. Make a mental note to work in easier environments going forwards.

If you've acclimated correctly, simply start over from the beginning. For example, if you are working in stage two and your dog makes eye contact but then looks away as you start to hand over a treat, that's failure because you have not completed the cycle. The cycle is only finished when your dog has received the treat. Stop moving, become silent, and wait for your dog to engage. Or in stage three, if your dog makes eye contact and engages for two seconds while moving with you, but then disconnects before you give the classic reward, start the whole stage over, not just from the point the dog disconnected. Stand still, be silent, wait for eye contact, engage actively for the full amount of time that you were asking for in stage three, and then give the reward.

The only disadvantage your dog will experience if he disconnects is that you will start over. For many dogs, this works very well and negative punishment will never come into play. If you've selected your environments and motivators with care, then the dog's priority quickly becomes having the chance to work. He knows how much fun it is to be with you!

Disengagement with Advanced Dogs

With advanced dogs, we will sometimes use negative punishment when they disengage. Simply put, this means we would take away something a dog wants - the opportunity to work.

Although some dogs benefit from negative punishment and learn that staying engaged with you is really worth their while, you should not use negative punishment for all dogs. If your dog is not very interested in engaging with you, using negative punishment will be a waste of time. Taking away the chance to work is not punishing if your dog doesn't want to work. It also won't work if your dog does not understand that the route to classic reinforcers is through engagement. In both these cases, you need to work through the stages more thoroughly until your dog IS interested in working with you.

There are also dogs who are simply fragile by temperament. They work, but not with a lot of enthusiasm. While they are trying, they don't care all that much if they work or not. For these dogs, you need to use lots of positive reinforcement for correct choices and simply start over when the dog disengages. Time, setting your dog up for success, and constantly developing the love of work will get you much further.

One more thing to stress: if your dog disengages because of fear, do not use negative punishment. Bring the dog to you, pet him, and reassure him. Consider if the area you're working in is truly suitable for the stage or amount of engagement that you are asking for. There is never a reason to disengage from a fearful dog; offer him support!

Once you reach the point where your dog really loves to work, AND he makes a positive choice most of the time, AND you really believe that your dog is not stressed, AND your dog clearly understands engagement work, THEN you can introduce the possibility of losing the chance to work. It's especially helpful to do this with dogs who find simply standing and staring or air scenting reinforcing. For those dogs especially, allowing them to go back and forth between engaging for a period and then choosing to disengage is a "have your cake and eat it too" situation. Left unchecked, you could end up with a dog who works for a bit, leaves to go see another dog, comes back for a bit more work and reinforcement, then stops to air sniff, and so on.

Sometimes all your dog needs is a break!

To use negative punishment, rather than waiting the dog out, you will end the opportunity to engage/work. You can do this in two ways. If you are at home, you could simply release your dog from work, pick up your stuff, and get on with your life. Session over. If you are not home, or if you do not want to end work like that, you can give the dog a short break in a crate (cover it if he tends to air sniff). Do not be angry or rough when you end your session. Be matter of fact. It's no big deal - it's just a choice. When your dog comes out of the crate, do not do any acclimation. Instead, start from the point where you stand still and allow the dog to choose to engage. If your dog does not come back to work quickly, something is wrong. End the session so you can do some thinking about what is really going on.

Are you asking for more than your dog can give for his age and stage of training? Scale back! Consider whether your sessions might be too long. Remember, no more than a few minutes total! If you find that your dog consistently works well for a period of time (let's say three minutes) before disengaging, try engaging/working for two minutes, and then institute a rest period or start a new acclimation period BEFORE your dog disengages. Remember, it's not failure if YOU start the rest period or a new acclimation period. Just cheerfully end work and encourage your dog to explore again. After a break of one to two minutes, go back to work. Some dogs do very well if they get another short acclimation or rest period, but make sure you are the one initiating it!

Another option for dogs who appear to need a bit of a break is to take them to a new area that is very close by for more acclimation. Allow them to explore again for a few minutes to clear their heads. This also allows you to use a chance to explore as a reward for great work. But again, the handler must start this process, not the dog! When it's time to go back to work, return to the first area you were working in.

To create an excellent work habit, offer breaks while your dog is still working hard!

Chapter Twenty-One
Advanced Acclimation

Sometimes the handler will need to insist that the dog acclimate.

In the first part of this book, we went into a fair amount of detail about the importance of acclimating your dog to new environments. We discussed fear and curiosity, and how strongly your choice of environment can affect your dog's ability to work with strong focus or engagement.

This chapter is going to introduce some advanced acclimation concepts. We'll talk about enforced acclimation, the role of a formal stay in acclimation, adding rest periods within work, and how to introduce your dog to acclimation for competition purposes.

Enforced Acclimation

As a general rule, we let our dogs tell us when they are ready to work, but as work becomes more important to our dogs, it's not uncommon that they ask for work even though they are not settled in yet. They appear ready to work because they make eye contact and engage with you, but they still seem to be excessively curious or even fearful, as evidenced by quick glances away or checking out. That's not good enough!

If your dog asks to work, clearly understands engagement, yet checks in and out more

than once or twice after work starts (even for only one or two seconds), that means the dog is not truly ready to work. This happens when the dog's interest in our motivators is higher than his curiosity or fear, but his curiosity or fear is also significant enough that it is influencing his behavior. In effect, your dog is lying! He's telling you that he's ready, even though he really isn't!

When dogs stop making good decisions for themselves, we don't give them a choice anymore. We use "enforced acclimation." That means we set a period of time and stay in the acclimation period regardless of the dog's behavior. To do this, keep walking, do not make eye contact, and maintain a casual pace and body language. This prevents the dog from getting a chance to engage.

Based on this dog's body language it appears that he is not yet comfortable and ready to work. More acclimation time is needed.

Let's say your dog takes five minutes of acclimation time. You then stand still and wait for your dog to notice. Your dog checks in one minute later, ready to work. You engage at whatever stage is correct for your dog, but then your dog checks out more than twice in the next minute or so. Stop! Go back to walking acclimation. Make it clear with your behavior that it's acclimation time. After five more minutes, try again. If it ends up taking a total of 15 minutes before your dog truly locks in and engages, next time insist on at least ten minutes of acclimation before you stand still and allow your dog to choose.

If your dog struggles to tell the difference between acclimation time and engagement time despite your body language, another option is to use a harness. When the leash is connected to the harness, you are acclimating. When you switch it to the collar, you are now available for work. Most dogs don't require this, but it's a viable option if you need it!

The Role of a Formal Stay in Acclimation

There are two times that acclimation involving movement might not make sense. One is for dogs who get amped up the longer they walk through an environment. Rather than settling and getting bored, they become agitated. These dogs benefit from the structure of a formal stay. The second is for dogs who have a habit of checking in and out after work begins and enforced acclimation isn't doing the trick. Using a stay in this instance is a mild punisher because the dog loses the opportunity to work and because it's more restricted than normal acclimation, where the dog has the ability to move around within the space.

A formal stay can help your dog.

If you choose to use a stay to provide more structure, begin with a normal period of acclimation that includes some walking before putting your dog in a stay. The length of the stay could be as little as a minute or as much as ten minutes. One clue that you have selected the correct period of time is the dog's behavior. When you notice that the dog is beginning to stare at you rather than looking around, it is probably time to end the stay and begin the engagement process. At that point, release your dog from the stay and proceed into normal engagement. If you were at stage two engagement it would look like this: Walking acclimation, formal stay, dog looks to handler for several seconds, dog is released from the stay, dog looks to handler for two seconds, reward!

If you are using a stay as a punisher, it looks a little different. Do your normal acclimation time and then wait for the dog to engage. After your dog asks to work, begin engagement. If your dog checks out for any reason, simply stop what you are doing and put your dog on a stay. Then walk away.

In both of these cases, the purpose of the stay is to allow your dog to look at the environment, but to get minimal satisfaction from it. The fact is, stays are boring. Very few dogs enjoy staring at the world from a stay. They must exercise self control (they aren't allowed to get up), and they are not rewarded by the environment beyond looking.

Keep the dog on the stay until he looks back at you as if to say, "Please, can we do

something now?" At that point, return to your dog and try active work again. You may or may not choose to reward your dog's stay - it depends on how advanced your dog's stay behavior is. When you go back to work, you should have a lot of dog to work with. If not, then back into your stay.

This dog's expression suggests readiness to work!

Rest Periods within Work

Many dogs benefit dramatically when given a rest period within work, and engagement training IS a type of work! A rest period is anywhere from 30 seconds to two minutes long during which you stop working (engagement) and let the dog rest. You might start a new acclimation period after the break if your dog is fearful, but for most dogs this isn't necessary. During the rest period, your dog should be close to you, not wandering off to self-entertain. You might hold your dog, put him on a relaxed down stay, rub his tummy, or pet and praise him. Be sure that your chosen method of rest doesn't amp him up! The idea is to let your dog be calm in your presence. To end the rest period, let your dog go, stand up, and go back to your "I'm ready when you are" posture that you normally adopt at the end of acclimation time.

If your dog fights the idea of taking a rest, it is quite likely that he does not need it; go ahead and skip the rest period. On the other hand, if your dog looks like he is losing energy, or if you feel that he is working very hard to maintain attention, consider a break.

You may be wondering how using a stay for negative punishment is different than using one for a rest period. The answer lies in what's happening before the stay, and what happens during the stay.

A rest period is initiated by the handler, takes place when the dog is engaged, and usually happens right after a classic reward. No work has been interrupted; no reinforcement is being missed out on. The handler stays with the dog and the interaction is mutually enjoyable. It should feel like a positive event for both of you.

During a rest period, keep your dog close to you. If your dog likes it, you can use a big hug!

Negative punishment is initiated by the dog's choice to disengage while he was actively on the path to reinforcement. Stopping at this point causes the dog to lose the opportunity to earn rewards. Furthermore, you are not interacting with him during this stay.

Acclimation for the Real World

In a perfect world, you would select exactly the right environment for your dog to practice his skills. It would be just enough challenge that he must make an effort to succeed, but not so much that the dog is overwhelmed with either fear or curiosity. Of course, we don't live in a perfect world. If your dog is brilliant indoors but struggles badly outdoors because there are interesting alternatives, it can be hard to find a "just right" environment. For a dog like this, simply being in the environment is gratifying. A bird dog does not need to fetch a bird to be gratified by watching them, a terrier does not need to catch a lizard to be willing to watch it for hours on end, and a sheepdog does not need to herd livestock to be delighted to be in their presence or smells.

In these cases, the ideal situation is to get so far away that your dog is barely aware of the "thing," but sometimes that is incredibly difficult to do. How do you prevent a bird from flying overhead, or a bug from showing up in your crittering dog's eyesight?

You don't. Real world dog training is not the lab. Sometimes we have to accommodate reality.

In the real world, it's hard to stop birds from flying overhead!

You may have no choice but to blend stage one engagement with the later stages in those specific environments. In effect, you are going to use low level stage one engagement to interrupt your dog's behavior before moving to stage two or three. Although we do not like to use stage one engagement longer than we need to, this is an acceptable alternative if three criteria are met:

1. It works FAST. That means the dog isn't locked in hard and he is not over threshold. Your dog is able to unlock from the world and turn to you easily.
2. Your dog STAYS engaged when the cookie or toy is not immediately in front of his face, at least for a few seconds. The classic rewards must only be a reminder, not a constant presence. If it's a constant presence, you are wasting your time because you'll never get rid of them. You must change something.
3. You are not ANTAGONIZING your dog into paying attention to you. Think twice if your dog is turning back to you because you're being annoying - it will ruin your working relationship if you become an irritant.

Here's how it works. Say your dog is fascinated by birds. You start your engagement and your dog is doing fine until a bird flies overhead. In that first second, you can use your food or toys to redirect your dog back to you, reward your dog, and then re-start as soon as the bird is gone. Only start work again once the bird is gone; if you need the reward non-stop, you have no choice but to find a more suitable location.

What you are really doing is allowing more stage one work in locations where your dog will always struggle to care about what you have to offer because he is so focused on an alternative. You may or may not be able to get your dog to the point where the promise of what you have to offer overwhelms his interest, but approached in this manner, at least you have a chance! If it doesn't work, you may even need to accept that you will only be able to train and compete in specific environments.

Different dogs are fascinated by different things!

Acclimation For Trial Preparation

Until now, when we have discussed acclimation we have meant that your dog is allowed to thoroughly explore an area using all of his senses. He can look, sniff, and explore to his heart's content before working. This is called full acclimation because he is allowed to explore the working space as well as all reasonable surrounding spaces fully until he is satiated.

While this is highly effective for training purposes, it's not possible to let your dog explore the ring at a trial. We need to refine our definition of acclimation to mean

visual acclimation instead. During visual acclimation, the dog is allowed to explore the general area (the crating area or warm up area), but he won't get to explore the actual working area (the competition ring) before working. However, he will be allowed to look at it.

To introduce your dog to visual acclimation, start with an easy space where your dog has worked many times before such as your own yard or a local park; set the dog up for success! Mentally block off your working area. Now begin acclimation. Your dog can walk AROUND the working area, he can look at the working area, but he cannot explore it directly.

In a trial, acclimation must take place outside of the actual working area.

Once your acclimation time is over, move very close to the unexplored working area, stand still and make it clear to your dog that you are available for work. When your dog turns to you, engage fully as you move into the working area. Make sure you are well within the unexplored territory before you reward or start work. Consider simplifying your expectations; if your dog is comfortably engaging for 30 seconds before a classic reward, drop that down to only 15 seconds to make success even more likely. If your dog visually disengages or drops his head to sniff, quickly leave the working area and return to the area that has been fully explored. Go back into acclimation in the area that has already been explored. Treat it like any other incident of disengagement and start over. Continue this pattern until your dog understands that once engagement begins, he cannot check out to explore even if he finds himself in new territory.

If your dog simply cannot function, you have asked too much. Either simplify the environment or move to a new location.

Most dogs master this quickly and easily, and the carryover to competition is excellent. Now when you head to a trial, make sure to give your dog plenty of time to explore around the rings. Engage your dog several times outside the ring well before your turn to ensure that both of you are ready for work. Then, a minute or so before it's your turn to compete, approach the entrance, say your dog's name (this is stage five engagement, which we will introduce in the next chapter), engage for a very short period of time, and enter the ring. This pattern of engagement will be very familiar to your dog and sets you up for a great start!

A Note About Quality

When generalizing known behaviors, do not sacrifice the quality of the work - in this case, focus and effort. We would much rather see a dog who gives three seconds of attentive heeling than a minute of questionable heeling with checking in and out. Whatever you ask for will become a habit; working in new environments with high quality can also become a habit, but only if you expect it.

Reinforce the attention that your dog offers you in order to cement his habit of working well, regardless of location. Use extra cookies, extra toys, and extra praise for very tiny bits of behavior! Your job is to convince your dog that he made a good choice when he chose work over sightseeing. This is NOT the time to work on problem behaviors.

Remember, what you choose to practice isn't that important; don't bother with equipment at this point. Right now your goal is generalizing high quality engagement, and most generalization can be done practicing only the most basic skills. Think about behaviors that can be performed in three seconds or less, like simple positions, pivots, fronts, and so on. Put your energy into finding a variety of locations, not in complicated ring set ups! Success depends on working away from home as much as possible.

Even in a challenging environment, expect high quality work!

Notes:

Chapter Twenty-Two
Engagement for Competition

Competition-worthy engagement may mean no food, toys, or personal interaction.

By this point, you should have a well-engaged dog. And yet, you do not have competition-worthy engagement. Engagement for competition demands a number of things. You need to be able to initiate engagement instead of the other way around. You need your dog to work when you request it. You need engagement in many, many locations. And you need to be able to do all this without cookies in your pocket and in a way that is appropriate for your trial location. Let's talk about how to accomplish all these things.

Adding in Work

In chapter 19, we discussed subtly requesting work in stage four engagement, but being subtle won't work in competition - you'll need to give direct commands and expect excellent performance! Although this is important for competition reasons, do NOT rush to do this. If you think about it, you'll see that the amount of energy that you create in engagement is strongly tied to the amount of energy that your dog will show you in work. The more time you and your dog spend in stage three engagement developing energy and desire to interact with one another, the more drive your dog will carry into the work! Indeed, it is impossible to spend too much time in stage three.

When it is time to start adding work to your engagement training, choose movement-based behaviors such as heeling, jumping, recalls, tricks, and so on. Doing so allows you to maintain as much momentum from your engagement training as possible, which in turn makes it easier to get the behavior without having to work hard to get it. For example, heeling is an easy one to start with because you can simply turn sideways and encourage your dog to fall in next to you. Same with a jump, assuming that when you look at it your dog will go over it with little or no encouragement. A minimal amount of cueing is okay, but less is more in this case. The dog's behavior should suggest that he was ready to spring into action as opposed to being told what to do.

As always, start in very small increments. If you are routinely engaging your dog for thirty seconds before coming up with a classic reward, try 25 seconds of engagement with no reward, five seconds of work, and then a party with food and toys! The actual amount of time is still thirty seconds in total. There is no hurry to lengthen the amount of time you and your dog are working. Instead, lengthen the time that you engage, not the time that you work. The next logical progression might be thirty seconds of engagement, five seconds of work, and the classic reward. Then 35 seconds of engagement, five seconds of work, and the reward… and so on. Doing it this way will make your dog more and more enthusiastic about being "allowed" to work because work is what makes the treats show up.

When engagement leads to work and work leads to a classic reward, your dog will learn to LOVE the start of work!

Another important consideration when adding in work is your demeanor. If your sport requires silence during work, then this is the time to introduce silence. Start by engaging your dog in stage three for a shorter than usual period of time, but with a normal amount of personality and chatter. Move smoothly to stage four engagement - this means you won't give a cookie, but instead ask for a short amount of work. When you do this, change your demeanor and posture so that it is identical to what it will be in the competition ring. If your sport is agility, there may be almost no change at all; for rally, you will move formally, but you can continue to talk to your dog; for obedience, you'll become completely silent and formal.

After your brief amount of formal work, explode into a reward and engagement period. Feed cookies, run, and play. The way you do this isn't too important. You might give your dog a cookie when he halts in heeling, or you might release him from heeling to chase a thrown cookie. What is important is that your dog begins to associate silence and formality with the reward package that is about to show up! In this manner, you are teaching your dog to carry his energy from engagement into work while also teaching him that silence and formality are awesome and predict amazing things.

Train your dog to look forward to silence and formality!

But Wait! There's More! Stage Five Engagement

Stage five engagement is introduced here instead of in the chapter on the stages of engagement because it isn't offered engagement. Instead, YOU will request the start of work, even when your dog is busily doing something else, like sniffing or looking around. This is when you add a cue to the behavior. In this stage, your dog learns to work when you ask him to as opposed to when he's ready to show up. This is important because competition trials do not start when your dog is ready; competition starts when a judge calls you into the ring. Your dog must get to a point where he can easily and willingly move into engagement when YOU request it.

Stage five is extremely easy if your dog is ready for it. You'll know your dog is ready for stage five when your dog is clear on how to start work, stays engaged without seeing classic motivators, and willingly moves into work when the opportunity arises. This means that you will have worked through the first four stages with attention and care, without rushing through them. Your dog should be very interested in working with you, to the point that he will spend very little time on acclimation in familiar places. Indeed, you might be finding it hard to acclimate your dog because he keeps trying to

get you to start work. Your dog should also know to orient to you when he hears his name.

If he's ready, take your dog to a place he has worked before. Allow an acclimation period, and then BEFORE your dog makes contact and indicates a desire to work, say his name one time. If he looks up at you - and he should if he's truly ready for stage five - start the engagement process at stage two and progress through to stage four relatively quickly.

And that's it! When your dog can orient on his name and stay engaged through the working period, you have successfully completed your engagement training through stage five!

If your dog failed to respond to his name, then one of the pre-conditions listed above was not met. You can either ignore it (if you think your dog was not ready and you made a poor choice), put your dog on a sit or down stay to narrow his acclimation options, or remove him from the area and try again in a few minutes. But remember, repeated failure means he's just not ready!

The trick to success is to pick a moment that you think your dog is close to checking in anyway. It also helps if you go back to stage two engagement the first few times so your dog is quickly rewarded for his choice - but don't get stuck there. Go ahead and move on to stages three and four relatively quickly.

Once you have stage five, you will use it rarely. The majority of your sessions will still

When you think your dog will respond instantly, say your dog's name to start engagement. This dog does NOT look ready.

be offered engagement training sessions for the rest of the dog's life. Work stage five just enough that you know that when you need the dog at a specific moment, you can simply call your dog's name and initiate engagement.

Generalizing Engagement

As we have stressed many times, it's important to get out and about with your training. It's wonderful if your dog can engage at stage five in your backyard, but dog shows are not held in your backyard. For engagement training, the most important criterion to raise is one of environmental generalization. The question is, can your dog engage in a variety of new places?

Great training says that you increase one criterion at a time. That means that both the stage of engagement you are working and the length of time it is sustained will vary based on location. Moving to a new location automatically increases criteria because of the inherent challenge of the environment, so you will temporarily relax the criteria of time. For example, if your dog can work stage three engagement in your house, you might only ask for thirty seconds in the backyard, and maybe fifteen seconds in the park. As your dog improves, you might slowly raise the amount of time in each of those locations. Likewise, you can move into stage four engagement in your most familiar environments while you continue to work on stage three in public.

At some point, you will want to stop using stage two engagement altogether. There will come a point when simply checking in, taking a cookie, and going back to the world is creating an undesirable behavior chain. There is no hard and fast rule about when this point arrives, but if you feel that your dog is starting to show this pattern, then raise criteria and expect stage three engagement everywhere.

More Engagement, Less Food

So far in stage four, the cycle has been to allow the dog to choose to engage, engagement, work, and a classic reward. Now we need more engagement for less food. Being able to do more rounds of engagement without a classic reward makes it very easy to work and move around in competitions where the work starts and stops between formal exercises, such as in the obedience ring. If you do your engagement training to the point that your dog is truly enthusiastic about the entire process, the transition to the competition ring is easy. You can make it even easier if you help your dog get used to the idea that work sometimes results in a classic reward, and sometimes results in more engagement before the reward.

Here's how to do that. Let's say that your dog is currently comfortable with a pattern of forty seconds of engagement, followed by twenty seconds of work, followed by a

Eventually, another round of engagement can be used as a reward for good work, without adding a classic reinforcer.

classic reward, for a total of sixty seconds. We're going to change that to twenty seconds of engagement, followed by twenty seconds of work, followed by ten seconds of engagement, followed by ten seconds of work, followed by a fabulous round of engagement that includes a classic reward. The total amount of time has not changed, but the pattern has. This teaches your dog to stick with you, even when the work ends, and even when the engagement package does not include a classic reward.

Once your dog is comfortable with that, you will slowly extend the increments of both engagement and work. As you do this, make sure that you vary the behavior you request during the work periods. Ultimately, your dog should be able to handle several rounds of engagement and work without a classic reward until he has performed for about the amount of time that you would want in a competition ring.

Dogs enjoy their engagement time!

This process is not nearly as difficult as it sounds for several reasons.

First, dogs really enjoy their engagement time! This means that they do receive rewards after work, but now it's engagement as a reward instead of food

or toys. For some dogs, that's all they will ever need. For those who really do require the classic rewards to stay enthusiastic, you WILL provide them - after you leave the competition ring. For this to work, your dog must become comfortable with the idea of several rounds of engagement before a classic reward.

Second, engagement creates energy that is channeled into work. Now your dog gets a shot of energy before each exercise. If you think about it, most exercises are actually quite short in competition. You just need a way to renew the dog's source of energy between rounds. Engagement can help you with that!

Finally, engagement gives you something to do with your dog in the ring so that you don't have dead time between exercises when neither of you know what to do. Dogs find dead time very stressful. Engagement both focuses the dog on a fun activity and also eliminates dead time. Another win-win!

Classic Rewards off the Body

Until now, the toys and food have been in your pocket. Now we need to get them out of your pocket - and ultimately out of the ring - before your engagement is truly ready for competition.

As always, we're going to move slowly. Take the cookies or toys out of your pocket, show them to your dog (so he knows they aren't on your body), and place them somewhere only a foot or two away. Repeat the entire engagement process starting at stage two, where simple eye contact will cause you to go and get the reinforcer. Over time, vary your distance from the reinforcer until your dog can engage you easily at any distance from the reinforcer. Sometimes you might go get the reward together, and sometimes you might send him to get it himself. How often you send him to get it himself will depend on his overall level of impulse control; the more impulsive the dog is, the more we'd recommend going with your dog to pick up reinforcers. Do not rush this. You want your dog to give you just as much energy and engagement when the motivators are off your body as when they are in your pockets!

Once your dog can make eye contact in exchange for a reinforcer that is at a significant distance, you can move to stage three engagement. Again start close and work up to greater distances. Handle errors as described in earlier sections. If your dog looks away or leaves, start the repetition over. So if you were aiming for ten seconds of engagement before the cookie and he left at eight seconds, stop and wait. When he glances back at you, you will again expect a full ten seconds of engagement before both of you go to the chair and get the reward. Be sure that if your dog leaves you, he can't access the reinforcer on his own. You might need to put it up higher or in a container.

When working through the stages, work on engaging in all directions around the reinforcer. For example, if the food is sitting on a chair in the middle of your training area, your dog should be able to engage as you are moving towards the chair, away from the chair, and by the sides of the chair. Vary your distance so that you are close or far, and vary the reinforcers you use, so that your dog functions equally well when the reinforcer is kibble as when it is steak.

You must teach your competition dog to work when the rewards are not in your pocket.

Flash Training Sessions

Another way that you can help your dog understand that the presence or absence of classic reinforcers is not relevant is through "flash training." This is a short, unexpected, and informal training session. You will be in a location where you don't usually train, you will have no rewards on your body, and you will not do anything to indicate that you're planning to start training (such as pulling out a bait bag or a toy).

Call your dog over to you (note that this makes the interaction a form of stage five engagement). Start engagement by offering the amount of energy and the types of behaviors that you would normally use for stage three engagement. Your dog should engage because of all the previous work you've done together. If you are happy with your dog's response, go and get the reinforcers from wherever they normally live and reward your dog generously. If your dog doesn't give you the energy you want, no problem! You can just stop. You had a nice interaction, it just didn't get to a level that you felt "driven" to reward him. Likewise, if he initially engages but then opts out, that's fine. End the session without a reward and go back to what you were doing.

You can do flash training several times a day, with each session totaling no more than two minutes or so from start to finish. Ask for interaction, engage, work (if you're adding work to your engagement), reward, end the session. Only the first repetition of this session teaches the desired lesson - after that your dog is aware of the reinforcers that you are using - so only do one full cycle per session.

The purpose of this training is to further convince your dog that the location of the reinforcers is not what matters - it's the fact that you have access to them, and it is therefore in his best interest to engage and work no matter what!

Alternating Challenging Sessions with Easy Sessions

Once your dog has a solid understanding of engagement and work cycles, and once he can work equally well with reinforcement on or off your body, try to alternate easy training sessions with hard ones. One day you might take your dog to a brand new place or add other challenges of proximity, intensity, or duration, and the next day you might train in a familiar location - possibly with lower value motivators - using easy work. Alternating difficulty levels can prevent a dog from becoming overwhelmed. It's no fun if every session is harder than the last one!

Some of your training sessions should be mostly fun and play!

Ring Acceptable Engagement

While preparing for the dog show is not the main focus of this book, the primary purpose of engagement training is to compete with a focused, engaged dog without the use of food and toys. This means that you will need to find ways to engage with your dog in respectful and socially acceptable ways.

Simply being in a competition environment limits your actions. While some competitions (in particular agility) do allow for a fair amount of high-intensity interactive play, other sports, like obedience and rally, are more subdued. It is frowned upon to run back and forth while your dog growls wildly and you wrestle on the floor! Furthermore, even in agility, you will find yourself at trials where space is limited and you must find a way to contain yourself to a relatively small footprint. So how does one go about transitioning from incredibly physically active engagement to more socially acceptable engagement?

What forms of engagement are allowed in your sport?

Like everything, it's a matter of raising criteria slowly. Start with what is easiest and most enjoyable for the dog, and work towards your own goals. Remember, we need our dogs to buy in to our games before we can begin to add our rules.

Continue to play however you and your dog like until you both are feeling really good about your basic play routine. Make all the noise you want and take up plenty of space! If your dog wants to run, then run! If your dog wants to wrestle, then wrestle! If your dog needs a toy in his mouth to stop from biting you, then do that too! What matters is that you're conditioning your dog to think that you are really fun!

Once you're both comfortable, pick one thing that you would like (or need) to change. For example, let's say you need to reduce the amount of running you do during engagement. Maybe you have been using up your entire backyard running back and forth. On this day you are going to limit yourself to only half of your backyard, but every other aspect of your play will stay the same. Reduce the running even more by emphasizing tension over motion. Encourage your dog to respond to tension and

a quick snap into little bits of motion rather than running back and forth. And don't forget the option of work! If your dog can go from racing back and forth into work, can he go from your body tension directly into work? Try it and see!

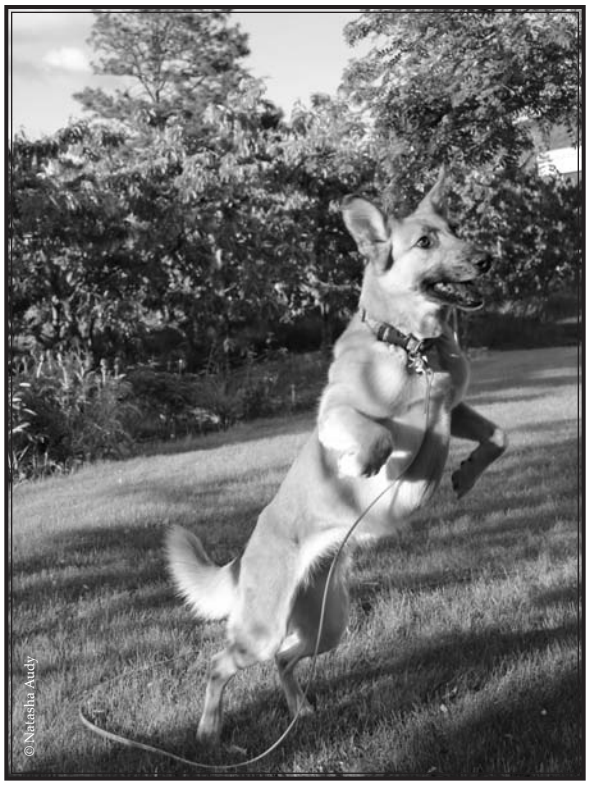
Once that looks good, choose another thing to change, maybe reducing the amount your dog growls. Go back to running with your dog using the full amount of space in your backyard and pay attention to see what causes your dog to growl. Is it when you turn and face your dog? Is it when you put your hands on your dog? Once you know what you are doing that elicits the growling, stop doing it. If your play deteriorates and your dog is miserable without that specific move, then add it back in - but only half the time. Now your dog gets what he wants a percentage of the time and you get what you want a percentage of the time.

One of the hardest things to address is dogs who like to bite when they play because dogs use their mouths like we use our hands. Start small; going cold turkey with nothing in the mouth at all is generally not the best option. Alternate very short sessions of play without anything in his mouth (maybe five seconds) with longer sessions with an object in his mouth (maybe sixty seconds). Incorporate hand touches, spins, or falling into heel position instead of giving him an object to hold.

Don't forget to take it on the road! When you do, go back to easy criteria - give the dog what he prefers before raising criteria again. Slowly incorporate one change at a time, just like you did in your backyard.

Over time your dog will adapt to these changes. In fact, he will probably become extra excited when you use up the entire backyard to play or when you do the moves that elicit excited growling, but he'll also stay in the game the rest of the time, waiting for that extra special reward.

If you take your time, you can find ring acceptable ways to engage with your dog, and yes, engagement IS allowed in the ring. Know the rules for your sport and do what makes sense for your team. For example, in obedience, there is nothing wrong with walking backwards while your dog pushes into your hands and body, or running to the start of your next exercise, or doing hand touches and spins. The most important thing is to work at this set of skills slowly so that they feel normal to your dog before you even think about competition.



Eventually, a crazy play session will become an extra special reward!

Chapter Twenty-Three
Wrapping Up and Moving On

Deb and Zen have built their teamwork on focus and engagement.

Denise with her young dog, Brito.

Wrapping up Book 4

In this book, we have tackled the foundation skills of focus and engagement; two tightly intertwined concepts. We truly hope that you now grasp the importance of developing focus and engagement in order to create a working partner who drives you to train and interact. Before you turn your attention to training specific skills and behaviors for your chosen dog sports, you must have a dog who wants to be there. Once you experience work with a truly engaged canine partner, you will never go back. Indeed, you will marvel that you ever trained any other way! What's more, these skills can be trained and refined in dogs who do not come by them naturally. We hope that you have found the roadmap laid out in this book to be sufficiently detailed to allow your team to progress steadily.

Now that you are on the road to excellent focus and interaction with your dog, don't quit! The activities presented here can be refined and maintained for your dog's entire working career. Experiment to discover which exercises will become staples in your working toolbox and which ones give you the best emotional edge before competitions.

Speaking of competition, it's time to consider this entire series of books, especially the fact that in spite of having written four entire books targeted at the dog sports trainer, we have said relatively little about creating the specific target behaviors that will take your team into competition. How is it possible that we have created a series of four books, yet we have failed to train any behaviors? What, exactly, have we been doing all this time?

The Dog Sports Skills Series

In our experience, words like "relationship," "motivation," "play," "focus," and "engagement" have been sprinkled about like holy water on struggling dog trainers seeking assistance. Unfortunately, those words are often followed up with little or no explanation about what they mean - and even more importantly, how one might go about obtaining those miracle qualities. Telling a struggling trainer that they need to develop engagement with their dog is no more helpful than telling a drowning person to learn to swim; if they knew how, they would have done so already. Such generic and vague advice tends to engender bad feelings and panic without offering much needed support.

The Dog Sports Skills book series was created to bridge the gap between vague advice and practical techniques, and to give you the positive working philosophy and the technical foundation skills that you will need to develop success with your canine partner. Instead of suggesting that you learn to swim, we have attempted to teach you HOW to swim, show you WHERE you are swimming to, and explained WHY it is important. In these four books, we have introduced foundation concepts that cut across all dog sports. We have attempted to get to the heart of developing a highly engaged and willing working partner who thrives on training, and who brings his trainer great joy as a result of their mutually enjoyable partnership.

Because we strongly believe that both dogs and trainers are individuals, what makes sense for one team might not make sense for another. Foundation concepts are not

miracle cures to be applied assembly line style with the end goal of perfection. As a result, we have also attempted to provide alternative options and problem-solving strategies to assist when what works for your friend's dog is clearly not working for your own.

If we've done our job well, you are now able to take on the positive working philosophy that we've laid out in this series. This means that you have taken on the challenge to understand your dog, including his strengths, weaknesses, and temperamental tendencies. It also means taking responsibility for creating a workable plan that will allow both of you to thrive, to the best of your ability, based on your current state of knowledge and skill.

Or, put more simply, we have followed a simple guiding principle: **Train your dog with affection and respect, and take responsibility for that process.**

This is easy to do when you're working within your comfort zone, your dog is progressing normally towards some specific end goal, and your interests are well aligned with your dog's interests. It is much harder when you find yourself confused, stuck, or even angry. Can you maintain confidence in your abilities to make good decisions and to problem solve even when you encounter challenges or resistance? Staying the course when you are struggling will provide you with a tremendous source of satisfaction. Sometimes you'll lack the experience to know that you are on the right course; we hope these books have given you the resources to keep you moving forward in a positive fashion even when your beliefs are being sorely tested.

Although we consider ourselves science-based trainers, we have moved beyond the language of learning theory and behavioral psychology and leaned heavily on the language of emotions and cognitive psychology. We have emphasized the development of a strong and positive interactive relationship, with an emphasis on play, even though there is no mention of "relationship" or the need for "interactive play" in learning theory. We know that animals can learn behaviors without having a relationship with their trainer and that play is certainly not required for dogs as a motivator. Indeed, in laboratory settings, food is often used exclusively and the trainers are likely to change frequently.

We are able to integrate these topics because we do not see training as a simple business transaction of behaviors for rewards. We see training as a strongly emotional and interactive event between two sentient beings with a personal history, individual expectations, and a full range of emotions. If you take the time to develop that package, your training will thrive as a direct consequence. Train with affection and respect in addition to using the best technique you have at that moment in time, and you will become an advocate for your dog. You will become a problem solver. You will value your dog as an individual and you will search tirelessly for the best ways to create connection and a desire to interact.

We have tried to write books that accommodate the fact that real life is not the laboratory, and most of us are not going to design perfect training set-ups under perfect conditions most of the time. We are going to live with our dogs in our homes, and we will probably be our dogs' sole trainer. We are going to spend a lot of time guessing about the best way to proceed with our training, and we will often find ourselves relying on our dog's uncanny ability to figure out what we want in spite of our training

flaws, whether or not we recognize that they have done so.

And that is why relationship, play, and the development of a strong attachment matters to us, and to you - ordinary trainers living in a house with pet dogs. When your dog truly cares about positive interactions with you, who responds to your emotional reactions and feels "happy" as a result, you will have a dog who will work hard to stay in the training game with you, even when you're not doing a particularly impressive job, and even when he logically should opt out. You cannot stray too far from good training if you regularly ask your dog, "Are we having fun?" In the same way that you might stick by your child even when she is going through a rough patch, your dog will stick with you when you're the one making a mess.

You will likely discover over time that the joy lies in the process of training and the relationship which is developed as a result, not in the end goal. As the years pass, you will not remember the awards, placements, or scores - but you will proudly remember those special times when you made decisions to make things better for your dog at the expense of your goals. You will remember the occasions when you pulled from a trial because your dog was uncomfortable. You will remember the trials where you made decisions that were emotionally difficult because you believed it was the right thing to do for the well-being of your teammate. Those are the behaviors of a human who values and respects her dog, and that is something to be proud of.

We can tell you that teaching relationship is hard and teaching behaviors is easy, but you may not believe that until you try it yourself. We can tell you that the process is the goal, but until you reach your goals and look back on your journey, you may not quite believe that either. And finally, we can wax lyrical about the drug-like pleasure you will feel when known behaviors combine with relationship to create "flow," that state of being where time passes without notice, and work is effortless and fully engaging for both of you, but again, you'll need to experience that for yourself.

But what we can do, and what we hope we have done with these four books, is give you a desire for the relationship that sets the stage for all of these possibilities and allows you to discover on your own how absolutely unique and amazing and wonderful each dog is.

We are proud of these books, our written contribution to the dog world! We believe that we have helped to bridge the gap between the science of learning theory (behavioral psychology), the science of emotions and cognition, and the practical knowledge gained through experience training hundreds, if not thousands, of dogs.

Admittedly, one could argue that we wrote our books out of order - that we should have started with skillbuilding for specific sports - but we believe we did it just right. We did not start with the skills and then add in the emotional components, because that is simply not how we think. We think in terms of relationship and emotions and play, and when that foundation is set, we add in the skills. If you add the skills to the play rather than the play to the skills, you'll find each training session to be full of joy, with a healthy serving of traditional success on the side. Done well, you will create a working addict. Engagement will become work, focus will be an automatic outgrowth of the effort required to flow, classic reinforcers will drop dramatically in quantity, and the activity itself will become the end result.

When you reach that point, you'll know that you've learned to swim. Indeed, you may be well on your way to learning to fly! When you do, take the time to reach back and share your progress so that we can learn to fly too. And the cycle continues.

And now, as we wrap up book 4, the question remains: are we wrapping up the entire series? Have we said what we want to say? Like so much of dog training, our best answer is that we don't know yet. We originally thought that the first book would be a stand alone, and yet it developed into this series. The truth is, every day, month, and year that we live with our dogs, we find more topics, more areas of intrigue, and more ideas that spark our imaginations. When we find a spark, we feel compelled to blow

on it. If that spark becomes a flame, we will nurture it and consider… is this worth a fire? If so, there will be another book.

Acknowledgements

As with many significant projects, this series took on a life of its own. The feedback has been nothing short of amazing, and we'd like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to those who have supported us. Thank you.

We'd also like to take a moment to discuss where ideas come from because at the end of the day the ideas in these books didn't simply magically appear in our heads! In scientific circles, it is well understood that a critical point comes in the understanding of any given subject and people all around the world will come to the same conclusions at just about the same time; a breakthrough will occur. These "knowledge leaps" take place because of the foundation work of many individuals who receive little or no credit for the final result, yet without whom the process may not have happened at all.

We wish to acknowledge and thank all of those early trainers who spoke up about the importance of positive reinforcement and relationship-based training, often in the face of ridicule from the dog sports community at large. We recognize and understand that we did not invent anything here, we were simply lucky. We were interested, willing, and available to further the cause of positive reinforcement and relationship-based training by being in the right place at the right time. That fortunate confluence of events led to this series of books, and, of equal importance, to the development of the Fenzi Dog Sports Academy. In combination, we believe that these have the potential to significantly change the world of competition dog sports for the betterment of the dog, and quite frankly, for the betterment of the handler as well. The time was right - we simply showed up. So truly, thank you.

We look forward to continuing the work we've started, and we hope you'll stick around to see where our new journey takes us. We're pretty excited since the current journey has been nothing short of spectacular!

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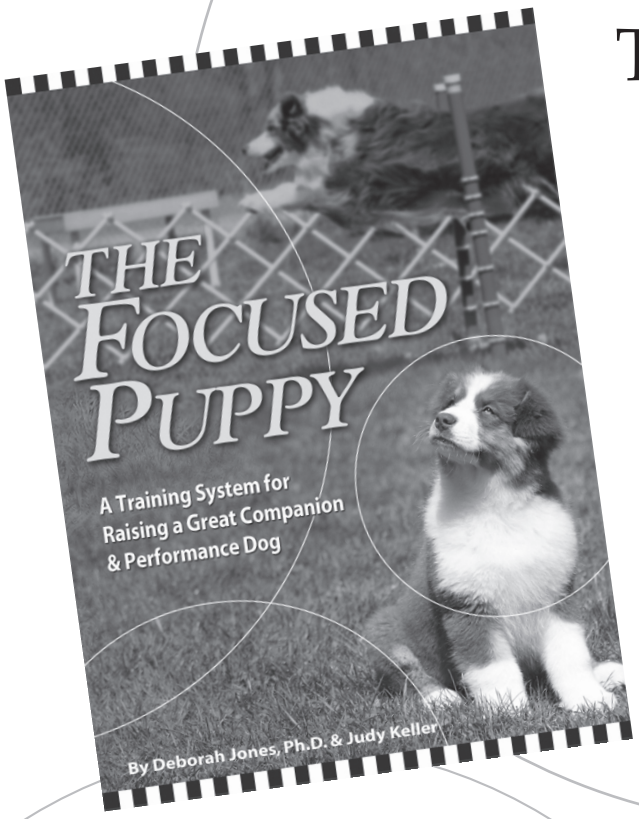

The Focused Puppy

A Training System for Raising
A Great Companion &
Performance Dog

by Deborah Jones, Ph. D.
& Judy Keller

"A well-conceived, well-organized, well-written, much-needed resource for puppy people. Brava, Deb and Judy, exceptionally well done!" —Pat Miller, CPDT-KA, CDBC, Peaceable Paws LLC, Training Editor, The Whole Dog Journal, www.peaceablepaws.com

The FOCUSed Puppy presents a variety of foundation exercises for your pup's first year. The book tells you exactly what skills you should be working on and when. By following each step, you and your puppy will build a wonderfully rewarding relationship that will carry over into everything you do together. And once his foundation skills are set, you can easily take your training in any direction you choose.

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