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WHY WON'T YOUR DOG COME BACK WHEN YOU CALL? Today our breed expert looks at:

#### **RECALL TRAINING & PROBLEMS IN BORDER COLLIES**

Is there anything more frustrating than a dog who refuses to come back when you call them, or the sight of a defiant collie bottom disappearing into the distance, while seemingly 'deaf' to any command you give them? Dogs who won't come back when called are also more likely to get into danger, or have less free and fulfilling lives, as a result of having to spend more time on a lead or line.

A good recall in a dog can be a lifelong joy, and a poor one a never-ending worry. So this feature is going to look in more depth at what could have gone wrong with your dog's recall training, or responses, and how you might greatly improve both.

#### **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RECALL**

Whether or not they always realise it, recall is one of those responses in dogs that so many owners take for granted. Or imagine should just naturally exist. I.e. they see it as just a simple matter of, when I call a dog it should come to me. When my answer to that is, why? Why should a dog come back to you when there might be something ten times more interesting or important – at least to them – to focus on instead? Or, what have you done to make returning to you the most rewarding thing any dog can do, in any situation?

So a basic first problem can be how we approach the action of recall in dogs ourselves. Believing it should either be a completely 'natural' (as opposed to more purposefully trained in) response in them, or something they should do out of some kind of deeper 'respect' for us as their owner. Rather than because they have been consistently taught to find this response intensely rewarding.

#### **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

Making recall a far more personal issue, or battle, between yourself and your dog, is also where everything so often goes wrong. Because it inspires so much greater anger or frustration in an owner, which then passes down to the dog and - somewhat self-defeatingly – can then make them even less keen to return to you when called, due to the hostility they have associated this response with in the past.

When recall fails, it's also always going to be easier to blame faults in our dog's intrinsic character (e.g. they're naturally more stubborn/wilful etc.) than the quality of our own training.

## EARLY MISTAKES

In my experience, the two commonest mistakes owners will make with recall training is not laying down the foundations for good future recalls in their dogs early enough - of which more in a moment - and letting a dog off a lead BEFORE their recall training is complete. You always train excellent recall responses into dogs first, THEN let them off the lead, as long as those responses remain reliable.

Anything else has a greater capacity for disaster. For you give dogs ample opportunity to learn, instead, the rewards of persistently evading your control once off the lead. Which can then become the main lesson they learn and take into future walks with you.

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

Recall training should also begin with puppies from the moment you get them. Before beginning it, you must also have the clearest idea in your head about what you wish to achieve. First, you want a dog who more constantly keeps their focus on you - which will always make them easier to recall to you in any situation - and second you want a dog who finds returning to you, on command, a consistently rewarding experience. If you get both these early basic elements right, and keep working on them daily, you have the perfect foundations for a dog with excellent recalls later.

My earliest recall training actually just involves walking around with pockets full of treats and waiting for a puppy to focus on me and follow me, of their own accord, to get one. Next, you need to put specific words and sounds to the actions you wish to keep perpetually encouraging and repeating in your dog (i.e. watching you and coming to you).

So every time a puppy focuses on me I say 'watch' and reward this, and every time they come to me I will say their name and a specific word in a specific tone - like 'come!' - and constantly praise and reward this. These words/specific voice tone then become the basis of their recall cues or commands later.

It is VERY important to understand that the only thing you want to perpetually reinforce and reward in your dog, in early recall training, is more ready focus on you, and coming to you, of their own accord. And the more consistently you name, praise and heavily reward such responses in your young dog, the more ingrained or automatic they should eventually become.

You will also use your same special recall sound or cue just before you give your dog their meal, or a toy or treat, or go for a walk, or anything they find intensely pleasant, ever further motivating your dog to come quickly to you when they hear it.

## NEXT STEP

Next, once this is all going well, go out in the garden with your dog on a long training line, and try recalling them to you with your special word(s)/sound in the same way several times; praising and heavily rewarding them with toys or treats for any speedier responses to you on command. If they won't come quickly try running away from them more excitedly, and getting them on the line to follow you, like it is all one big game. Stick at around 5 to 6 good recall responses then leave it until the next training session.

You never want your dog to discover there is any alternative, or better, course of action than returning to you when called. Nor do you want them to feel more persecuted by too many recalls one after another. Always finish a good recall session with much praise for your dog for returning quickly to you, and a lovely treat, toy and game.

Only from this point can you then try testing your recall training when you go out. If your dog still shows consistently good recalls when out, and off their training line, not only is this a credit to your training but your dog can have ever more freedom out on walks. If your dog's recalls rapidly deteriorate once off the line, they must go back on the line again to stop them further worsening, and to more gradually improve them again with further training.

It is also vital to teach dogs how to maintain good recalls, even in the face of ever increasing surrounding distractions, like other dogs or people, or things they might otherwise want to fixate on and chase. Recall training should also be constantly ongoing throughout a dog's life; remembering to keep rewarding them, with treats or a toy, every so often on a walk whenever they check back to look at you, or come to you, to keep their motivation to keep repeating these actions high.

## WHY RECALL FAILS

Commonest reasons why recall responses fail in Border collies – or indeed any dog - is first, because all the detailed early groundwork of recall training, as I previously outlined, has not been adequately completed, to the point where more constantly watching you and coming to you when called become more automatic, or conditioned, behaviours in your dog, even before you leave the home environment.

And If these behaviours have not been conditioned strongly enough into your dog, earlier on, this means not only that other distractions may rapidly override your training, in their head, once they are out, but no amount of shouting at them on your part will make them return any quicker.

Also keep remembering that your dog's NAME, in itself, is not a recall command. The only thing that's a recall command is a specific word or sound you have consistently trained your dog to associate with returning to you, and finding this incredibly rewarding.

Do not try to recall a dog while they are intently sniffing something on a walk, or locked in some kind of more intense encounter with another dog, as their 'hearing switch' will be off. Wait instead for that moment when the dog's attention lifts off the scent, or other dog, and returns your way, if only for a fleeting second – and then try recalling then. If a dog will not respond to a recall command the first or second time it is used, that command is likely to have lost its effectiveness or value, due to the all-important association between the recall action/sound/reward getting weakened in some way. And you may need to begin your recall training again with an entirely different sound or command.

## BEING GOOD TO BE AROUND

Getting cross or annoyed with dogs who take their time to come back to you also greatly deters them, in future, from coming back any faster to you another time. Dogs also quickly get wise to owners grabbing them more suddenly by the collar, to put a lead on and go home, and get very good at dodging these attempts to catch them another time. But ultimately you have created this problem via allowing your dog to associate recalls - or returning responses to you - with more negative, rather than positive, experiences.

I hope this feature has made people aware of how much of a 'science' good recall training in dogs can be, how early on you must start the basics of it with dogs and, as well as consistently rewarding good recall responses in dogs throughout their lives, how easy it is to corrupt the same responses by our own less insightful actions or behaviours.

Meanwhile far more on all aspects of collie focus, recall and control training appears in the SECOND book (red cover) in my BORDER COLLIES: A BREED APART trilogy: ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILLS AND LEARNING.

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