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Chapter 6:

BRAINWORK TRAINING

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Picking the right exercises is important - and impossible, if you do not know the difference it makes whether you pick one exercise and not another.

For your dog's sake (and for yours too!), you should engage the dog in as many different types of brain activities as you can. Don't try to be one-sided or fanatic about one single type of exercise! Although your dog might have certain talents you want to pursue, you should still maintain some balance so you make sure you cover all corners of the dog's brain.

Getting started...

I hope by now, you have acquired enough motivation for giving your dog some adequate brainwork so that you are ready to start.

Although you have some ideas about what this is all about, you might still lack the "hands-on" guide that takes you one step at a time, in each specific exercise.

I have made this guide for you. The last part of this book is a collection of brainwork exercises most dogs can do - and any owner can use them. You don't need to be a professional dog trainer, and you do not need to attend any training classes. Some of the exercises are useful for other purposes as well. Some of them are just for fun - which is useful too, by the way! The proposed

exercises are all *suggestions* on what you could do, and how to do it, and they are surely not covering everything that would be possible or make sense.

(As a matter of fact, if you know of any specific exercises that you have had good success with, please let me know! I would be very happy to include them in the next book!)

I want to emphasize that it is the actual *learning process* of the different activities that is the main thing, not the performance of the already learned tricks. Once your dog has learned something to perfection, it is almost totally useless from a mental activation point of view, unless you continue to develop the challenges and thus change the situation for the dog so it cannot predict everything anymore.

Those standard obedience exercises you see at competitions at high performance levels sure "look good" when the dog does everything completely under the handler's control - but that kind of "robot performance" is no longer fun for the dog and it is certainly not a challenge to its intelligence...

The key is to get the dog to use its brain to figure out what to do next. The *learning process itself* is important, not the performance of something it already knows well. So, if you ever find yourself frustrated over slow progress in the dog's comprehension or learning, think again! The longer it takes for the dog to grasp what exactly you want, the better value this trick has as an activation agent for brainwork! If the dog learns something too quickly, you will end up having to find new tricks all the time, and that could be a big challenge for *your* imagination...

For each exercise in this book, you will find an overview of some of the most important information that will help you to get started. First of all, there will be a description of what the exercises look like (often with pictures) when trained well. Next, you will find suggestions to a suitable command, recommendations of some possible incitements, and suggestions to adequate rewards. You will also find some suggestions to obstacles and challenges you can add to this particular exercise as the dog makes progress. With this, you can get the training started.

I also include some ratings of the exercise, so it will be easy for you to identify exercises that fit the challenges you need, for yourself and for the dog.

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Learning perspective

In all my years training people to train their dogs, I have never experienced that the *dog* was the limit for what an owner could achieve in terms of training. The limit was always determined by the owner's time, energy, and devotion. In other words: as long as you keep teaching, the dog will keep learning!

I have seen this in particular with my own dogs when they grew old. Getting past 15 years of age often presents some physical challenges for a dog. The body does not work quite as well any more. The senses may not be as sharp as they once were - but the brain is still active and needs stimulation! My 18-year old Bettemuir was stiff from arthritis, and almost deaf and blind too - but she still shivered in excitement when she realized that we are going to try a new game. And, just for the record: she was just as fast learning any new game as she was when she was younger - I just have to adjust the physical demands so she can handle them, and I did that with great pleasure.

The exercises are divided into the four main categories of brainwork exercises:

- ◆ Training the dog to do certain behaviors on command.
- ◆ Training the dog to solve a special type of problem.
- ◆ Training the dog to use its body with caution, speed, and balance.
- ◆ Training the dog to use its nose to find something it wants.

The division into these categories is a bit arbitrary; you will find many situations where they mix with each other, and you should certainly not feel restricted either! Actually, the more you can incorporate into a given exercise, the better value it has.

Having said that, you also need to realize that, *together*, these four categories pretty much dictate what you can get a dog to do in terms of problem solving. You cannot get it to solve any abstract problems, like math questions, and you cannot get it to understand English.

In terms of human language, the dog's ability to comprehend words is restricted to *verbs* that relate to a specific *action* from its own side. Dogs have no way of comprehending names and nouns as representing things, objects, individuals, etc. - and certainly not anything abstract.

Note on dogs' ability to understand language

You may not like to know that your dog cannot understand the meaning *you* put into its name. For you, the dog's name is an "identity tag" that makes your brain see a picture of your dog every time you use it or hear it used. Dogs cannot do that.

All you can expect from your dog in this regard is to provide a certain action when you use the name. You can use the name to have it come to you, for instance. Coming to you is an action the dog can relate to a word used as command. But you put the dog in severe distress if you use its name as a recall command - because I guarantee that you will use that name also to mean 200 other things, so you will confuse the dog completely by doing it! The certain result will be an unreliable recall performance.

Your best bet is to give the dog a name for you and other people to use when you talk about the dog, and then teach it a bunch of individual commands that each have their specific meaning, relating to a specific action you want from the dog's side, such as: come to you, look at you, come closer, stop doing what it is doing, move out of your way, etc.

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