

Sure Steps to Steadiness!—Part II

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In Part I we looked at things from Spot's point of view and talked about using reinforcement in the proper way to help Spot learn. Now I will continue on with what was already said and talk about a very important ingredient in steadiness training. That step is a reliable STOP command.

WHOA, SIT OR HALT

In my opinion the best stop command to teach steadiness is HALT. Not that the word used makes any difference, but the position of Spot does. HALT means lay down and put your chin between your paws on the ground. Keep in mind that you are not teaching Spot to lay down on point, wing shot or fall. You are using the HALT command as a "time-out" for misbehavior. If Spot does everything as he is supposed to, then he will never hear a single command other than FETCH. This is the goal of this method. If you ever have to give Spot a stop command it is because he messed up and he definitely does not get to retrieve, so what does it matter if he is on his belly? If he is on his belly he will be thinking about how not to get there next time and not thinking about chasing the bird. It makes the whole situation very black and white for Spot and Spot will be a star student in no time at all.

This notion is always confronted with great resistance but it is a technique that has been used by European trainers for many years before pointing dogs were brought to this country. With the exception of very timid dogs, if you want to make it easy on yourself and Spot, HALT is the way to go. Of course with a flushing dog, SIT is the proper command because that is the position a steady flushing dog is supposed to assume after the flush.

The only reason SIT is not quite as effective as HALT is because you are not giving Spot an effective time-out. Spot is still in a position where he can see the bird fly or fall. He isn't thinking about what he did wrong. He is still tempted to chase the bird. If we can get the bird out of Spot's head, then Spot can start focusing on what we want—steadiness.

So what about WHOA as a tool for steadiness? Why not use it? This is the position we want Spot in while he is pointing. Well, there are two reasons for not using a standing position. First is that it does not give Spot an effective time-out, just as SIT didn't. Secondly WHOA is very difficult to reinforce.

Dogs have a hard time distinguishing between shades of gray. Sure you can teach Spot that you want him to stop fairly quickly, but what happens when he moves his feet when he gets tired of standing there? You give him punishment for moving his feet after the fact. Spot can move his feet a lot faster than you can move your hand to the transmitter and finger to the button. Soon Spot is confused and moving all over the place trying to

find the safety zone. Not only that, I bet Spot gets away with moving his feet a lot more often than you know. In comparison, if Spot had his chin on the ground, how hard do you think it would be for him to cheat? Pretty hard to do without getting caught and very easy to reinforce with the e-collar. The e-collar stays on until Spot's chin is on the ground. This is reinforcement because you caught Spot in the act (chin off the ground).

I dare to bet that there are a lot of people out there that have been in this situation. You flush the bird, check Spot out of the corner of your eye to make sure he stopped, shoot the bird and watch it fall. Next you turn around to release Spot and find that he has moved about five feet. Is there anything you can do to punish the offense? Sure, you can pull him back and put him approximately where he was. If you could make him lay down with his chin on the ground for a few minutes and not get the retrieve, he would think twice about moving his feet the next time. An effective time-out or sequence-breaker is a very useful tool.

The only other exception I can see where using WHOA has advantages is if you have a horseback field trial dog—a dog that covers a lot of ground and may be on point for several minutes before you see him. If Spot has had a lot of SIT or HALT training you may find him in that position when you get to him. For the average hunting dog this is not a problem. I know when I'm out hunting I don't expect my dog to be out of sight long enough to get tired of pointing and lay down.

If you still insist on using WHOA then this steadiness method can still be used. Things will not progress as quickly though, especially in real hunting situations when you aren't keeping an eye on Spot quite as well as you should.

TEACHING THE STOP COMMAND

The Dobbs Training Center has an excellent video out on using the e-collar to teach Spot the WHOA command. *WHOA for Pointing Dogs* is the title. If you are going to use WHOA I recommend the Dobbs method. It is very similar to what is taught in this article. If you are teaching Spot to sit, then a nearly identical method to what follows can be used with the e-collar. Just substitute HALT with SIT below.

I've already mentioned that HALT is the proper stop command to use. Now lets take a look at how the e-collar can be used to teach HALT and reinforce it in the field. The ease of transferring the reinforcement to the field is the main reason for the use of the e-collar. Some people insist on teaching commands with conventional methods in the yard and then using the e-collar when they get to the field. There is absolutely no reason for it. The training is done much more efficiently and humanely with the e-collar to begin with. If used in this way, Spot will know exactly how to react to the e-collar when you go to the field. You won't have to spend any time back tracking and teaching Spot to comply with your command. The e-collar can be used for negative reinforcement in the field just as effectively as in the yard. Spot will become very confused when you try to enforce a command in the field with the e-collar that you taught in the yard with conventional methods.

So let's start out in the yard or house. You can use a peg with a ring on it in the yard or simply a collar, leash and your foot in the house. The idea is to pull Spot's chin to the ground after you give the command. This can be done by placing the leash under the foot and pulling it until Spot's chin is on your foot. The other method is with a peg in the ground that you can thread a long lead through. That way you can pull the lead and Spot's head will be pulled to the ground where it is threaded. Make sure the setup allows you to pull Spot's chin completely to the ground! If not, make sure you are in a position to push Spot's head the rest of the way in a timely manner. Now you have the ability to force Spot into a somewhat proper position. The peg in the ground is probably a much better set up because it allows you to remove yourself from Spot a little more. That way Spot knows you have control even when you are not next to him.

You already know what stimulation level to train Spot at. You determined that earlier. Take the e-collar and place it on top of Spot's neck. This will help since the pressure from the probes will be above Spot and he will naturally move away from the pressure. It will probably also put the ring on the e-collar near Spot's chin where you want it. Hook your lead to Spot's collar and be ready to force Spot into the proper position. Command HALT and simultaneously turn the e-collar on. Slowly pull Spot into the proper position. As soon as Spot is there, turn the e-collar off and praise him. Repeat this until Spot is quickly responding to the command and stimulation. You are teaching Spot to turn the stimulation off by complying with your command. You are not punishing him for not complying. Spot will learn that standing is unpleasant while putting his chin on the ground brings praise and maybe a treat. You are using the e-collar for negative and positive reinforcement. Spot gets negative reinforcement (turn on) as soon as you give the command and positive reinforcement (turn off) as soon as his chin hits the ground. This is the reason that continuous stimulation must be used. Momentary stimulation cannot be used for positive reinforcement in this way.

After he is responding quickly, then give Spot the chance to be a hero and go down on his own. If he does, then give him lots of praise and maybe a yummy treat. A treat may be in order even before this stage. As soon as Spot's chin hits the ground a treat is there. Positive reinforcement! There isn't anything wrong with positive reinforcement here. Try to keep Spot motivated. You don't need to wilt Spot's spirit. If Spot doesn't go down promptly then a very timely second command in conjunction with the use of the e-collar is needed. The worst thing that you can do is be inconsistent with Spot here. You will save yourself and Spot lots of time and trouble later on if Spot learns that he must comply quickly with one command. This is accomplished with consistent and timely use of the e-collar. A little more work here will save many hours down the road.

After several repetitions Spot will be hitting the dirt quickly and consistently without any reinforcement. You can start taking the leash off of Spot, commanding HALT and making sure Spot is in the correct position; that is, chin on the ground between the front paws. No exceptions and no being slack with Spot. If he lifts his head even an inch then use the e-collar to reinforce a second command. Spot must also go down very quickly. You want Spot's reaction to be a conditioned reflex. This will take repetition but you do not

want Spot to give it a second thought. He must understand that promptness is essential under all circumstances.

After Spot is getting good in the house and yard you can start tempting him to break by dropping a dog treat nearby or bouncing a ball his way. Each time Spot moves his head he gets a timely reinforcement with the e-collar. If he does well he should probably be released to eat the treat or chase the ball. A good combination of positive and negative reinforcement will make things easier for Spot. Remember that reinforcement can only be done in a timely manner. Too late or too early will not help.

You want Spot to feel success often, but after he starts getting good you will have to increase the temptation so Spot will fail. Step by step we are working to a reliable stop command in the field with any amount of distraction.

So now you think Spot is reliable in the controlled yard and house situations. Let's go to the field and give it a try. Start out with Spot at heel and command HALT. I'm sure you won't have any problems here, but it is good to get Spot in the correct frame of mind before beginning. Now let Spot get a few feet away and repeat the command. Enforce the command with the e-collar every time that Spot isn't prompt. More than likely you will not have any trouble. If Spot did well, let him get a little further away and keep increasing the distance until Spot is hitting the dirt at 100+ yards. If Spot starts hesitating before going down then start using the e-collar to reinforce the command as the command is given. Soon Spot will be trying to beat the collar and not give it a second thought. Spot will be programmed to HALT very promptly.

Now you have a dog that is ready for steadiness training. He is very birdy, is an excellent retriever and is very reliable on the stop command. Within a couple weeks Spot will be well on his way to being a finished gun dog! As a bonus you have a dog that is obedient around the house. A prompt HALT the next time he jumps on the neighbor will increase your popularity in the neighborhood as well.

In Part III of *Sure Steps to Steadiness* I will walk through the actual steadiness training and put all of the information that was presented in Parts I and II into practice.

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