



A Promise Kept

Years ago, when I started my dog training journey, the only method of teaching was aversive or punishment based. I had trained several dogs using these methods, and I had moderate success in the obedience ring.

Then came Brava. She was a blue merle Australian shepherd. I thought of her as being a bit stubborn, hard headed and hard to train. With lots of effort we made it through Novice (the first level of obedience showing). But, now it was on to Open and more difficult exercises.

The “retrieve” which is done “on the flat” – throw the dumbbell, the dog goes to get it and returns the dumbbell to her handler’s hand and “over a high jump” – the same exercise but the dog must jump over a jump on the way to get the dumbbell and jump it again when she returns with the dumbbell). This is the exercise that rocked my world and changed everything I knew about dog training.

The way I attempted to teach Brava the retrieve was done by using the principles of negative punishment – a forced retrieve also known as an ear pinch. The way it was always taught. The first step is to show your dog the dumbbell and pinch your dog’s ear. This is supposed to cause pain, and your dog yelps. As soon as your dog’s mouth open, you put the dumbbell in her mouth, simultaneously releasing the ear pinch. Theoretically, when the dumbbell is placed in your dog’s mouth, the pain goes away (because the ear pinched is released too). In reality, this is what happened to me and Brava: I showed Brava the dumbbell; I pinched Brava’s ear; She clenched her teeth tight; She did not yelp; She did not scream; She did not open her mouth. The harder I pinched, the tighter she shut her mouth. To say the least, the ear pinch did not work.

What the ear pinch DID accomplish was to make Brava afraid of the dumbbell and afraid of me. When she saw me with the dumbbell, in my hand, she would go the opposite direction and hide.

Believe me, the ear pinch wasn’t the only aversive training I did with Brava. She wore a choke chain and on occasion a pinch collar. I would frequently jerk/choke to get her into position or stop her from pulling. If she jumped on me I would step on her paws. I may have even rolled her over on her back. It’s a wonder that she never bit me!

Luckily, I found a new trainer who introduced Brava and me to the world of positive motivational training. It took lots of work, lots of praise, lots of cookies, lots of time and lots of love to gain back all the trust I had lost by using punishment. Brava earned her American Kennel Club, Canadian Kennel Club and Australian Shepherd Club of America Utility titles (at that time the highest title that could be earned). And, yes, she had to do lots of retrieves. She was ranked in the top ten in all three organizations.

Brava lived to be sixteen years of age, and when it was time to say, “Goodbye,” I promised Brava that I would never knowingly hurt another dog. I have kept that promise, and I intend to keep it forever, whether I am training my dog, or teaching students how to train their dogs. Aversive/painful methods are no longer a part of my training. I Promise!