

PRACTICALLY TRAINING:

Verbal Left and Right Cues, Part 1

By Sandy Rogers, photos by Laura Tsuk except where noted



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As we train our dogs we should always be aware whether we are training verbal or physical cues. At the risk of sounding like a broken record to those of you who have read my previous articles, I will repeat myself: When you call your dog while you also give a physical cue, you do not know which cue the dog is actually responding to. Whenever you call your dog you are practicing a verbal recall. You should assume he came because you told him to. If you combined the verbal recall with a signal, then you cannot know if he picked up the physical cue you gave him while you were calling him.

All the turn cues we have done so far in the series have been physical cues. Now we are going to explore turning the dog with verbal cues. Physical cues are successful when handlers are in the correct position to execute them. If you can't be in the correct position to give your dog a physical cue or if your training is lacking in the physical cue department, you will have to rely on verbal cues.

Verbal cues break down into obstacle cues and directional cues. If you use

verbal cues for obstacles when you are not in position to physically cue the dog, it should mean that you have systematically taught your dog verbal obstacle discrimination; that is, you can be behind the dog and call out the name of an obstacle and the dog will take that obstacle, even if he has to change his current path to do it. Sound difficult? It is more so for some dogs than others, but it definitely requires a dedicated trainer with a good training plan to produce the high level of comprehension needed from the dog to be successful in making the choice in competition. Please don't be fooled. Just calling out the obstacles by name as you train is not enough training for the dog to learn true verbal obstacle discrimination.

The same is true for verbal directional commands. I see handlers using them every weekend in conjunction with physical cues, believing that the dog has picked up the verbal command when in fact there is no way to tell if the dog responded to the verbal "Right" or the rear cross, for example, that happened at the same time.

Who Needs It Anyway?

Not every team needs verbal directional commands. If you can outrun your dog, your need for verbal directionals plummets because you can always be in the correct position to cue your dog. Even many distance challenges in the specialty classes in most venues can be successfully executed from time to time with just good old-fashioned line setting and lots of momentum heading into the challenge.

But if you are often caught far enough behind your dog that you can no longer influence him with physical commands, or if you would like to excel at the higher level distance challenges more consistently, then you should train your dog to turn when he hears a verbal command.

Understanding Lead Changes

It is best that you understand what a lead change is before you start this training. If you don't know, please ask someone to show you. Watching horses change leads is easier than dogs. If you

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watch a dog or horse run (canter for a horse) in a circle, it is easy to see that his inside front leg reaches a bit farther than the other front leg. This is required for balance as the animal leans into the circle. That is all the lead is, whichever leg is “leading” is the lead the animal is on. When animals change direction, if they did not change leads, they would fall over. It is a very natural movement. In dressage in the horse world, elaborate training can be accomplished by controlling and changing the horse’s leading leg.

The Right Job Description

You need to make some choices about what you expect from your dog before you start training. Here are two questions to ask yourself before writing your dog’s job description:

- Will you train a single command that tells your dog to change leads and turn away from you from either side of your body?
- Will you go the extra steps to train both the “Left” and “Right” commands to a high level of comprehension?

Let’s look at what you need to take into consideration as you try to answer these questions.

Understanding a Single Turn Command

Many people find they only need to train a single command that simply means “turn the other way now.” Common commands are “Switch” and “Turn.” I use “Hook.”

When the dog hears this command, he changes leads and ends up traveling in a new direction. I have had great success in the past using the “Hook” command instead of “Left” and “Right.” Since the dog’s leading leg is usually the leg on the same side as the handler is located, the same command will turn the dog away from his handler regardless of which side the dog is on. That means if I run with my dog on my left, he is most likely on his right lead. If I give my command to change direction, the dog will change leads, which will cause him to turn left, away from me, and vice versa.

When I first trained a turn command, I believed the dog had to be next to me to understand he was to turn away from me. Then one day I was hopelessly behind my dog, watching him head for an off-course obstacle. Out of desperation, with very little hope of success, I yelled “Hook.” I only said it because there was nothing else I could think of to say to save the day. When my dog turned away from the wrong-course obstacle and headed toward the correct obstacle I was shocked. That was how I learned the command was just a lead change and I did not have to be close to my dog for it to work. What mattered was which side of me the dog had been on as he passed me. Thank heavens I have patient dogs to teach me!

Understanding the “Left” and “Right” Commands

If you are often caught in the wrong position for cueing your dog to the correct obstacle with your body position, then you should choose to teach verbal directional commands to a higher level. This will give you more flexibility on course than a single turn cue. Training directional commands means that you’ve decided you don’t want your body’s position in relationship to the dog’s position to be taken into consideration by the dog at all. You will train the dog to understand to turn both left and right no matter which side the dog is on as well as when the dog is in front of you or coming toward you. This means the dog is not just changing leads, he is turning in the direction he has been told to, no matter what lead he is on, including if he is on the lead needed to make the turn. His comprehension of left and right are at a very high level. This path will take considerably more training than a simple lead change cue.

Now that you have decided what you are going to train, let’s look at how to go about it.

Ground Work

Training a Verbal “Turn” Cue

Those of you who understand clicker training can train your turn with a

clicker. If you don’t know clicker training and would like to learn, this is a nice behavior for beginners (it is always a good idea to train a trick or two that you won’t need in the future first, just in case you have a bit of a learning curve). Clean Run sells many good books on the subject of clicker training and many trainers are qualified to teach clicker work if you are interested in learning it.

For those not interested in shaping the turn behavior with a clicker, here is another method.

1. Begin with the dog standing on your left side in heel position. Either hold the dog’s collar or keep his head in place with a treat held with your right hand on the side of your left leg.
2. Tickle the dogs outside hip with your left hand. When the dog turns his head to investigate the tickle, acknowledge his choice (“Yes” or “Good” works well) and reward so the dog has to move forward out of the turn to get the treat.

OR

An alternative to tickling the hip: use your “tickle hand” (your right hand if the dog is on your left) to put a cookie on your dog’s nose. Slowly drag the cookie along the dog’s body back toward the dog’s hip so the dog’s nose can follow it.

3. When the dog steps toward the treat, rotate into the dog and move forward. Done correctly, the dog will end up on your right (new) side and you will have turned 180 degrees.
4. Get a rhythm of repetitions going and when the dog anticipates what is happening, start to fade the lure of the cookie or the hip tickle.
5. Add the verbal cue when the dog understands to turn without much help.
6. Progress to walking with the dog in heel position, telling him the verbal cue and turning with the dog *after* he starts his turn on his own.
7. Next try jogging then running while surprising the dog with his new turn command from time to time.

Once the dog understands the command your ground work is done and you should begin your one-jump work.

Do not overdo the ground work. You want the dog thinking that turning and jumping go together. For one of my dogs, I overtrained the ground

work so he will turn on command at the very last second and not take the jump. He is often so close to the jump that he can knock the bar with his rear

end as he turns. I no longer overtrain the ground work and I have not had this problem again.

Ground Work Photos (hip tickle)



The handler is distracting her dog with a treat while she reaches to tickle his back hip.



The dog has noticed the tickle on his hip and has stopped trying to get at the treat.



As the dog begins to turn, the handler starts to rotate with the dog.



The handler continues to tickle the hip as she rotates.



The handler is ready with her treat to reward the turn.



The handler has completed her turn and the dog is catching up to her.



Handler and dog are now facing 180° from their starting position.



If the dog is too distracted by the treat, just put your hand in the collar before you tickle the hip.

Hand in the Collar (drag the treat down the body)



With one hand in the collar the handler is using a treat to get the dog's attention. Notice her treat hand is actually touching the dog.



She is moving the treat slowly down the dog's side to turn him; her hand is still in the collar.



The handler is rotating with her dog after the dog has started the turn.



As the turn is complete, she delivers the reward.



Dog and handler are now facing the new direction together.

Physical cues are successful when handlers are in the correct position to execute them. If you can't be in the correct position to give your dog a physical cue or if your training is lacking in the physical cue department, you will have to rely on verbal cues.

Setting the dog up for the left and right:



This handler is setting the dog up between her legs, centered on her body, so the dog does not consider which side he left from.



The handler stays in the middle of the jumps so she does not influence the dog before she gives the verbal command.



I do not recommend teaching the dog to turn like this. The hand movement is so large that the fading process will add unnecessary time to the training process.

Troubleshooting

- If you are using a treat to distract the dog until you tickle him, you may need to fold it tight into your hand to get him to turn away from it. If it continues to be difficult, remove the food and use the hand-in-the-collar routine. I like using the food when the dog can handle it because it helps to keep the dog from anticipating the tickle.
- Start with several treats in your hand so that you are ready if your dog needs more treats to get himself turned
- If the tickle doesn't do the trick, try a soft pinch or gentle hair pull. Be careful with reactive dogs; I don't want you to get bitten! You can also try other parts of the leg to tickle, pinch, or pull; the hock often works well.
- Do not start to turn yourself until the dog has definitely turned his head away from you.
- Don't worry about anticipation. When it happens, you are on the right track and should start using your turn command at that point.
- Always rotate with the dog so you end up facing the same way as the dog.

Ground Work

Training Verbal "Left" and "Right" Cues

I recommend using shaping (clicker training) when teaching left and right. The

shaping process takes comprehension to the required higher level. Here are some basic tips for shaping left and right.

- Teach left or right first, spending a few days on it. Like any new behavior it is best to play with it for 2 to 3 minutes several times (six to eight) a day. Dogs that only get a shot at a new skill once or twice a week can really struggle and seem to always be going back to square one (often because they are!).
- Do not wait till the original direction you choose to start with is totally perfected before you start teaching the other direction. As soon as you have basic comprehension, begin training the second direction.
- If your dog struggles with one side more than the other, work on the weaker side for a day or two and put the other side on the back burner. You may have to do this balancing act by going back and forth between cues as you proceed.
- When you ask the dog to distinguish between the two directions, don't go crazy going back and forth and back again. The dog will just start guessing and he will not be learning anything. Ask for repeated responses for the same direction; for example, two, three, or four reps of one direction and then ask for the other direction. This will prove whether the dog comprehends the cue more than just going back and forth. Vary which cue you start with in each training session.

- Reward every correct response. Withhold rewards for incorrect responses.

Words of Caution

- I do not recommend teaching the dog to turn by using a wide, sweeping hand movement. The motion is a much too large hand signal and will take too much work to fade. Remember, we are teaching a verbal cue and any physical movement used in the initial teaching stages will have to be faded. Even the movements used above will have to be faded, but they don't take as long to fade since they are smaller (which is the reason I use them!).
- I do not use hand signals to turn my dog away from me. We bring our hands up all the time in agility to cue the dog to go straight. Using the hand to also signal the dog to turn can confuse the dog, even if you try to discriminate between signals by hooking your arm to turn him and keeping your arm straight to cue straight. If you use a hand signal, the dog will begin to guess as you start to raise your hand whether you are going to cue straight or a turn. Use your raised hand only to mean travel straight and your dog will not end up confused and turning when you don't want him to.

Next Month

Work on perfecting your ground work. In part 2 of the article you'll take your training to one jump and then two jumps. 🐾

Sandy Rogers has been teaching obedience and agility since 1991, and founded ACE Dog Sports in San Francisco, California in 1999. Her dogs have competed in the USDAA and AKC national championship finals multiple times in four jump heights. Sandy and Jack Russell Terrier Quill competed on Team USA at the World Agility Open in 2011-2013, winning individual gold and silver in 2012 and bronze in 2013. Quill won the 2013 USDAA Grand Prix Finals, and placed second at the 2012 and 2014 AKC Nationals. Sandy has two DVDs available: One Jump Two Jump and Feet First. To contact Sandy, email sandyrogers@acedogsports.com.