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Spy Kids

Variations on Our Training Themes

By Nancy Gyes, photos by Marcy Mantell Photography except where noted



From the left:
JB (for James Bond), Jarrett, Sweep, and Tip

The pups are almost seven months old. We saw three of Sweep's siblings at an agility trial two weeks ago and had fun taking photos of the energetic pups who would have rather been off playing together. They look almost like adult dogs now, but certainly still act very much like the pups they are.

Tip's owner Dr. Belinda Head has an office in downtown San Francisco. Tip goes to work with her each day and they spend break time training around the city. Tip has to be the most well-socialized of the pups, having new adventures around the busy city on a daily basis. The

doormen at all the fancy hotels know Tip by name and look forward to his visits! Belinda is able to practice stays with lots of city commotion in the background during their daily walks.

Sweep is being presented with new distractions during his stay training as well. At this age our pups are starting to become much more aware of their environment, and who is doing what around them. They want to run and play and are becoming more interested in what their housemate dogs are doing. They are excitable juveniles and I hope all the time we have put into training will begin to pay off as Sweep moves through this next stage of development. It is not unusual for dogs this age to forget the perfect recall or stay they understood perfectly a month ago. The only recourse is diligence in training, and lots of rewards.



Recalls

We will do hundreds of recalls with Sweep this month, around as many distractions and in as many locations as possible. We call his name, he turns and runs toward us, and he gets multiple cookies at our side or a good game of tug. We expect him to stay at our side until released after he comes to us. If Sweep is dragging a leash, we immediately step on the leash as he comes in for his reward. By our stepping on the leash, if he gets distracted while being rewarded, he will be discouraged from dining and dashing. He is petted and praised and we slip our hand in and out of his collar while feeding. If he does not have a leash on, we sometimes snap one on and then take it off again immediately and release him. The release word we use to end a stay exercise is *O.K.* That

means Sweep should move out of a stay and toward us.

The release from our side after a recall is different. We say *Off You Go*, which means he is allowed to go back to running, playing, or interacting with the other dogs. We use our adult dogs as distracters when practicing recalls. If Sweep does not respond immediately when loose with the adults, we tell the adults to lie down, which they do quickly. Now the distractions are minimized and he is more likely to respond correctly. If he fails to respond more than once, he goes back on the leash for a few recalls. A portion of Sweep's food is still used each day for recall training. If we feel that his recalls are backsliding in any way, then a larger portion of his daily meals is used for training and a smaller amount is fed at his regular meal times in his crate.

Sweep is still rewarded for putting on his leash to start walks or training sessions. We are careful that the leash is not an indicator of the end of a play or exercise session. Time is always spent playing or getting rewards on leash after the leash is snapped on. We say, "Put on your leash" while presenting the leash to Sweep, and we want him to sit quietly while we snap it on. He is rewarded as soon as the leash is snapped on.

Stays

We are beginning to add distance and more distractions to Sweep's stay training.

Last month I talked about teaching Sweep to do a sit, down, or stand when we are in a variety of positions ourselves. We have continued with that training and are upping the ante on distractions after he responds to our cue to take a

position. We move around him, away from him, make funny noises, and do funny things. We always return to reward him while he is in position during stay training. At the end we take different positions relative to him and release him to his toy to tug. He is getting food rewards while in a sit, down, or stand and the toy at the end. We try to find many ways to go from food to toys while training.

We also ask Sweep to do short stays while on stools, buckets, or little tables. The length of time we are asking him to stay has increased as well. Duration while staying varies, from just 10 seconds, up to a couple minutes. He gets multiple rewards during the longer stays. He does not need to remain motionless without reinforcement at this point on his long sits or downs.

Toys, Tugging, and Retrieves

Sweep loves to tug and play with toys. This month I focused on using the toy as a reinforcement for a behavior. Until now toy tugging was just a game or a way to end stays or recalls. Jim has worked to teach a good retrieve to Sweep so that he will grab a thrown toy and return immediately. As a general rule we do not play Frisbee or tennis-ball retrieving with our dogs, nor do we use retrieving as a way to physically exercise our dogs. We use toys with handles so we can interact after a short retrieve, and we do not want our dogs to crash into a retrieve object over and over again. There are too many dog injuries caused during retrieving games. Toys are our tools for agility, and we are careful how we use them.

Sweep is being introduced to having a toy thrown to him as a reinforcement for doing a behavior, rather than being rewarded with food and then having the toy used to end the behavior with a tug game. I hope you have introduced your pup to click and tug as a reward instead of food sometimes. You need to work diligently with a pup that has strong food drive and weaker toy drive. This week I taught Sweep to go through a hoop, then I clicked and tossed his toy to him and called him in to tug with me. This is the first behavior I have taught him that sends him away from my side and is rewarded with a toy toss. You could use any kind of device or behavior to reward with a toy toss. We use hoops on our A-frame in training so this skill is one that I want to teach eventually anyway. But my purpose this month is to find something to send him to and then reinforce with the toy. Find something for your pup to go over, under, around, or through, and use click/toy as reinforcement rather than a cookie. As soon as you toss the toy, call your pup in and play tug, and then start again.



We are increasing the duration and speed at which we move with Sweep at our side. Generally the leash is tucked into the back of our pants, not carried in our hand. We move our arms as if we are running when practicing, even if we are moving slowly. We want Sweep to accept that we will be sprinting with him at our side in both straight lines and in circles. We don't want our arm movement to be cause for him to jump up and bite at our hands or a toy we might be

carrying, or try to get in front of us. We still give a lot of both food and tug rewards for his staying at our side. We expect to be perfecting his moving groundwork over the next couple of months, gradually adding more distractions. We'll begin to do the work off leash as well, starting with his dragging the leash or light line on the ground while we work.

Front Cross

While doing heelwork we are starting to practice turning into Sweep and rewarding

him for turning with us. He is rewarded for swinging into position at our side with a treat so that we can isolate the position he is in on the front cross.

Spins

Reward your dog for staying close to your side by spinning in place and giving multiple cookies while you turn away from your dog. I do 180° turns in the opposite direction with a minimum of one reward, or a game of tug at the end of the turn.



Sweep had a couple short sessions recently on learning to go over three jump bumps. This early stride training is Susan Salo's invention. Sweep is sent to a plastic stool that is turned upside down and a cookie is placed inside it. You could also train your pup to go to this target with a clicker, but this method that we use for our adult dogs works perfectly. The upside-down stool is not something that your dog will see on an agility course, so it is doubtful that salting it with cookies will cause a problem. I want my dogs to keep their head lowered during this training, not looking at me while they are moving. I don't throw a toy because I don't want him to crash through the bumps. Sweep is placed in a sit-stay in front of a bump and is released to travel forward to the stool that I am standing next to. I do not want him to go forward of my body right now, so I stand in a lead-out position. I would not have started this training unless Sweep had a really good sit-stay, which he does!

Note: Jump bumps are made by cutting large-diameter PVC pipe in half lengthwise. You need to use jump bumps that are the appropriate size and height for your dog. For a Sheltie-size dog I use 6" pipe, which makes a 3" high jump bump. For an almost grown Border Collie like Sweep we use 10" pipe, which makes a 5" high jump bump. As a starting distance, place the bumps at a distance from each other that is 2.5 times your dog's height. Sweep's bumps are placed 3' apart to begin with. For more information on Susan Salo's methods, see www.jumpdogs.com/index.html.

New Targeting Behavior

We introduced a plastic disc to Sweep that we will begin to use for targeting contacts. If you have a great hand-target behavior with your pup, you are ready to replace your palm target with a disc target.

Hold the target disc in the palm of your hand, and this month work on getting good strong nose touches to the disc, just like you did with hand targeting. Read about teaching hand targeting in previous articles and follow all the same procedures using your clicker or marker to reinforce strong nose touches. Be careful not to reinforce open-mouth nose touching when introducing the target.

Time To Go Swimming

It's summertime! And this month we'll teach Sweep to swim. I started by introducing water play with a hose, just to see if Sweep liked water and enjoyed being wet. The good news is that he really liked the hose and the water being moved from side to side in front of him! The bad news is that I already know this could turn into an obsessive behavior that I do not want to encourage. I don't want Sweep to be that crazy about a hose or moving water. We have sprinklers in our yard that are expensive to replace, and I don't want the dogs to attack them if they come upon one in the training field. So, now that I know he likes water, no more hoses.

I trained Sweep to get into an empty kiddie pool just like I introduced other devices to him, like the balance toys. He looked at it; I clicked and tossed his cookie into the pool. He touched the pool, click/treat and gave him a cookie inside of the pool. He quickly offered to jump in and I marked/rewarded by tossing his toy to him in the



pool. I took him away from the pool and added a tiny bit of water and repeated the above steps while asking him to move around by tossing his cookies after he moved inside the pool. I will gradually raise the height of the water in the pool until he is happy jumping into it when it is full. Then, we will go to our in ground swimming pool and start with small increments to teach swimming there.

Have fun with your pup this month—we are having a great time 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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