

BEHAVIOR SHAPING A MUST
FOR THE PUPPY AND THE COMPETITION DOG
BORDERLINES

By Norma Simpson Rust

First let me tell you that I have lived the history of the Border Collie. From Miscellaneous Class dogs required to have an ILP number, to full AKC recognition. I acquired my first Border Collie in December of 1978. He was a wonderful dog registered with the North American Sheep Dog Society. His mother was a bitch bred by Arthur Allen and his father came from J. M. Wilson's Kennel in Scotland. He was a very classic Border Collie - black & white, rough coated & split faced. I took him to an Obedience Class and by the time he was three years old he had a Utility degree. Despite his "stock dog" credentials, when I first began showing him at AKC shows there were professional handlers who would come up and ask what kind of a dog he was. With him, my life long love of the breed was born.

When I first heard the term "behavior shaping", I was very skeptical about the process because it involved the use of food. I had attended a class where a collar pop followed by praise was the norm and food was considered an absolute NO. Twenty years of teaching behavior shaping in two puppy classes per week with ten dogs in each class has removed any doubts and turned me in to an avid proponent. The most amazing thing to me has been the discovery that at this age, all of the pups seem to have been created equal. After they reach the age of 4 months it does make a big difference if you are training a Dachshund or a Golden Retriever, but the stars of my Puppy classes have been Boxers, Sharpie, Bulldogs and Chihuahua's. As a Dog Trainer this has never ceased to astound me.

The use of food by itself does not insure successful behavior shaping. Where the treat is held, offered and given is of prime importance. It is necessary to pair the delivery of the food with praise as well, so that when you no longer have the food you will still have your vocal reward. Puppies are trained to walk on the leash, sit, stand, come and down on a hand signal by the proper use of treats to shape these desired behavior. With the sit, for example, the treat is held in the palm of the hand by the thumb and delivered with the correct hand signal.

Just as correct behavior can be shaped, incorrect behavior or incorrect position can be shaped as readily. A prime example of this occurred yesterday in my

Beginning Obedience Class with a young man and his 5 month old American Bulldog. Both are graduates of my Puppy class. This pup has had eleven lessons so far and he struts along beside the owner looking up with that look that we admire and strive for in a competition dog. Since it takes six months to truly shape a behavior his work is not finished yet. This great start comes from the proper use of shaping techniques. Just as I am gloating in their success we get to the recall from across the room. This young dog flies to the owner, sits in front, turns his head to the left and the owner reaches out and gives him a treat. Now the handler is shaping the WRONG behavior. In front training, treats that are given with hands that come from the side of our body are shaping the behavior of looking at our hands. With large dogs, treats should be taken up to your chin and given from there to shape the behavior of looking up at your face. This makes it much easier to sit straight if the dog's focus is upward and in the middle of your body. With small dogs, the treat is given between the knees so it is always looking at the correct sight picture to create a good front. People often wonder why their dog lacks attention or eye contact when they have actually shaped inattention by giving treats while the dog is looking away. A dog that turns its back on the owner, who then reaches out to reward him, has just begun shaping inattentive behavior as well.

Whether you want your dog to be a competition dog or just a well behaved pet, behavior shaping will make all the difference. Puppies taught to come on command consistently before they reach the age of 4 months will always do so. Here again, shaping the correct behavior and knowing the difference is all important. Ian Dunbar, noted behaviorist, addressed this distinction in a column written for the AKC Gazette. He observed people at a dog park in California whose dog was digging. The owner called the dog to them and then punished it. Their intention was to stop the dog from digging. In reality they were punishing the dog for coming and insuring that "come is something it would not want to do in the future. A good, solid "come" can be a life saving command. As Ian Dunbar observed, "Whatever you do, don't teach your puppies to come – it will be very hard to get rid of."

An example of how behavior shaping is not only successful, and quite useful comes from a student of mine in Utility Class who trains a Great Dane. A Great Dane will inspire you to shape behaviors if for no other reason than it is very hard to physically move a 150 pound dog into an exact position. When this student's dog would finish to heel position, she would point to the floor in front of her. After sitting he would wrap his head around her to look at her right hand that usually held treats and never found the correct position. I suggested that she hold the treat with her left hand at shoulder height. This not only draws his attention upward as he sits but shapes a correct sit in heel position. It is much more effective to shape a desired behavior than to try to

correct an undesirable one.

Behavior Shaping is the most valuable tool that a trainer can employ. To make effective use of this tool we must insure that the behavior we are shaping is the one we desire. Remember you get the behavior that you reward.