

# Training Your Unruly Dog

This scenario - an unruly young male dog with a female handler who is not very assertive - is one that most instructors have come across. How can we help the owner to assert herself and deal with her dog?

## The Unruly Dog

I had a young woman come to see me recently with a young male dog of a large breed. She showed me bruises all down her arms where the dog had been mouthing her and scratching as he jumped up at her. She said she had been in tears of frustration at her inability to control the dog. She loved him and didn't want to hit him (as her boyfriend had suggested) but she was at a loss as to what to do.

Most importantly, the handler should find some small behaviour to reward, and keep up the rate of reward.

If the dog is jumping around, obviously you don't want to reward that behaviour, so when should you reward? Reward when the dog has all four feet on the ground. Chances are the beginner handler cannot handle the dog and a clicker at the same time, so teach her to use a verbal marker - I use a short, sharp "good", delivered at the instant that the dog's feet are on the ground.

The second important point is to reward frequently - a common mistake is to wait too long in between rewards and the dog gets bored or loses focus and starts to play up. Rewarding frequently means having small amounts of good behaviour to reward - don't expect too much at one time.

So for example, reward for "four on the floor", then as you gradually up the ante, reward for four on the floor and holding attention for a few seconds more - not too long! Then reward for four on the floor, and moving along a few steps without jumping, lunging or grabbing at the lead or the handler. This type of dog may require some individual attention, because he needs a higher rate of reinforcement than other calmer dogs in class.

If you are working on "static" exercises, or when the instructor is talking to the class, or you are doing an exercise one by one and the dog is waiting his turn, make sure he is occupied, for example by doing static position changes, or by doing a sit or a drop with duration built in.

This means that instead of just standing around and letting the dog's

attention wander, the handler should be getting the dog to do all sorts of things to hold his attention, such as moving from sit to drop to stand to sit to stand etc, and also rewarding him for being able to hold an attentive sit or drop for longer.

When doing movement (which usually means heeling) be aware of the fact that any movement will make the dog's excitement escalate, and this can cause problems such as grabbing the lead or grabbing the handler.

This is when leash handling is important, and a rapid rate of reward is essential.

These techniques will work if there is a calm, confident handler - however, the typical handler of such a dog is a young woman who is not very assertive, who becomes stressed when the dog acts up in a physical way. If these techniques are too difficult for the handler, then you need to use a technique that I call "tethering for calmness".

For this you need a tethering post, such as a fence. If you are training on an oval, this means you may have to take the dog and handler out of class and work individually. Don't be afraid to do that - there is no point in them being in the class if neither are coping and it just becomes a physical wrestling match. The most important thing to do then is to short circuit the physical struggle, because the dog is winning and is not learning anything - except how to physically harass his owner. He needs to be taken out of class until he has calmed down and can benefit from the class.

### **How to tether for calmness.**

Put a spare lead around a post or fence rail. When I have been working inside, I have also used a door handle. Walk the dog around practicing loose lead walking and sits. At this stage the dog is probably not offering much in terms of loose lead walking or attentiveness, but do what you can. As soon as the dog starts to grab the lead, jump up on the handler or grab her, she should immediately take the tether and snap it onto his collar, and step aside, so she is out of his reach. If you use a chain lead for the tether that will ensure that the dog can't chew through it. If the dog is jumping around, struggling or trying to grab the tether, the handler should just wait calmly and patiently, not talking to the dog. Don't try to use any commands. All we are doing is removing the dog from a position when he can harass his handler. As soon as the dog has calmed down and is doing "four on the floor" in other words standing calmly, the handler should approach to unclip the tether. The dog will almost certainly start to jump or try to mouthe her hand. When this happens she should leave the dog tethered and quickly step

away. Again she waits patiently. She should repeat this procedure as many times as it takes. The behaviour we want is calmness, the absence of jumping, mouthing, pawing and so on.

Dogs learn to offer behaviour according to the consequences of their actions. Unruliness leads to remaining tethered, unable to reach or fight with the handler. Calmness leads (eventually) to the dog being untethered and getting on with some more training action. Training proceeds in small increments. Firstly, untethering the dog, then proceeding to reward him for simply walking and sitting without any grabbing or jumping up. As I said at the beginning, how the handler holds the lead is important, because that determines whether the lead is a visual stimulus for the dog (which can cause leash grabbing) and whether the lead is loose (restraint can cause agitation). Having a short but loose lead and rewarding the dog for being in position in the goal. Expect the dog to go a couple of steps and then maybe play up again. When this happens, instantly put the dog back onto the tether, to short circuit grabbing, jumping and harassment. Go back to waiting for calmness. Untying the dog is his reward. Then as he starts to walk calmly and sit calmly, he is rewarded with food given at a rapid rate at first, with gradually longer time intervals between rewards.

I would probably suggest to the owner that she does some leadership exercises with the dog to raise her status with him. For example, the most important one is what I call "Earned Rewards". The basic idea is that she does not give her dog any free attention and certainly does not respond to bossy or demanding behaviour by the dog. Instead she asks him to do something (such as sit) before she pats him or gives him anything. As well as reinforcing his manners and giving him an alternative to jumping up, this will also teach him that good things happen when he responds to his owner's command, rather than when he tries to boss her around. It sounds simple, but if it is done consistently, it is remarkably powerful. I would also establish a tethering point at home, and place a mat there. The owner can teach the dog to go and lie down on his mat, starting with short times and gradually building up the length of time that he will settle. In this way she can control his unruliness at home.

You might be wondering why I do not recommend correction for bad behaviour. In positive reinforcement, we try to control unwanted behaviour by removing the rewards it brings, and by rewarding an alternative desirable behaviour. In the case of an unruly dog, we try to eliminate interaction, because the more the handler struggles with the dog, the more he is encouraged by the feedback he is getting, and the more stimulated he becomes. Being able to struggle and get the better of his handler is a reward, and this is sufficient to encourage the dog to continue. In addition,

while an experienced trainer might be able to handle the dog with calmness and authority, the less assertive handler can't. She is not going to win if she tries any form of physical correction. The danger is the dog will escalate and aggression could result. It is much better to use our superior intelligence to outwit the dog, and reinforce the behaviour we want.