

## The Training Trifecta

Training with our breed, as most of us know, is an ongoing thing – pretty much lifelong. That being said, the three most common problem behaviors people have with Ridgebacks are:

1. Getting – and keeping! – Attention,
2. No Recall and
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These are all tough issues with our beloved hounds – they are hard-wired to hunt and guard, so that brings all three of these behaviors into play. Hounds are notorious for “Selective Hearing” – if they are involved in something with their noses, they don’t even hear you calling them – guard behavior makes them want to be in front of us instead of beside or behind us, plus that old hunting thing makes them want to pull, too; and, they are just faster than we are and in a hurry to get moving!! And the Sniffing!!!! Who doesn’t struggle with this with our dogs?

Due to the length of the article, it will be split into three parts, and I will start with Attention, because, in competition, if you don’t have your dog’s attention, you have nothing!

### Part 1: ATTENTION

Getting your dog’s attention is one thing, keeping it is another. It takes a LOT of hard repetitive work and a LOT of treats. And I must confess, my own dog Zak is far from perfect in this - sometimes I just want to smear Vicks all over his nose [so he can’t smell], but I am seeing improvement so there is hope!

The first thing you want to do is train your dog to look at your face on command. I use the word “Watch” but any word you want to use will work – just pick one that comes to you easily. To teach this, have plenty of treats in one hand; take a treat and hold it up next to your eyes, say your dog’s name and the word – “Zak, Watch!” – and feed when he looks at you – feed from the side of your face so your dog’s eyes stay on your face. If your dog can catch the treat, good, and if you can spit it from your mouth, even better! Do this in a rapid-fire way, using plenty of treats and feeding them quickly, so he keeps his eyes on your face. (A word about treats: use lots of different treats – different shapes, sizes, flavors, textures, so your dog never knows what he will get.) Eventually, you will drop the dog’s name and use just the command. But when he hears his name or the command, he should look at you. You need to play this game a lot and in

many different places. Note that when you are in an area where there are more distractions, you will need to use better treats, so it's a good idea to see what treats your dog really likes, and then save those for when you need more "oomph" in your training.

Another competition trick to use is getting your dog to focus on your finger when you are entering the ring. To teach this, have your left hand closed with a lot of treats in it, and your index finger pointing straight out and your hand held high over your dog's head. Once your dog realizes those goodies are in your hand, he will jump up at your hand. While you want your dog to be excited about this (we want them lively in the ring!), you also want him to be manageable in the ring. So, when the dog has all four feet on the floor and is looking at your finger, he gets a treat. As training progresses, you can eventually move your finger closer to your body so it is not too conspicuous. This training also involves a lot of treat dispensing! The goal here is that your dog gets conditioned to looking at your finger when you enter the ring (where you can't have food) so that he has a focal point. **You need your dog engaged before you enter the ring and as you enter the ring.** If he is looking around or sniffing, you have lost him and you are already at a competitive disadvantage. So, this finger trick will keep your dog's attention on you as you get lined up for the exercises.

When you are starting out in the ring, ideally your dog is sitting in heel position and looking up at you, ready to work. For Zak, the command for this is "Place." So, when I tell him Place, I want him to get into heel position, sit and look up at my face. When his attention wanders from my face, I will tap the side of his face with my hand, tap his head, or give a light tug on the leash – whatever it takes to get his eyes back to my face. Teaching him to hold that is important. But it doesn't happen immediately. And holding that can be a strain for your dog. When training for it, initially only ask your dog to hold your gaze for 3 seconds, then release – treat and a few seconds of play. Then "Command!" and do it again. Vary the time your dog is asked to hold it, extending it as he gets better at it. Bear in mind when doing this training, you need to remember that when you are in the ring and you are preparing to perform, you will need to stand with your left arm across your waist and your right arm hanging naturally at your side and you will be looking straight ahead when you respond "Ready" to the judge's question, "Are you ready?" (Incidentally, Ready is another word I use for Zak to look at my face.) So, you need to incorporate that into your training of this command – get your dog used to looking at your face when you are standing in proper position and not looking at him. And realize that when you break eye contact with your dog, he may look elsewhere, so you need to train him to hold his gaze on you when you turn your head away from him.

You see a lot of dogs in the obedience ring with their heads cranked up, looking at their handlers' faces as they walk in heel position. This is not an easy thing for our breed to do, and personally, I don't want Zak to need a chiropractic adjustment after every competition. But your dog needs a focal point for heeling! And if your dog can't crank his head up like that, then set your focal point lower. I like to use my left elbow. Since our dogs are tall, we need to have our left arms across our waists, so we don't inadvertently touch the dog while in the ring. You can use that crook in your elbow as a treat pouch. Let your dog see you put a treat in that crook in your elbow and train him to look there when heeling. In training, you will have the dog focus

on your elbow for a few steps, release him, then spring the treat out of your elbow and tell him “Get it!” and let him have a fun time getting it. Then back to it! Make a fun game out of it and your dog will learn to LOVE heeling – which is a fantastic goal to accomplish. It’s a thing of beauty to see a graceful dog trotting happily in heel position and enjoying it!

There are other games you can play in training to work on attention. When you leave your dog in a Wait or Stay, as you walk away as in a recall, with your arms hanging naturally at your side, you can wiggle your left fingers to keep your dog’s attention. If your dog’s focus on you drops – he sniffs the ground or looks away from you – say his name and take off running!! This surprising action will tend to keep his attention on you, as he will never know what you are going to do. These things are easier to do if you have mirrors where you are training, so you can watch your dog when you are not facing him. If you don’t have that luxury, and you are training alone, you might consider taking a hand-held mirror and holding it so you can see your dog over your shoulder when you are walking away. If you have someone with you, that person can tell you when you have lost the dog’s attention for the running game.

Something else you can do to work on attention is to scatter toys around where you are going to train. If you are feeling really confident, you can put out bowls, with or without treats in them, as well. Then work your dog among these items, praising and rewarding when you have his attention. When your dog’s attention is distracted, you can do a leash correction, turn into the dog, or suddenly change direction – anything that surprises the dog will encourage him to keep his attention on you. And if you do these little tricks consistently, you will find that your dog is paying much better attention to you.

Another thing that works to keep attention is other surprise tactics – in addition to the ones mentioned above, when your dog’s attention wanders, you can playfully push him with both hands and say, “What happened to you? Where’s my dog?” and things like that. Again, the element of surprise is what gets your dog’s attention and keeps it.

It IS possible to get our dogs to pay attention, but it takes work! As always:

Don’t complain, train!

Lorraine Pedersen

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