

Competition Obedience

In my previous article I explained the requirements of Working Trials and just how much fun they are. Well, the other competitive work we enjoy training is Obedience. The work for this is very precise and the dog is expected to look glued to the handler's left leg in heelwork – this is obviously a challenge with a breed like Staffordshire Bull Terriers who are relatively small dogs, have short coats and broad shoulders – all together not everyone's first choice when it comes to buying a dog if you have ambitions of doing well in the obedience ring! Now, that may well be commonsense, but it has obviously had absolutely no influence on me whatsoever, as I am now training my fifth Stafford for this sport! And it is terribly rewarding to come home with a rosette when every other dog in the class was a Border Collie!

My dog, Busby (Beraka Hurricane of Copyhold B.Ex CDex UDEX) is the most successful Stafford ever in obedience and has recently been placed in the highest class: Class C. This is a terrific achievement and in order to be there, he has won through Novice, Class A and Class B, with the type of work needed getting progressively more demanding at each level.

Now, what I could do is continue to explain the exercises in detail and impress everyone with the nigh on impossibility of training a Stafford for this type of work – but I think I would rather tell you just how much fun we all get from the training and how Busby and Garbo (Dazmarnic Firefly at Copyhold) consider all of the 'work' as huge games! When we arrive at our obedience trainer's, the two Staffords don't look at all well behaved as they are both desperate to be the first one out of the car for their training session – that is something I do not mind at all as I know they will wait till they are told they can get out of the car and to work with the concentration needed in the ring, dogs have to be very well motivated. And my two are certainly that!!

The magic ingredient to achieve this level of motivation has been clicker training. I am convinced that without this method we would not be nearly so successful – Busby and Garbo are confident that they are able to offer

behaviours that will make me give that click: a promise to them that they will receive their reward – and they are convinced that that puts them in charge.

All of our training is reward based; for instance, when the puppies are very young they learn that white tiles are places to find portions of dinner so they are classically conditioned to want to go to sniff the square, white scent cloths when it comes to competing. For the distant control exercise, we play 'fielding the titbit' which encourages the dogs to stand at a distance from me while waiting attentively for the next instruction and the thrown titbit. The actual movement into the different positions is taught sitting on the floor with the puppy and luring with titbits, then clicking the desired response – when they can do all of the separate components, then they can be chained together for one reward and we end up with the exercise that will be performed in competition.

And we may be working on very precise heelwork, but when the dog is getting it right and I give that click, we break off and run down the garden to get either the food or toy reward! All exciting stuff. At Busby's level, he needs to do heelwork at normal, slow and fast paces and has to stop in the sit, stand or down when told to, remain static and then rejoin me in the heelwork position on command and all of this is taught as a fun and rewarding game.



“As the target became further away, he ran faster and faster to it to earn his reward.”

There is a sendaway in obedience which is usually to a series of markers and the dog is asked to drop near to these as indicated by the judge. Busby does this exercise at great



speed as he just loves belting around. To teach him to run in the desired direction, he was trained to target a stick with his nose to earn a click. As the target became further away, he ran faster and faster to it to earn his reward. The control needed is taught separately, so we never lose the enthusiasm by constantly yelling at the dog to go down when he reaches the sendaway point. The one exercise I cannot even imagine training without a clicker is the retrieve and this is a very important part of obedience work. In the lower classes it is a dumb-bell retrieve but once you reach 'B' the dog has to retrieve an article provided by the judge. Again, I start when the puppy is very young and click for any interest in the retrieve article. Once he realises that the article is the thing

that initiates the reward, then I wait until the puppy picks it up for a click and from there, it is just a matter of time until he is happily carrying the article around waiting to hear his reward marker. Because the reward is more important than the retrieve article there is less likelihood of mouthing or other possessive or anxious behaviours.

Busby was certainly as successful as he was because of this type of training and young Garbo is coming on very well and should be starting to compete in the ring later this year. With her attitude and enthusiasm, I feel sure that she, too, will be capable of reaching the very top so I have even more excitement to look forward to.

Marney Wells

