

What's Next? Practice!

By Nancy Gyes, photos by Marcy Mantell Photography

Sweep and his littermates are almost eight months old. He is a joy to train and has a focused attitude while working and playing with us. Some people refer to that as having a good “work ethic.” I never really understood that phrase as it applies to a dog’s attitude. Jim and I have a work ethic when it comes to training our dogs. While we enjoy the time we spend training and take pride in what we create, we also have made a commitment to exercise and train our dogs even when it is inconvenient at times. Some dogs do seem to have more of an aptitude for training, and many dogs are bred for their trainability, but I don’t think dogs have ethics. If I asked my dogs if they would rather train stays (which we both know they need) and if they could answer me, would they choose stay training over going for a swim? I doubt it. Our dogs just seem like they have a work ethic because they follow our directions willingly. I believe they do so because they have been trained diligently and rewarded often for what we ask of them.

Use It or Lose It: Continuing to Reinforce Previously Taught Skills

Sweep has been introduced to many individual behaviors since we started his training six months ago. Most of them are on cue and very reliable. Others we have just recently started, like disc targeting and walk back, and are still incomplete. At this age if we do not continue to reinforce and practice behaviors he has already learned we will quickly lose them. Our puppy is only going to be as good as we are. Jim and I continue to discuss and remind each other weekly about the skills that have *not* been at the top of our training list. Use it or lose it. Don’t forget to continue reinforcing the skills you started training the day you brought home your pup.

Potty on command: Sweep is still rewarded often for *Get Busy*. It is easy to forget to continue this after your pup is housetrained and you are not going outside with him 10 times a day.

Door and crate behaviors: He almost always gets a cookie for getting in his cage, as well as for waiting to be released when we open the cage door or the doors going in and out of our home.

Handling, grooming and nails: Make this a weekly priority. Training Sweep to like grooming and the Dremel we use to trim his nails was fairly time consuming, but has been worth the effort as he stands or lies quietly whenever we groom him or do his nails.

Hand targeting: I use and reward hand targeting throughout my dogs’ lives. Keep it accurate and rewarding and you won’t lose this handy skill.

Put on your leash: Each time we want to put Sweep on leash we say exactly that, *Put On Your Leash*, and he gets a treat after he sits politely while we snap it on.



Balance cushions (such as a Bosu ball) and Buja boards: At least a couple times a week spend a few minutes practicing these skills. It won’t be long before these pups are ready to train contacts and balance skills need to be in place before that. Don’t do too much though, the cushions can be physically demanding.

Retrieve: If you don’t have one, get busy! It is an important skill that you will need as soon as you start jump training and throughout your dog’s career.

Recalls: Every day, every week, spend time training this most important of all skills.

When the pups were eight weeks old, I wrote about my training mantra. The objective is that my dog is able to *eat, play, come, and stay anytime, anywhere*. My minimal guideline for introducing real agility equipment is the same. Sweep has not been tested in enough anytime/anywhere situations yet, but I hope he will be closer to our expectations in about four months. When he is one year old, I hope my focus, and that of these articles, will turn to equipment training, jump drills, and handling.

As you are ticking off the days and months until you are ready to being training on equipment, ask yourself this question: *Will my pup eat, play, come, and stay anytime, anywhere? Write down all the places that your pup doesn’t have excellent responses to those four skills and make an action plan for training in those situations.*

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Stay and Attention Training

During the past month we have been increasing the distance and distractions while practicing sit- and down-stays. Jim regularly runs away from Sweep, or moves in circles around him while he is on a stay. The time between reinforcements is growing longer. He might wait 30 seconds to one minute now before Jim returns to either reward or release. Occasionally Sweep is released from a distance, but the majority of time Jim returns to his side then releases him with his verbal cue and a game of tug. At this age we keep the percentage of releases from a distance smaller than the number of releases after returning to his side. The reinforcement is delivered to him while he is in what I call neutral position. He sits or lies down while facing forward and waiting for the treat to be brought to him. Sweep's attention is focused on Jim while he is in a stay. Attention is encouraged and reinforced with praise, as well as mark/food reward. Since Sweep seems to clearly understand his release word we have stopped rewarding him for jumping on us to get cookies after we give him the release cue. If we are using food it is now delivered at our knee level. If we are using a toy we present it to him lower in front of us or to the side.



Perimeter Stays

Today I practiced stays with Sweep in a slightly different way. I am teaching him a "perimeter stay." I put Sweep on a large footstool and began training him to wait on the stool until released. I did three stays. The first was one minute, the next was more than 2 minutes, and then I had him wait for 10 minutes on the stool before I ended the exercise. I gave him minimal treats, but a fair amount of praise while training. Jim chose the verbal cue *Wait There*, one we have used for most of our dogs while learning this skill. It is okay if Sweep moves around while on the stool as long as he does not get off. During the first session Sweep sat up a few times, but spent most of the time lying down on the stool. He got off twice; once while I was lavishly praising him from 20' away, and the next time when I stepped out of his sight. Eventually I could leave the room many times, but I was out of his sight for only a few seconds each time. While practicing agility our dogs are often placed on a table or on a blanket or chair and asked to *Wait There* while we walk drills or train another dog. This is similar to "place training," on a blanket or pad.



Running at Heel

Jim is able to run with Sweep off leash on both his left and right side, doing straight lines as well as small and large circles, with Sweep on either the inside or outside of the circle. Jim makes sharp front crosses by turning into Sweep and then rewarding with his toy. If Sweep gets ahead of Jim, Sweep is only reinforced when he returns back to Jim's leg. If Sweep is lagging, he is reinforced by tossing the toy slightly forward of Jim's side.

Position Discrimination

I have added more complexity to our position training for Sweep. I ask him to do any of four things while I am either sitting or standing in front of him. He does sit, down, stand, and release in any order. Most positions are rewarded. The training session might be as follows. I am standing and facing Sweep. *Down*, treat, *Sit*, treat, *Down*, treat, *Stand*, treat, *Release*, tug. Or *Sit*, *Down*, treat, *Stand*, treat, release, *Down*, *Stand*, treat, *Down*, *Release*, tug. In the second set you'll notice I asked for a change of position without rewarding the first position. I vary the training and the time he stays in position, and both how long he stays and how many treats he gets while he remains in position. If you just do a series of sit/down/sit/down your dog will begin to anticipate very quickly and simply move to a new position immediately without really understanding to wait and listen to what you are asking him to do. Only do this training if your pup has a solid understanding of the individual positions when you are not mixing them all up.

Introducing New Skills

Go On, Bucket Game

In last month's issue, in my "Power Paws Patterns" article on pinwheels I demonstrated how to teach a *Go On* around a bucket or post. We recently started this training with Sweep. I won't introduce the jumping part of that drill for a few more months; we will just perfect the *Go On* part of the drill.

Walking Backward

Sweep is learning to walk backward. I usually train this between the couch and the coffee table, but you can also train the skill between any two barriers, like ex-pens. I started with Sweep facing me between the barriers. I took a little step toward him and he took a small step backward. As soon as he stepped I clicked and treated him under his chin as quickly as possible. I want to deliver the treat *fast* before he gets a chance to move forward toward me. Then I stayed there and waited for him to move again so I could click and treat. If your pup just stands and stares at you, take a little step toward him to get him moving again. I watch the dog's rear end or feet and that is what I am marking when he moves. I move toward the pup quickly after I click, and I deliver the treat in a way that the pup almost has to step back to get the cookie. Soon I will start to throw the treat or a toy to the dog, so I can stay in my position and the reward arrives to the pup without my moving.



What happens beyond getting your pup to take a step or two backward will be up to you. You could continue to do it the easy way and get the dog to move back when you step toward him. Or you could have a loftier goal of getting the dog to move very quickly backward in a straight line for as

far as you want. I count steps as I progress forward in this training. I reward the first step a few times, then wait to see the pup take two steps, then three, and so on. If you only reward the pup for taking a couple steps back over and over, your pup will be patterned to do that many steps and then wait for a command from you or even move forward toward you. I don't put a command on this behavior until I get the pup to move back about four or five steps. My verbal cue will be *Walk*. Positioning yourself and the dog between two barriers helps to get the pup started when you want to train the skill. Walking back is a handy skill and you will find many ways to use it. It is also a great rear-end strengthening exercise.



Nose Targeting

Sweep has had minimal training sessions on nose targeting. I am not in a rush to teach this behavior because I feel that some dogs get bored with all the nose-touch practice if the training goes on for many months without giving the game a purpose by building up some movement and speed while also applying it to some form of board training. We have decided to use an electronic nose-touch device. If you are following along with the training, you do not need to use this device. You can use a plastic target and a clicker as a marker. The nice part about using the electronic nose-touch device is that the machine beeps as the dog's nose touches so you can eliminate the use of a clicker, which also frees your hands to hold the target and deliver cookies. You will notice in the photo the position in which I am holding the target (under his chin) and the location where I am feeding

him. I place the target under his chin and that is the only cue he will get right now to touch. We are working to get strong nose touches to the target and those are the only ones I reward. The way I know that the nose touch is strong is by the intensity of the sound. I do not feed him when I hear a weak beep. You can also pair the clicker with the beep. The dog touches the target, it beeps, and you click and treat. I make sure to position myself on both sides of Sweep while practicing. Right now I have covered the speaker so the beep is not very loud. I want him to hear it, but I do not want the sound intensity to be a concern.

Two-on/Two-off Contact Position

I am teaching Sweep the two-on/two-off contact position but he will not be introduced to the target yet from that position. I taught him to step off a short stool (or step) and hold that position while being treated or tugging. I encouraged him to step off the stool and then marked and treated and began to move around while feeding him. I am tossing the cookies to him on the ground so that he is being encouraged to keep his head low. As he steps off I click, then very quickly toss in the treat and repeat the reward if his head stays low.



Next month one of the new things we will be working on is teaching left and right to Sweep. Till then have a great time with your pup—we are sure enjoying 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.