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**Norfolk K9 Training**

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**Motivation  
Training**

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## About Motivation

Depending on your dog of course, one of the common challenges in training is motivating an unmotivated dog. I think one of the problems that we as humans have in our relationships with dogs, is that we don't know how to really 'connect' with our dogs on a case-by-case basis.

We pack yummy treats to our dog in class, or their favorite tug toy, but what used to seem to work for our other dogs, or even the same dog, is no longer working very well. What do we do?

We need to immediately stop doing what doesn't work.

There's a neat saying that says "Stupidity is doing the same thing repeatedly, hoping for a different result".

So, if we want to be smart, we need to do something different. Maybe even something outside our comfort zone (Yes, I'm talking about acting silly and talking baby talk if necessary!).

The main point is to find what REALLY drives your dog crazy. But what if there isn't anything that your dog is gets really excited about? I suggest finding something then that he is most motivated by, even if isn't as much as you'd like, and then using that item in training ONLY.

Don't flood him all week with something and then expect that during your training sessions that he'll go nutty over it.

Here is a list of ideas.

- **Don't use anything that doesn't work.** Switch gears fast.
- **Pay attention to what motivates your dog best,** especially during training times. Then use this reward in your training, but not any other time.
- **Be willing to change your motivators from time to time as needed.**
- **Be creative.** Something the best motivator is one you'd least expect of your dog!
- **Get less serious.** Take more time to play with your dog after a succession of accurately completed exercises.
- **Shorten your training sessions** and always end them on a positive note. Do not drag it out so long that your dog gets tired and loses interest. The goal is to create only positive memories of your sessions.
- **Study how a dog learns** then really get to know your dog.
- **Look up operant conditioning** and get to understand the full foundations behind positive rewards and negative punishment, don't just change something without first having a true understanding of what it all entails good and bad.

# What is motivation?

Motivation is a popular topic in the world of dog sports, and it should be!

Motivation forms the underlying foundation for learning. An animal who is not well-motivated is not likely to learn the wide range of behaviours that we require in a successful dog sports partner. And while force-based techniques exist which may compel an animal to master and perform various behaviours, it is extremely unlikely that the end result will be the picture of teamwork, beauty, and mutual enjoyment that is the “gold standard” of a successful competition team.

To reach that gold standard, a motivated dog is essential. To learn behaviours requires motivation. To refine behaviours requires motivation. To prepare for competition requires motivation.

And to actually make it into the competition ring...well, for that you'll want the most motivated dog of them all! This manual will provide a good deal of information about the concept of motivation - what it is, why we need it, and how we can develop and maintain motivation in the wide range of dogs who participate in dog sports.

Motivation is defined by Reeve (2009, pg. 8) as “those processes that give behaviour its energy and direction. Energy implies that the behaviour has strength—that it is relatively strong, intense, and persistent. Direction implies that behaviour has purpose—that it is aimed or guided toward achieving some particular goal or outcome.”

Most dog sport competitors would be thrilled to work with a dog who consistently displayed energy and direction while training and competing. Sometimes a trainer gets lucky and ends up with a dog who is naturally motivated by many things, including food, toys, and the work itself. This dog is energetic and enthusiastic, and works hard to master skills and behaviours with very little external motivation.

This type of dog makes the trainer's job relatively easy. But what if the dog isn't naturally motivated? What then? Without natural internal motivation or easily acquired external motivation, it is left to the trainer to attempt to find ways to energize and direct the dog's behaviour. This is where things can become difficult. When it comes to understanding what actually motivates a specific dog, or how to apply the appropriate motivators for that dog, there seems to be a good deal of misunderstanding indeed!

The vast majority of dogs have a variety of motivators that we can tap into, but some dogs make the process of finding and building motivators easier than others. Something to remember: It will not work as a motivator if the dog does not want it, no matter how badly the handler might want the dog to want it. This seems to cause confusion for some handlers, so we'd like to suggest that you think hard about this reality:

To be motivating the dog must want it. That does not mean, however, that the dog must be BORN wanting it.

That isn't the case at all! There are many ways to increase a dog's interest in an object or activity, but until the dog shows a demonstrated interest in engaging with that object or activity, then it is not a motivator and will not be useful in building and maintaining either attitude or specific behaviours.

It's worth noting that nowhere in the definition of motivation are the interests of the one "supplying" the motivation considered. Motivation is only from the point of view of the subject - the one being motivated. A motivator is something that gives the DOG a reason for doing something. There is nothing in the definition about the desires of the trainer. It is important, however, to take a moment or two to consider your motivation for training your dog for any particular dog sport since it is unlikely that you are being paid or receiving pieces of chocolate for your efforts.

Training dogs takes a lot of time and energy. It uses up a lot of resources that could be spent in other ways. People who train beyond basic household obedience must have strong motivation for doing so. Maybe you enjoy the activity of training itself. Training is an intense cooperative relationship between individuals of two different species and can be incredibly fun and rewarding. Maybe you have specific goals for the future. There's nothing wrong with wanting to earn ribbons and titles.

They demonstrate a level of effort and commitment that goes well beyond what most folks will ever do. Maybe you enjoy participating in a particular dog sport, regardless of the outcome. You simply find it a fun way to spend your time. For many, there is a strong social aspect to being involved in dog sports. You make lots of very good friends who all share your interest. Maybe you train and compete as a way to keep your dog active and occupied. Bored dogs can get into a LOT of trouble! Or maybe it's a combination of these reasons, or something else altogether.

Whatever the reason, it's important to remember that training and showing in performance events is your choice and is driven by your motivation, not your dog's. He has no say in the job you assign to him. If you're lucky your dog may be a natural fit for the sport or sports you enjoy. People now spend lots of time trying to choose the pup who seems most likely to succeed in the future. But it is impossible to accurately predict how a pup will turn out.

There are no guarantees, even with careful choice and lots of early training, that your pup will love your sport. While there is a lot you can do to help, your dog develops an interest and desire to perform specific behaviours (that's what this book is about) you cannot change your pup's basic nature. The sport you compete in together should be a good fit for him as well as for you. If it is not, then we'd suggest that you will be working very hard to find all of the possible motivators that may exist to alter that reality.

## Operant Conditioning

Operant conditioning can be defined as “experiences whereby behaviour is strengthened or weakened by its consequences” (Chance, 2013, pg. 131). There are several important aspects to totally understand this definition. First, operant conditioning concerns behaviour that is freely chosen or offered. If you force a behaviour, then it is coerced and there is no freedom of choice for the subject. Second, consequences are vital to whether or not behaviour is likely to be repeated. Consequences come after the behaviour, not before or during.

And typically, immediate consequences have a much more powerful effect on behaviour than delayed ones. Let's take a look at a simple example. The easiest way to teach behaviours using operant conditioning is to pair something the dog wants (such as a cookie) with a behaviour that you would like the dog to do (such as sit). Over time, the dog makes the association between sitting on cue and receiving a cookie. Soon, learning takes place as a result of this association and the dog sits when cued in order to receive the cookie. That is operant conditioning.

In positive reinforcement training (+R), the hallmark of the method is the pairing of things the dog wants (reinforcers) with things that we want from the dog. For example: “If you sit I will give you a cookie.” “If you weave I will play fetch with you.” Working in this fashion, you may soon find yourself asking for multiple behaviours before you “pay.”

You might ask for a sit, tunnel, and simple trick before handing over a cookie. Or maybe you will choose to develop a behaviour chain - several behaviours strung together (such as a formal retrieve) before giving a reinforcer. Take a moment to note that nowhere in this equation is there room for the idea that the dog will make the effort to learn something simply because you want the dog to like what you are offering. If your dog doesn't want a cookie, then the possibility of receiving one will not motivate behaviour. In another example, let's say that you want your dog to “work for praise” as a motivator.

You diligently help the dog into a sit and pair it with the word “sit” - and eventually you notice that the dog sits on cue, at least a percentage of the time. You then reinforce the dog with praise. Over time you notice that the dog is not performing the sit more frequently; indeed, the dog is walking away, unless you physically make the dog perform the cue (possibly through physical modelling or pulling up on the collar). On occasion, possibly when the dog is looking for attention, the dog will sit on cue and accept praise as a sufficient reward. But on many other occasions, the dog is not motivated by the chance to earn praise.

As a result, the behaviour never gains reliability unless the handler makes changes to her method - generally either by adding a cookie (which is typically a more desirable reinforcer) or a correction (something unpleasant to be avoided) to the equation. Since we don't add corrections, we'd suggest stocking up on cookies! But what if you have paired praise with a

behaviour and you notice that the behaviour begins to increase in frequency? Using the above example, every time you say sit, you see that your dog throws his butt to the ground and gets a twinkle in his eye - all because he knows he is about to get an ear scratch? Then you have discovered a motivator, because you can influence the dog's behaviour and create change! For that individual dog, an ear scratch will cause behaviour to become more frequent.

What about toys?

Surely dogs find toys to be a motivator?

The answer is simply "it depends." The question to ask is always the same. Are you offering something that THE ANIMAL finds reinforcing, and will work to earn?

If yes, then you're in good shape; you have a motivator! The most important part of this phrase, is, "the animal". This states that the INDIVIDUAL is the one that decides what is motivating, not any other outside source.

You do not decide what motivates your dog.  
Your trainer does not decide what motivates your dog.  
Your therapist does not decide what motivates your dog.

Your DOG decides what motivates, or does not motivate, your dog. If your dog's behaviour suggests that the motivator you have selected is lacking or just plain irritating, it's probably best to listen carefully to what your dog is telling you and find something that brings out a better reaction.

Does this mean that the dog, at birth, has already decided what is motivating?

No; not at all! Yes, the dog must desire a motivator for it to influence on learning. At the same time, the dog has the capacity to love many things - some things the dog didn't even know existed until you brought them to the table!

For example, dogs are not born loving balls - even the most ball crazy dog in the world was not born loving that ball. The dog LEARNED to love that ball when it sparked his prey interest.

At some point, it rolled across the floor and caused him to want to chase it down, just like an escaping mouse! And that was so fun that maybe this puppy brought it back to you to see if you could make it happen again - and you did! And now, you have TRAINED the game of fetch. True, some dogs will learn the game in exactly one repetition because they are strongly wired through genetics to take to that game easily, but regardless, the dog LEARNED to love the game. Fast.

# Types of Motivators

As you have seen, motivation is not a straightforward topic. There are many considerations for choosing and using a motivator, so in this chapter we're going to help create some clarity. We will provide an overview of each of the three main types of motivators, when they are best used, and when you should consider a different type.

As you read, remember that although each type of motivator has its place in a well-developed training plan, they are not created equal. Therefore, when you are choosing a motivator, you need to consider the dog in front of you, your goals for the current training session, and what impact your choice might have on your overall training.

## Classic Rewards

The first type of motivator is the classic reward. These are motivators that the vast majority of dogs will like, are easy for the beginning trainer to understand, and can create and maintain behaviours with high levels of motivation. This ease of use means that trainers often become overly reliant on them, sometimes to the exclusion of developing a true working relationship. And because they cannot be taken in the performance ring, classic motivators require a systematic plan in place to reduce them as the dog becomes proficient in trained behaviours. Classic motivators can be broken down further into three subtypes. Each of these subtypes have their own pros and cons; once you've decided a classic motivator is the best choice for a given training situation, you will need to decide which type of classic motivator will best meet your needs.

## Food

Food is the easiest motivator to use. Most dogs are naturally driven to work for food, so it doesn't take any real effort or training in order to make this a valued motivator. Most people are naturally able to figure out how to give food quickly and easily, so the learning curve for the handler is low. Food is a great option when a dog is just learning a behaviour – especially when the behaviour is being taught via clicker training or shaping activities - because it is easy to offer a large quantity of rewards in a very short period of time. It is also easy to reward the dog in position with food, so it's a great option for behaviours requiring precision.

There are, however, some disadvantages to using food. Food is often hard to use for distance rewards; tossing food to a dog isn't always practical on grass or similar surfaces. Small dogs, with their small stomachs, are often very limited in how many treats they can eat in one session. Other dogs satiate quickly, limiting the food's value for these dogs.

One major and rarely mentioned disadvantage is that trainers become addicted to the use of cookies for everything - to the point where it is quite difficult to get them to stop! If a plan for fading out food rewards is not developed, the presence of food often creates the illusion of a finished behaviour. When the food is gone, the behaviour disappears with it, causing

frustration for both members of the team. Because food rewards tend to have a calming and soothing effect on the nervous system, they are best used when you need a calm, thoughtful dog. Food is almost always the motivator of choice for behaviour modification. It is also ideal for initial learning or for activities requiring self-control. It's also a great choice when you're in a situation where more active motivators would be disruptive to others. However, if you're working on a behaviour requiring increased activity and intensity, food rewards are unlikely to give you the result you want.

### **Tug Toys**

Although tug toys are commonly used in training, they do require more skill to use than food does. Not all dogs will enjoy tug right off the bat, so time must be spent developing it as a motivator before it can be used in a training context. For other dogs, the challenge is not in developing a love for tug, but in ending the game; these dogs need to learn to release the toy on cue. Because of the initial time investment required, some trainers choose not to develop tug as a motivator – an unfortunate reality since tug can be a huge asset to a training program!

Tug toys are great for increasing energy in the dog, making them ideal for tasks requiring speed and intensity. Tug toys can also encourage relationship development between both team members. The trainer will need to interact closely with her dog, while the dog quickly learns that he needs his person to play the game. As a bonus, the toy on its own is “dead.” This makes it hard for the dog to self-reinforce. Tug is not ideal in all situations. It is hard to reward a dog precisely in position with a tug toy since most dogs move out of position when the toy is presented.

Because tug requires close interaction, it is hard to use it to reward a distance behaviour. Tug often results in high stimulation levels, so many dogs will have trouble focusing on the task at hand in their rush to get to the game. Finally, tug is not well suited to shaping because each repetition takes a good deal of time to complete. While a cookie can be eaten in seconds, even a quick game of tug will take at least ten seconds for every reinforcement.

It is possible to take this too far. It is neither humane nor ethical to withhold basic physiological needs such as food, water, or exercise for extended periods of time. Dogs need these things regardless of whether they are cooperating with a training plan. If you find that your dog is not doing what you want, it's much better to scrap that session for the time being than to stubbornly cling to it in the name of training. Life rewards can also be difficult to put into practice at times. You're not going to wait for your puppy to sit before you open the back door if you're trying to potty train him! They can also be problematic if you cannot control the things your dog really wants.

### **Alternative or Non-traditional Rewards**

At first glance, alternative rewards seem very like classic motivators or life rewards. They can be interactive rewards, such as playing with the trainer, getting a massage, or receiving praise. They can be more independent activities such as digging a hole, rolling in the grass, or barking. They can even be the chance to perform a highly-desired behaviour such as a dumbbell

retrieve. We call these “alternative” or “non-traditional” rewards because they tend to be highly specific to the individual. We also call them non-traditional rewards because they are not commonly used as effective reinforcers. Part of this is because they are not typically powerful enough to motivate a dog to learn a new skill. However, they can be very effective in maintaining behaviours, especially if the trainer takes the time to learn how a particular dog prefers the interaction or activity. It is rare that trainers or scientists take this step; it is much easier to fall back on the more common and easily used reinforcers we've already discussed.

Despite the considerable skill and time needed to develop an alternative motivator such as personal play, interaction, and praise, the advantages are often worth the work. For one thing, alternative motivators help build a very strong bond between both members of the team. This happens because personal play is just plain fun! Dogs who are trained with play or praise often have natural focus on the trainer, which makes it easier for the trainer to reduce the use of classic motivators. Plus, you can even take personal interactions in the ring with you!

Of course, there are many dogs who will not work with energy or enthusiasm when the reward offered is praise, petting, or play. Other dogs are not naturally playful, or they have outgrown that phase in their lives. And even when a dog is willing to play with his trainer, many people are uncomfortable genuinely playing with their dogs – especially in public! Regardless of these disadvantages, we tend to think of praise and play as worthwhile motivators because they are invaluable for the team working on their overall engagement strategy and preparing for competition.

One alternative motivator that people often overlook is the chance to perform a more desired behaviour. For example, many dogs naturally enjoy retrieving. If you can build that love to include a formal dumbbell retrieve, you will be able to reward less desirable activities (such as heeling) while in the obedience ring.

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## **Creating Motivators**

There is a common tendency among dog trainers to become anxious if they cannot motivate their dogs with a particular thing. Convinced that their dog has to like the toy, they begin to reason that if it's not appealing skittering across the floor, it might be if it's shoved in the dog's face. If their dog attempts to reduce this pressure by turning away, the handler's anxiety often turns to panic. This panic causes more effort from the trainer: gentle touches quickly turn to shoves and pinches, voices get louder, and movements become bigger and more intense. A panicking handler forcing a toy on a dog reminds us of a visiting uncle who completely ignores a quiet child's obvious discomfort with his grabbing, hugging, and smothering behaviour. After a few visits, the child will be driven to hide before the overbearing relative even gets through the front door. This usually results in a family desperate to get the child to interact with family members, ending up in a vicious cycle of pressure and avoidance. Whether it is with humans or with dogs, "more" is not the answer to a lack of interest in something. In fact, the overwhelming energy of more usually creates a situation worse than disinterest.

If the dog associates the pressure of the handler with the toy that is being used to antagonize him, it creates stress and nervousness that quickly turns into either avoidance or frantic engagement. Although frantic engagement can look like the handler was successful, the truth is that when a dog engages with a toy to calm down or appease the handler, it is not true motivation. So, what's a handler to do? The easiest answer is to simply find something else that will work as a motivator. However, as we discussed in the last chapter, there are times when using a thing as a motivator can really help advance a training exercise. In this case, it's time to consider putting in the time and effort to create a motivator.

## Training Motivators through Operant Conditioning

One way to create a new motivator is through operant conditioning. You can teach your dog that the behaviour of interacting with the object you'd like to use as a motivator results in a consequence he likes. This is done the same way you would teach any other training exercise; the only difference between fetching a dumbbell and fetching a tennis ball is the importance we humans attach to the object. It's important to note, however, that if your dog does one thing (fetches the ball) to get another thing (eat a cookie), the game of fetch is not necessarily a motivator. It's a conditioned reinforcer. Some dogs trained this way will develop a great love for the conditioned reinforcer at some point, making it a motivator.

Other dogs may not enjoy the game at all, in which case it won't work very well as a motivator on its own. The only way to know how much value the conditioned reinforcer has acquired is to stop pairing the two activities (play fetch, but no cookies after). If the dog maintains enjoyment for the conditioned reinforcer, then you have effectively developed an additional motivator for that dog, which is great! The more motivators you have at your disposal, the better. If, on the other hand, the pairing must continue, you need to ask yourself if you are gaining something from using the conditioned reinforcer that you cannot get without it.

Given the uncertain outcome of trying to use operant conditioning to create a motivator, some handlers wonder what, if anything, is gained by training the dog to play the game of fetch. Even if you must maintain the pairing between ball and treat, there are still two potential benefits. First, if the dog has to chase the ball in order to get what he really wants, he will have to expend more effort and energy than he would to simply eat a cookie. This can translate to more intense and enthusiastic behaviours. Second, there are times when rewarding a dog in a place is highly advantageous.

The drop point on the drop on recall exercise is an excellent example. You may not be able to throw a treat far enough or with enough accuracy to reinforce your dog at the exact point of the drop, but you probably can with a ball (and maybe a little practice). In both situations, the conditioned reinforcer brings additional value that you cannot get from food alone.

There is a potential downside, however. Once a dog associates a more desired activity with a lesser activity, the dog can become overly focused on the more desired activity. Let's use the game of tug as an example. A dog playing tug because he loves the activity is using the predator part of the brain. This is an intense, fast, and engaged aspect of the dog's innate behaviour. It is almost always stimulating and builds movement, arousal, and handler focus; excellent characteristics to bring to training when you want fast and intense responses.



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