

Reliable Recalls – the Come Command

By Mary Mazzeri

Dog training (reliable dog training) is my passion. It's a long story, going back to 1966. I've been a professional dog trainer since 1970. I have always worked hard to make my dogs trustworthy off lead, but it takes time and consistency. I am rather old fashioned in my dog training techniques. My dogs have a lot more 'freedom' because we trust each other. They all know that there are consequences for their responses to commands - both positive and negative. I know that a dog can be held accountable for learned behaviors and given simple responsibilities. If this weren't true, there wouldn't be Seeing Eye and service dogs. (I am presently training a service dog for a chair bound woman. I acquired her Lisa, an 11 month old lab, from Labrador rescue. She seemed very responsive even though she was your typical, out-of-control, untrained adolescent.)

Like my Wolfhound puppies, Lisa is closely supervised in my house. This means keeping untrained dogs on a 6 ft. dragging clothesline and supervised at all times unless they are in a dog kennel (indoor or out). I do not even allow puppies to wander into the next room during training. I start using the line when the puppies are 9-10 weeks old. (They grow up thinking that they are permanently attached.) Occasionally when they walk ahead of me, I call "Puppy, Come!" If they respond, they learn that they receive praise, or a belly rub, a toy to play with or perhaps a treat. They are never called to be corrected, bathed, nails trimmed or anything else they might not like. (For those chores, I always go 'to the dog'.) I also use their name with the word 'come' when I feed them their meals. 'Come' should promise good things.

If the puppy ignores me when I call it and keeps going, I quietly put my foot on the dragging line and stop them in their tracks. This usually startles them or at least gets their attention. If they look at me, they are praised and encouraged to come. If they don't volunteer to come, I pick up the line and 'insist' they come by drawing them in hand over hand. I praise the pup all the while I am drawing it in. Mind you, they don't have to 'want' to come. I draw them in even if they are balking, but continue to calmly soothe them with 'Good puppy, good come.' After they get a bit more praise for coming, I give them permission to go on their way with a release command (such as 'free', or 'alright').

My puppies are constantly supervised or confined safely. Prevention is worth the proverbial pound of cure. If they try to eat the line, I don't say anything, I soak it with Bitter Apple (R) anti-chewing spray and gently put it into their mouth for a few seconds to let them 'taste' it. They usually spit it out and shake their heads. That is when I give them verbal reinforcement "Good Drop."



Lisa was a little older when I started and had already learned how to play 'keep away.' She would try to bolt just out of reach in the back yard. I'm sure she'd learned this 'game' in her first home. I kept her on a 20 ft. line when I was outside with her, even though I have a fenced yard. I would only call her when I could step on the line without giving the appearance of 'chasing' her. She has become quite reliable in 3 months' time. I do NOT constantly food reward my dogs, as is popular today. Too many become loyal to the food and look with disdain if you ask them to come without it. I use 'relational' or 'pack instinct' or 'prey drive' motivation to reward my dogs. I try to BE their reward. On the other hand, I do not give my dogs a formal come command when I have no way of making them do it. Too many people turn their dogs loose and wonder why they won't come when called. It's because they have learned that the person calling has no way to enforce it. The dog learns "Come" as a suggestion rather than a command.

It may seem strange to some, but I do not enshrine my hounds. We live together as a cooperative pack. Everyone has a 'job' to do, even if it's only waiting patiently or coming when called. They all have free room and board and a better health care plan than I do. Welfare is mentally unhealthy for a physically healthy hound. Lying on the couch all day can be dreadfully boring. Having rules and 'jobs' to do seems to give them a strong sense of purpose and security. My hounds are happy when they can show off their skills. They love the approval they receive.

I do let my dogs run in a fenced area off line, but when they do I avoid using the formal "Dog, Come!" command (except in an emergency, i.e. -skunk) and have 'informal' commands to bring them in the house. (This could be a whistle, hand clap, using just the dog's name, or any combination - except the formal command.) They occasionally get a treat just after they come in to keep things interesting.

If I call the dog formally, I feel obligated to follow through. If the dog chooses to ignore the call, I go get the pup from where it is and bring it back to the place I was when I called it. Sort of 'show and tell' or 'tell and then show', if you will. I never lecture the pup when it's wrong, just praise it when it's right. (Even if I have to help make it right.) I take the Come and Stay commands very seriously, as I feel they can save a dog's life if reliably taught.

I work at this level for several weeks until the dog shows understanding and consistency. Sometimes I call the pup/dog when it's 'just so excited' as people say, "otherwise it's pretty good at coming." My friends, obedience is like insurance. It is most needed in an emergency, and like insurance, you need to have the policy before the emergency occurs.



So I have someone sneak out the back door, go around to the front door and ring the bell or knock. When the pup races to the door I call it (before I open the door - actually, I have no intention of opening the door.) If the puppy ignores the command because, after all, it's too excited to listen now, I quietly pick up the line while the pup is preoccupied and give it a fairly healthy pop - enough to startle the pup - and sometimes it takes more than one pop. I'm waiting for the pup to notice that I am at the other end of the line. The moment it looks at me, I praise it while I move the pup toward me and away from the door. I get down to the pup's level if I have to, and welcome it with open arms and lots of praise. Again, if the pup is unsure what to do, I will draw it in with the line while praising. I repeat this 3-4 times with a helper at the other side of the door.

I will plan to practice this at every door of the house, maybe the living room window, and then move the exercise outside on a longer line. Start a little closer again and progress to greater distance gradually. Once they understand that, I start back at a shorter distance and do it all again with distractions. It might be calling the pup away from the fence where the neighbor's dog is on the other side, or where children are playing or whatever interests your dog. After the dog responds, or is 'helped' to respond properly, I praise it and release it to go back and explore or play in the yard.

Look at this from the dog's point of view. Whenever it hears you call and it comes to you, it is a pleasant and rewarding experience. When the dog is distracted or ignores the call, something's momentarily grabs him by the neck and says "HEY!" and when he turns to see what's going on, there you are inviting him to come to a safe, rewarding place. After a while the heavy long line is replaced with a light long line, but not until the dog consistently responds on the heavier line (It usually takes the average pet owner 6 months of consistent work around distractions to get reliability.) I continue to run 'tests' throughout my dogs' lives to keep up their skills.

By correcting the dog when it is distracted, the dog is more likely to think that its own behavior (lack of response to command) causes this startling jerk on the neck.) If your timing is good, the moment your dog is focused on you, you are either praising it for coming and/or helping it to come. So when the dog is focused on you, be pleasant and help it to 'be right'.

It's not really quite that simple either, because in the meantime the dogs will also have been taught to take responsibility for keeping their leash loose while we go for a walk. They will learn to respond to basic positions and stay 'in position' with distractions etc.

I have a pair of hounds right now - a dog and a bitch -that cumulatively weigh over 300 lbs. and one of our favorite things to do is 'bicycle' together. For this I couple the dogs on one leash and ride my bike while the

dogs pace alongside at a trot on a quiet road. If they weren't trained, they'd pull me off my bike every time a stray cat, dog or squirrel crossed our path. As it is, they are interested, but know not to give chase without express permission. This would be a disaster with untrained dogs.

All of this takes time to explain and would take a book. In fact, I am writing a book, but it is not finished. I can recommend a couple of other good training books. I am sure that there are others, but these are very good. BEYOND BASIC DOG TRAINING by Diane Bauman. I also use modified "KOEHLER Method of Dog Training" by William Koehler. (You can skip the parts that don't apply to your dog.) You can't use dog-training books mechanically. It's like learning to use a recipe book where you learn to 'season to taste'. There are lots of methods that try to make the dogs work 'happily' but these two focus on making the dog think. All training is greatly aided by learning from a good instructor.

There is never a 100% guarantee that your dog will respond in any and all situations, but it is a lot better if your dogs will come through 99.8% of the time... All it takes is lots of hard work and good relational and management skills.

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