



CORRECT YOUR CLICKER

Clicker training does have a place when training gundogs, but it's not a magic wand that can fix every problem, says Lez Graham

Clicker training is getting more and more popular in the gundog training world. I'm occasionally asked whether a gundog can be trained using a clicker and if it's a better way of training? Obviously the clicker trainers think it's fantastic and the only way to train, whereas many of the non-clicker trainers dismiss it out of hand as a waste of time.

Me? Well, like many non-clicker trainers, the thing that tends to put me off more than anything is the fanatical "best thing since sliced bread, you have to do it" following that it has. Plus the fact that many people who use the clicker don't use it correctly, and never move on from the click.

Merit?

Does it have merit and can it be used successfully to help train our gundogs? In a word, yes. However, that would lead to a very short article. So let's look at



If your dog performs the behaviour you want, click and then treat it

what it is, what it's not, the pros and cons of clicker training and how we can apply it to our gundog training.

So, firstly, what it's not, it is not a be all and end all, it is not the dog training equivalent of a magic wand that can fix every problem. Why not? Well because clicker training is all about shaping behaviour and giving the dog choice on whether he wants to do it or not, he has to think about whether the action is worth the reward. If he does the behaviour we want, he'll be clicked and treated, if he doesn't then he won't. However, dogs are dogs: social predators that are ruled by instinct and at some point they will have to obey our commands, it's simply not going to be up for debate. Any form of shaping will potentially fail in the face of the instinctual drift, which is when the

A clicker is a very useful tool, but it can lead to a rather mechanical training method

animal's instinct is so overwhelming that genetics kicks in and it has to respond; think call of the wild. This is why it's so important to work and train within the psyche of the dog and which should form the foundation for any tricks to be built upon. By tricks, I don't mean shake paw and roll over, I mean walk to heel, sit stay, place boards - anything that would not be expected by a dog from another dog.

You can however, once you know how to use the clicker effectively, use it to fine tune behaviours and teach self-control. Using a clicker as part of your training does not mean that all of the boundaries and good manners are thrown out, or that you are automatically a positive-only trainer. Positive-only training really doesn't exist, if it did a dog would never be recalled from doing something it was enjoying as that, in operant conditioning

terms, would be classed as negative punishment! Nope, the clicker is a means to an end, it is a way of marking a behaviour that you would like to see repeated. A clicker is a little device that sits comfortably in the hand and makes a clicking noise when the button is pressed, which sounds not dissimilar to working the bolt on a rifle. It is used to mark a behaviour and although it's been associated with training dolphins, it's not, it's a dog thing - they tend to use whistles with dolphins.

Removing the handler

One of the best things I find about using a clicker is that it removes the handler. So when you're working with a very excitable dog that, for example, chomps on the dummy or won't sit, then using a clicker to reinforce the behaviour you want is great, as the handler's chatter is removed, as is the frustration. What it does mean is the timing has to be spot on, otherwise you'll potentially be reinforcing the wrong thing. Equally one of the worst things I find about using a clicker is that it removes the handler, it

"Using a clicker does not mean that you are automatically a positive only trainer"

can become a very mechanical way to train, and I like to train with emotion. Smiles, facial expression, body language and voice modulation all have a massive part to play when training a dog. I know that these can, and should, be used when clicker training, however, give someone a clicker and they immediately become deadpan.

Some trainers will charge the clicker prior to using it and some just give the dog an easy job to do to start the association process. To charge a clicker you quite literally click and feed without doing anything else or expecting anything of the dog. The dog learns that when it hears the click a reward is on the way. I prefer to do it by association, so I tend to throw a treat out and when the dog comes back to me, I click and feed. Not only am I giving the dog an association between the click and the treat, but the dog is learning to automatically come back to me.

Patience

Timing is all important, as is observation, having goals to work to and masses of patience, which is why I tend to use the clicker with my



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clients when their dog is struggling with something rather than from the outset. I've found that learning how to train a gundog is quite challenging enough without having to worry about another device in the hand and when to click or not to click. Once training is underway and both dog and handler are used to training then it can be used as a great help to get over a hiccup. Once your dog has associated the click with the reward, then whenever you get the behaviour that you want,

for example picking up the dummy without snatching, then click, as soon as you've taken the dummy off the dog give it a treat, but don't reach for the treat too quickly in this instance, as you don't want to induce the dog to spit out the dummy in favour of a treat.

When your dog is displaying the behaviour that you want then start adding "yes" as you click. You can then simply say "yes" and your dog will know he's getting it right. In this example, I would click if the dog picked the dummy up nicely and again just before I took the dummy if it carried it nicely. However, I would spend an awful long time getting the dog to just pick the dummy up gently from the floor, before involving any distance and, therefore, excitement.

Clicker training, although not my preferred method, does have a place when training gundogs, especially when working with specific problems, and I think it's something that every gundog trainer should be aware of and know how to apply correctly. **GGJ**



Using a clicker is a great way to reinforce calm holding