

Be honest with your dog

by Scott Linden

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This is the time of year for the "Three T's": training, testing, trialing ... all while counting the days to *The Opener*. It's a good time to reflect on how we handle our dogs, literally and figuratively. I hope this essay helps you both.

Neither of my dogs has a conniving bone in his wiry, hairy body. But humans are built of guile, wit, and cunning. It is tough some times, but I try to be honest, at least with my dogs (and spouse). Trust is a two-way street, and it starts with a dog having confidence in you and your actions, especially when it comes to interacting with him. Knowing how he thinks, we can help manage his expectations and deliver what he thinks should be delivered.

Remember the fable of the boy who cried wolf? If your deceptive actions create a dog that doesn't believe what you're saying or doing, you've eroded that underpinning of trust that is critical to a strong working partnership. If you ask your dog to retrieve a bird, make sure there's one out there for him. Shoot well, and mark your downed birds. In training, bring an extra bird just in case. In a rare case of brilliance, I lobbed a dead ringneck for a hard-working young shorthair when my partner whiffed on the flushing bird. "Duke" didn't know the difference, and was rewarded with the ultimate treat - a bird in his mouth and has since become that lodge manager's personal hunting partner.



If he's expecting a reward, don't withhold it when the job's done right. The other side of that coin is don't give a command you can't enforce. Enforce and correct every time you deliver a command or your dog will wonder when you're serious and when you're "crying wolf." It may be funny - to you - but pulling tricks (like hiding his food treat from him) only teaches him you can't be trusted.

An honest relationship is easier to maintain if you are consistent: same words, same tone, same expectations all the time. Dogs are, literally, creatures of habit. Use that to your advantage - and his.



Correction is a tough row to hoe. Until your dog truly understands the command you're teaching, punishment (however you define it) is out. Helping him physically or mentally to do the right thing is in. Delmar Smith put it best: *never give a dog a chance to fail.*

Hitting a dog is the ultimate betrayal of trust. It's the canine equivalent of biting the hand that feeds you. A dog should trust your hands - they deliver food, physical praise, even first aid. If they also deliver a blow, you're sending a mixed message.

In the field, you put all your trust in the dog. He'll return the favor if you've built your relationship on a firm foundation of honesty.

See you at a hunt test,

Scott

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