

The Training Trifecta

Part 3: Walking on Leash

We have covered 2/3 of our Trifecta with articles on Attention and Recalls. Now we cover the final 1/3 with Walking on Leash.

Walking a dog should be an enjoyable activity, but with a dog that pulls, lags or runs all over the place, it is no fun at all and can even be dangerous. When your dog doesn't know how to walk properly on a leash, you can trip over your dog, get pulled over or even dragged.

So how do you get your dog to walk correctly on leash? Training!! And when you are ready to start working with your dog, the first thing you need to do is look at your equipment.

The collar your dog is wearing is extremely important – it must be properly fitted and not come over the dog's head. My go-to training collar is a chain martingale – properly fitted, the collar will stay on the dog and you don't have to worry about it choking him. An added bonus is the sound of the chain part of the collar retracting will warn the dog that a correction is coming if he continues doing what he is doing. With some dogs, though, the martingale does not give you enough control; next on my list is a choke chain. This collar gives you a lot more control, but there is the chance of injury if your dog tends to lunge. And this collar needs to also fit correctly – you should measure your dog's neck and add 2 inches. The collar should also move smoothly, contracting and relaxing easily without hanging up.



Chain Martingale Collar on the left; Choke Chain Collar on the right

The leash you use should be comfortable in your hands, and fit your hands well. I like leather leashes – they are strong and are usually pretty comfortable to the hands. A leash that is too bulky or too long will be a liability: when you need to do a leash correction if you have too much leash, the timing of your correction is thrown off, rendering it useless. Likewise a leash that is too short will not provide you with the slack you need for a proper leash correction. The timing of a correction or reward is vital – if the timing is off, your dog will not get any benefit from it. Also important to remember, any leash correction you do should not be harsh or

prolonged. A leash correction is a quick pull and release – not dragging the dog with the leash or hanging the dog.

So now you have the right stuff, what do you do? First things first – where does your dog belong? Ideally, your dog's place is in the proper heel position – this means your dog is on your left and his right leg lines up with your left leg. Why this spot? So you know where your dog is. If your dog is in correct heel position, you can see his head. If you intend to compete with your dog this position is very important. But if you don't want to compete it is still important. You don't have to be so picky about the perfect heel position, but your dog should still be in approximately the same spot. For those of you who want or need to walk your dog on your right, the same rule applies, but the dog's left leg will line up approximately with your right leg. But whichever side you want the dog on, the training applies. First and foremost, pick a side and stay with it. Don't move the dog from side to side – that will only confuse him.

For the purposes of this article, we will work on training your dog to walk in heel position.

So where to start? The first thing to remember is you want your dog's attention. When your dog's attention wanders, so does he. Work on the attention ideas in the first part of this series. You can do those attention games at any time, and when you are working with your dog on heeling, work them in. And when working on your heeling, the biggest thing to remember is that your dog needs to get a "surprise" when he is not paying attention. For a dog that forges ahead or tends to get in front of you – the most common leash problem – a sudden change of direction into your dog, with your knee making contact with your dog's side will let him know that he is not in the right place.

To do this, your knee that is farthest from the dog is going to cross in front of your other leg and make contact with your dog. You don't want to kick the dog across the street or hurt him, but you definitely want to bump him hard enough with your shin to get his attention and to startle him. When you do this, you don't say anything to your dog, just quickly make the turn with your knee and keep walking. If you do this every time your dog starts to get ahead of you, pretty soon he will be paying better attention to you. Remember to ALWAYS PRAISE him when he looks at you!! Another thing you can do is suddenly turn around and take off in another direction – you can alternate between these two corrections or try them out and see which one works best on your dog. Also - talk to your dog when walking with him – it doesn't have to be a constant stream of talk, but definitely let him know when he is in the right place.

For a dog that lags, or falls behind, the best fix is you taking off suddenly. This can be the direction you came from or off to the side, but make sure the move is sudden and you don't give him any warning. A few times of this and your dog will be paying better attention – they don't like these surprises!

Another thing to keep in mind is that most people walk too slowly for their dogs – our breed is a fast-moving athletic breed and if your dog has time to sniff around and goof off when you are walking him, pick up your pace! Many times just walking faster will keep your dog moving with you.

A word about luring – luring is a useful tool for getting your dog in the position you want during initial training. The thing about luring is that it takes some practice to do it correctly – your hand needs to have a treat in it that stays close to your dog’s nose, your hand needs to be where you want your dog’s HEAD to be, and your hand CANNOT MOVE. If your hand moves around, so will your dog. So you may need to experiment where you need to hold the treat to get the dog in the right position. If your dog is a puppy or a short dog, luring may mean walking hunched over – to avoid that, you can put peanut butter or some other tasty treat onto a wooden spoon and hold it where you want the dog’s head. There are also long treats, like tendons, that you can use the same way. I am a big fan of NOT bending over!

So all this is well and good for training purposes and/or to prepare for competition - but what about a casual walk? Not every walk is a training walk, so there will be times when you are walking your dog on leash and you don’t want or need him in the heel position. This is where you set a boundary for your dog so that he doesn’t revert to the pulling or lagging you are working so hard to eradicate. For my dog Zak, the boundary is he can go to the end of the leash but he cannot pull. He is pretty good about it – if he starts to pull, I can just say his name and he will slow down. He is not allowed to swing off to the side or lunge around – he still needs to have some manners, even on a casual walk. And you can throw in some heeling training on a casual walk too!



Having our dogs with us is a pleasure, but it needs to be enjoyable for both of you for that to happen. Training your dog to behave on leash is the key to enjoying having your dog with you instead of fighting with him or just leaving him home because you can’t deal with it. Granted, some dogs are harder to work with than others, but you have enough tools at your disposal to make it work. So train yourself to train your dog to walk well on leash and you will have a much more enjoyable companion.

Don’t complain, train!

Lorraine Pedersen
Rowdy Red Dog Training, LLC
www.rowdyreddogtraining.com

