

Spy Kids

The 10-Month Mark

By Nancy Gyes, photos by Marcy Mantell Photography

Sweep and his brothers recently celebrated their 10-month birthday. They look like grown-up boys, but often act like the puppies they truly are. Sweep's training sessions are quite varied now. Jim practices recalls, stays, position training, retrieves, line-up skills, and targeting around as many distractions as possible. Sweep is not perfect, but he is continuing to improve in all the behaviors Jim is teaching him.



Training

Running Flatwork

Acceleration and deceleration are important tools in agility; they are taught before the dog has been taught to do obstacles. During Sweep's running flatwork training Jim is teaching Sweep to stay by his side when he decelerates or stops moving. Acceleration is taught using sprint work in combination with the *Go On* command and rewarding Sweep forward of Jim by throwing Sweep's toy. Jim is always moving when he cues Sweep with a *Go On* command. We do not want to teach Sweep to accelerate past us when we are standing still.

Lack of motion should be a cue for our dog to dig in and stop at our leg or to turn tightly to us. Acceleration of a handler should cue the dog to move forward using long strides and not to stop at our side.

Recall

Sweep is left in a sit-stay and Jim runs away to various locations around the field to call Sweep to his side. For this kind of a recall Jim is facing the same direction that Sweep is facing, and Jim looks over his shoulder to call him to his side. Sweep is rewarded with an exciting game of tug for stopping at his leg. Some of the time Jim spins in place just before Sweep reaches his side, and then he is

rewarded after Jim spins away from him while keeping Sweep tight on his leg. Other times Jim accelerates away from Sweep before Sweep reaches his side and then rewards him when he catches up to heel. Or Jim tells Sweep to go on and throws the toy forward. And Jim does not forget to go back and reward Sweep often for remaining in a sit-stay rather than recalling him out of position each time.

Nose Touch Targeting on a Board

Sweep is progressing to being sent farther along a board to touch his electronic nose target. Jim is careful to release him to *Go Touch* when Sweep is looking forward to the target and not looking at Jim. We

want Sweep to learn to look forward on the contacts and move quickly and directly to the target without looking over his shoulder at us.

Retrieve a Stationary Toy

To further emphasize Sweep's moving forward to his target or to any spot where we might send him, we practice tossing Sweep's toy and then holding him back by his collar or hips until he is facing the direction of the toy before being released to retrieve. Jim throws the toy, gets Sweep excited with the words *Ready, Steady,* and then sends him forward with a *Go On*, and then says *Get It* as Sweep begins to travel forward to take the toy.



Balance Work

Jim has continued to practice using the BOSU Balance Trainer as well as the Buja board to teach Sweep to enjoy moving objects. It also helps Sweep learn to balance himself in the two-on/two-off position to prepare for the training we will do on the seesaw.

Troubleshooting

Acting Like a Juvenile

This is the age when young males' behavior begins to be driven by their hormones. When Sweep is around 13 months old we are planning on doing preliminary hip radiographs. We will check on his growth plate closure and most likely have him neutered at the same time. Most studies of male dogs concerning the correct age to neuter conclude that altering should take place after the dog is full grown and the growth plates are closed. Since Sweep's behavior does not seem to be negatively affected by him remaining unaltered right now, we will wait to schedule the surgery and radiographs till that time. If being an intact male does begin to get in the way of our training, we will reevaluate at that time.



No Response or Poor Response to Commands

If we ask Sweep to do something and get no response or a half-hearted or incorrect response there are a variety of actions we will take. Here is an example of what we would do if we asked Sweep to line up by giving the close command, and got no response from him at all.

Wait. We do not ask again. We just stand perfectly still and see if Sweep is having a momentary lapse in attention. If after a short wait, he realizes he was supposed to respond and he *does* move into close position, we praise him for making the

effort but he does not get food or toy rewards for responding so slowly. We release him from position and ask again. If he responds quickly he is rewarded and then released and has a good game of tug to end. At this point we would usually ask for the behavior a few more times, and reward it again before we move on to the next task.

If, after a short wait, on the first failure Sweep does not willingly jump into position, I stop training and move out of position. I need to get Sweep's attention. I might pair a verbal wake-up call with a quick goose of his butt, to bring him back

to planet Earth, then engage him in some kind of attention activity or play. I won't give any commands again until I know I have his full attention. What we do not want to do is get into a habit where we give a cue to Sweep, and then have to say *Uh-Oh* or *Whoops* or repeat the command to get him to respond. Pretty soon, he would only respond to commands after we repeat the cue multiple times or say *Whoops*.

If Sweep is totally distracted we change the environment slightly or a lot, depending on his level of distraction. We change position in the room or field by moving a short distance away and then ask again. If he responds appropriately the very first time in the new location, he is rewarded, *then* we move back closer to the location we first asked for the behavior and reward his response and quickly release him from position to play.

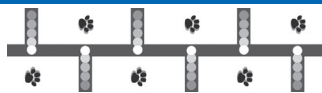
If, however, we still get no response, we should ask ourselves what *we* are doing incorrectly. We consider whether we are asking Sweep for behaviors before we have engaged him in play and have his full and undivided

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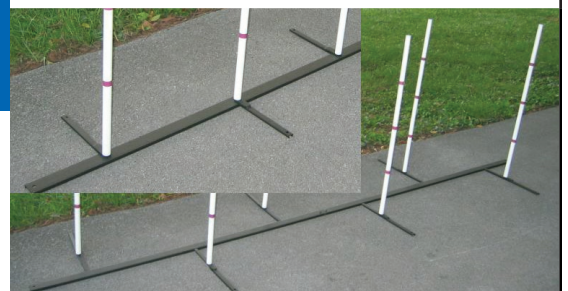
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attention. It is also possible that Sweep hasn't been given enough reinforcement recently for lining up, and he simply does not care if he responds since he feels it unlikely that he will earn a treat or tug game. We might try asking for some other behaviors like sit or down and if he responds immediately he will get rewarded and then we will go back to asking for *Close*. If he responds it is now back to business as usual. If not, then it is time for a refresher course throughout the next week on responding to the *Close* command in any location at any time, the first time we ask.

Continue to reward the behaviors you want your dog to do precisely and quickly by using lots of tug, play, and food rewards. Reward your dog when he responds to your first cue, and don't repeat cues, or add signals or bribes to get a response.

Bribery Leads to Failure

I could apply this concept to any behavior we have trained Sweep to understand when he fails to respond correctly

after our command. What we do not ever do is bribe him by getting a cookie or toy from our pocket to try and get his attention *after* we have asked for a behavior and he has chosen not to respond. That would be rewarding him for *not* doing a behavior the first time we ask.

Here's another example: you are training your dog and he runs off to chase a squirrel, sniff, visit another dog, or any other on a long list of inattentive behaviors. You call a few times and when he finally comes to you he gets a huge emotional reward of lavish praise as well as toys or treats. What your dog will learn is that going off and finding something interesting away from you earns huge rewards if and when he chooses to return, or decides to pay attention. *Do not offer an opportunity for your dog to earn rewards during a period of time when he is being inattentive or naughty.*

Unless you are in an emergency scenario where your dog's life is at risk if he does not respond,

do not offer rewards and bribes to your dog to get him to pay attention or return to you. You can continue in any way you like to get your dog to return to you, but do not give out rewards to him for his inattention.

Environmental Distraction Factors

The previous situation is different from taking your dog to an interesting new location to practice recalls. New or distracting environments are great for practicing recalls, and great places to reward our dog when he responds. (We often look for places to train that will get Sweep's attention off us and onto the environment, so that we can practice recalling him away from the diversion.) If you have to call three times and run away though to get your dog's attention the environment is too distracting for the level of your dog's training or your dog simply does not understand that the recall command is rewarded only if the dog comes immediately.

Don't turn your dog loose in an environment that is way beyond his ability on the distraction

scale. Learn to be extremely generous in rewarding quick and appropriate responses but stingy when dealing with lack of attention or outright naughty or inattentive behavior. Running away from your dog as a recall technique can be useful to build motivation and drive. If you run away only when your dog is naughty as a method to try and get him to come to you, and then reward the recall when he gets there, you are asking for trouble. You will be caught in a trap of being forced to run away to get your dog to come to you.

Being Realistic

As I work with Sweep as well as other dogs of a similar age, I try to help students realize the importance of having high expectations, yet remaining realistic about what level the puppy is at and to make sure the amount of reward is equal to the effort.

See you next month and have fun training your puppy. We are certainly having fun with ours. 🐾

Nancy Gyes and her husband Jim Basic run Power Paws Agility in San Jose, California. She is the AKC World Team Coach for 2006 and has been on the AKC World Team seven times, four years with Scud and three with Riot. Nancy and Riot finished 1st in 2002 and 2nd in 2001 in Individual Agility classes at Worlds. Nancy also won the USDAA Nationals four years in a row, 1998 to 2001, with three different dogs, Scud, Riot, and Wicked. In 2001 and 2002, Nancy and Riot were the 24" jump height AKC National Champions. Scud retired in 2001 after winning the USDAA Veterans Championship. Contact Nancy at www.powerpawsagility.com, where you can also view other articles and videos.



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