

# Foundation Article©2008

## By Linda Daves Siekert, CVT

### Building Blocks

The most important job a breeder has is to create a solid foundation to which any owner can build upon. The owner's job is to take that foundation and immediately begin building towards future goals.

*"The purpose of training is to make learning possible."* -Klas Mellander

Intended to encourage employee growth within the workplace, this statement can easily be applied to the early development of the performance canine. In the human/animal relationship the process of teaching communication between species therefore a solid foundation for any dog, no matter the goal, is two fold; they need early exposure to various sights, sounds and surfaces and they need positive exposure to the concept of how to learn.



**Tunnel work - competition**

Specific behaviors learned early tend to be life long however they will have less overall impact on the pup's performance future when compared to its ability to fully understand the notion of learning.

This point became clear to me when a dog I bred was returned at the age of six years. Clay left the fold at four months and while his owner did some sporadic training during those six years, I believe it was the early exposure and learning concepts I provided as his breeder that enabled him to enter an agility competition less than two months after his return, train for less than 10 minutes a day several times a week, and come within 3 seconds of qualifying in his first ever trial.

### Sights Sounds and Surfaces

As a breeder, creating a solid foundation for your puppies' future aspirations needn't be cost prohibitive - in fact money need never enter the picture. The only real investment is time. Properly creating a

solid foundation can be time consuming; therefore the more litters one has on the ground the less foundation each pup may have. As a potential owner I will always look more favorably towards those breeders who have one, or at most, two litters at any one time, or I will make plans to bring my pup home as early as 8 weeks so I may begin laying my own foundation.

From the moment my pups are born I have followed the suggestions outlined by Dr. Carmen Battaglia, Ph.D. in his "Developing High Achievers" a.k.a. Early Neurological Stimulation article. Pups are handled daily in a multitude of ways, as per his recommendations, for the sole purposes of



**A-frame competition**

introducing mild amounts of stress. Research shows that animals challenged with minimal amount of daily stress during the first weeks of life have better coping skills of everyday stressors as compared to non-stimulated brethren.



**Tunnel work - puppy**



**Mock A-frame**

When their ears begin to open I introduce the sound of the clicker during nursing. The idea is to have positive subliminal associations to the click and there is nothing more positive to a hungry baby than feeding time. This early exposure makes for a smooth (and quick) transition to more classic click/treat

sessions starting around five to six weeks of age. For me, the clicker is the first means of communication with my dogs and though I do not use it exactly as described by click/treat enthusiasts I will use it sporadically throughout the dogs'

Having very little money to spend on expensive puppy agility primers, I used my imagination during my first litter to create some rather interesting substitutes - rough perhaps but effective for the purpose of early exposure to a variety of surfaces. For an "A-frame" I took a used tri-fold lawn lounge and folded it into an upright triangle, which allowed the pups to climb up the soft fabric, go over, and then slide down the other side. Running through the center of the triangle creates a makeshift tunnel as well



To simulate the rickety movement of a teeter-totter I did two things; I fed the pups with a large flat pan atop of a small flat rock or piece of wood - every time they climbed onto the pan, the pan would wobble. For my second litter I took the round lid of a large rubber garbage can and laid it upside down atop of a small plastic dish. I would then throw food bits into the center to encourage investigation in hopes a brave soul would actually climb inside. Of course once a pup complied, everyone had to investigate and a game of "King of the Trash Lid" would often ensue with the lid rocking erratically to and fro. The rickety movement became a normal and fun sensation for all, certainly nothing to fear. For my second litter I had the added benefit of an actual teeter-totter. At first it was rigged not to sway from their weight, however as they grew they seemed to enjoy, especially as a team, making it crash to the ground.

A dog walk may be the easiest to create – all one needs is a long piece of wood and two low bricks upon which to set the wood. The pups' natural curiosity takes over and they will climb up, climb over, run atop of and oft-times fall off the makeshift obstacle with no negative connotations. As they get bolder one can raise the elevation ever so slightly on one side so they learn about the structure from various heights, angles, etc. For a tunnel I splurged and bought a very cheap children's tunnel at a local toy store. An alternative would be to convert a cardboard box by opening both ends and reinforcing the sides with tape to help keep their shape. A chute can be made by attaching an old sheet to one end of the box tunnel and allowing it to lay flat beyond the opening thereby encouraging pups to push through the sheet to escape.

Everything at this stage is done at the pups' pace and initiative. Other than dispersing treats here and there to encourage investigation, at no time do I force any pup to experience anything it does not want to try. Remember too that all dogs are situational, puppies even more so. What they may embrace in one location inexplicably becomes something to fear in another, so be sure to rotate the various obstacles throughout the house/yard to help shape future acceptance of all things new.

### **Make Learning Possible**

As a certified veterinary technician I see on average three new puppies a week. A comment I always make to the owners, as I gently guide their new charge into a sit or down using a small treat, is this, "If you have a food (or toy) motivated dog you can teach him anything." This is especially true of basenji puppies. For effective learning, a student must have motivation and a desire to learn; with basenjis that motivation is usually food. I have yet to find any basenji willing to work outside the home for any kind of toy. The one exception was my seasoned lure-coursing dog – he would go crazy for a homemade "bunny on a stick", which I would scurry along the ground to increase his attention and speed on certain obstacles. While he thought this was great fun, trying to hide the stick bunny in between uses was cumbersome, so it was only used when I was desperate.

Teaching the pups how to learn becomes a natural progression from their early clicker training. At first they are "worked" as a group with all training revolving around mealtime. Naturally the pups clamor or climb on the sides of their ex-pen, or my pant leg begging for their supper; when this occurs I stand tall and hold the food high and above/towards the back of their heads and quietly wait. Invariably, with their heads looking straight up vying for the food, their bums will rock back and hit the floor. Strangely enough they all seem to do it at the same time and when they do, I immediately click and put the food down. I then sporadically click as they gorge themselves reinforcing those positive click associations.

Pups are veritable sponges at this age and super quick to repeat what works, so when upon my approach with the food bowl they begin to offer the sit, I introduce a quasi-wait; I have them sit a little longer each time before offering the click and meal. Eventually little light bulbs start to flicker in their brains and they begin to learn that their action, such as sitting equals food; pay attention to the human and you might earn the food! As the pups leave the nest, and I am left with one or two, I begin more individual "training." I introduce the dumbbell and retrieve, the send away and recall, and of course longer waits for supper – up to and including placing a bowl on the ground, a mere foot from a sitting 10-12 week old pup who hungrily, but patiently, awaits my release word of "OK!"

I have found the learning curve between mentally conditioned puppies versus adult dogs that lack any kind of foundation to be astronomical. Pups as young as five weeks are easily lured with food into sits, downs, stands, etc. while an adult dog will oftentimes paw at the food, stare and whine in frustration or give up completely; they have no clue how to make the “human food dispenser” pay off. And it’s not just the dogs that get frustrated. Owners often lose their patience with adult dogs (or non-conditioned puppies) and sometimes consider the dogs “dumb” when in truth they are just uneducated in the art of learning. With a little perseverance however, once the light bulb turns on, and it will s.l.o.w.l.y., the learning curve can become indistinguishable between the two.

So owners: do not despair – old dogs can learn new tricks! But more importantly breeders do the breed (and your owners) a favor - stimulate those young minds; you might be surprised by what they can grow up to accomplish.  
To view Dr. Battaglia’s article visit: <http://www.breedingbetterdogs.com/achiever.html>