

A Training Diary: Teaching Flyer Rights and Lefts

By Sandy Birdsall, Issaquah, Washington, USA

For months she had fought with herself about teaching rights and lefts. She could list a dozen reasons not to.

The Situation

I had become very comfortable looking at the backside of my fast-moving Border Collie. It's about all I got to see of him on the agility course.



With Flyer often running an obstacle or two ahead of me, I was sometimes forced to use a call-off to turn him. This was inefficient and risky. After our first year of agility competition, it was apparent that we needed a few more navigational tools in our toolbox.

For months I fought with myself about teaching rights and lefts. I could list a dozen reasons not to. Number one, I'm somewhat dyslexic. If I improvise a sudden "right!" command, what I really mean will probably be "left!" So my use of right and left would have to be well planned, rehearsed and used sparingly.

Goal and Approach

I would need the left and right commands to have the power of a call-off command in order to redirect my hard driving dog. The goal was an instant response (with minimal forward movement) and turns as close as possible to 90 degrees.

I thought about the mechanics of a dog turning. If I could teach my dog that right and left meant *turn your head* to the right or left - his body would naturally follow. I wanted a tool to effectively show him what right and left meant. For this I chose a GentleLeader® Headcollar. It would allow me to gently direct the dog's muzzle with a precision that was not possible with a neck collar.

Caution: The headcollar must be properly fitted and rechecked daily for proper fit. I would need to ensure that my dog never received a jerk to his neck while wearing it. This could result in injury to the back of his neck.

What follows is a diary of my thoughts and experiences during the initial training. While I am pleased with the results, there are things I will do differently next time. They are covered at the end of this article along with lessons learned.

The Starting Line

- My dog knew the commands "stand", "wait" and "catch"
- Equipment: a small diameter (1/4 inch) leather lead, a Gentle Leader® Headcollar, and my dog's best motivator – a ball.
- We trained three times a day for about five minutes each session.



Day 1 – Introduced the headcollar

Once the headcollar was properly fitted, I began tossing the ball to Flyer using the command "catch." I marked each good catch with an excited "yes!"

Important: The headcollar was removed as soon as each training session ended.

Day 2 - Began teaching the words "right" and "left"

Flyer visibly brightened when the headcollar appeared. I tossed the ball to him several times in reward for his good attitude. Then, attaching the six-foot lead, I asked him to "stand" and "wait" while I stepped directly behind him facing the same direction. He looked back at me a couple times over his right shoulder. I waited until he relaxed and looked straight ahead, then *gently* turned his head to the right with the leash while saying "*right!*" in a very excited tone of voice. At the moment his head reached a point where we could make eye contact, I tossed the ball to him, praising lavishly as he caught it. We repeated the training sequence with a left head turn, ball toss, and praise.

Important: It was necessary to make sure the lead was hanging loosely to the side I would be turning him so as not to telegraph my intentions. I *never* used it to jerk his head around.

Day 3 - Continued as in Day 2

The training sessions continued as described above.

Day 4 - Continued teaching words; removed headcollar when anticipation appeared

Important: Today Flyer started offering a right or left head turn on his own from the stand position. I *immediately* replaced the headcollar with his leather buckle collar to avoid all possibility of a neck injury.

In fact, it was becoming difficult to get him to look straight ahead. If I wanted him to make a left turn, I would sometimes have to wait until he was looking at me from his right. Then I would give the "left" command and reward with the ball toss. If he made a mistake I simply ignored it and started over.

Day 5 - Removed lead; added my body language

We went off lead and I added my body language to simulate what he could expect to see from me on the course. The training sequence went: stand my dog, step behind, give the command "right" while at the same time pivoting my body to the right, tossing the ball to him at about the 90-degree point, and praise. Restart and work the left turn.

Day 6 - Continued as in Day 5; added "oh oh" feedback

Instead of ignoring a wrong response and starting over, I began responding with "oh, oh", which means: that's not the behavior I wanted, let's try again. Then I would restart the exercise. About this time I also started worrying (OK, obsessing) about what I was really teaching him. Was he actually learning what right and left meant? Did I really care as long as I got the result I wanted on the agility course?

Day 7 - Trouble

Problem. Today my dog was *soooooo* excited today about the probability of playing the game that he was offering potentially dangerous behavior. I started to train as usual this morning, leaving him in a stand and stepping behind him. Then he started wildly (and I do mean wildly) thrashing his head to the right and then to the left to look at me over his shoulder in anticipation of the ball toss, eyes gleaming like a Christmas tree. I released him, quietly telling him he was a good boy, and ended the session right there. My confidence sunk to a new low. I took the remainder of the day off to think about it.

OK, all you behaviorists out there are snorting about now. You saw this one coming, right? I'm embarrassed to say I didn't.



Day 8 - Provided forward focus

Let's face it. On the agility course, my dog is not going to be that interested in me. Never has been, never will be. What I needed was some excitement happening right in front of him to simulate the forward momentum of a course. I got a second ball.

I stood my dog, placed ball #1 out about ten feet out in front of him and returned to stand behind. Would you be shocked to hear that he broke his stand and wait? Yep, he did. I issued a soft "hugh ugh", which is my mild verbal correction. It simply means: I don't like that behavior, don't do it again.

We started over. I stood him, placed the ball in the same spot, and returned behind him once again. My dog was now pointed straight ahead and visibly struggling with his desire to retrieve the ball, but the wild side-to-side head thrashing was gone. "Right!" I said, in an excited tone of voice as I pivoted to the right. Miracle of miracles! He made a 90-degree right turn, planted his feet, caught ball #2 as I tossed it to him, and the two of us had a celebration!

We started again. I stood him, placed ball #1 out in front, but this time I turned 90 degrees to my right giving him the hand signal and verbal command to "get out, get it" – sending him away from me and down the hallway to retrieve ball #1. Next I turned him around to face the other side of my living room. We repeated the above training sequence with a left turn, ending with the get out exercise from the standing position. We were back on track.

Day 9 - Continued alternating between rights, lefts and get outs

I continued as in Day 8 except now I was *tossing* ball #1 ten feet out in front.

Day 10 - Added more distance between me and my dog

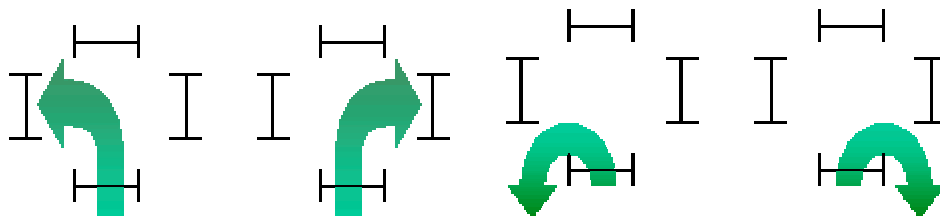
The training was continuing to go well. I moved back three to four feet behind him.

Day 11 - Added more variables (tossed/placed balls, 180-degree turn exercise, etc.)

I now varied between tossing balls in front of him and placing them around the room before he was brought in. For the 180-degree turn I would stand him, pivot around to face him, then hand signal and command: "turn - get out, get it" to a ball that had been placed behind him.

Day 12 - Continued with variables; added yet more distance

I increased the distance to six feet and got correct responses throughout our first two training sessions of the day. Gathering up all my courage, I took our third training session of the day outdoors to the front lawn where four agility jumps were arranged in a jumping square. "Over, left over" and "over, right over" – with the ball thrown to reward each 90-degree turn.



Then, "over, left come" and "over, right come" to get turnbacks – rewarding his good behavior by throwing the ball between my legs as he returned to me.

Day 13 - Incorporated new behavior into daily routine

The new behaviors were moved into maintenance today. This is a short, one-to-two minute training session just prior to Flyer's morning and evening meal.

Day 14 - Tested new behavior at class

We tried a right turn on a jumper's course tonight and Flyer executed it perfectly! Someone remarked, "Hey! I didn't know your dog could do a right turn. When did you teach that?"

Lessons Learned and Relearned

- **Forward Focus** - Provide a small amount of forward focus from the beginning, slowly increasing distractions as the dog gains proficiency.
- **Be Unpredictable** - Frequently change the order of commands so the dog can't anticipate.
- **Regarding Trouble** – There is great value in knowing when to stop a training session. It is important to be prepared to quit for the day when behavior appears that is not understood, or if you're not getting the results you want.

About the Headcollar

I experimented with the headcollar in an effort to teach the words and associated head turn *before* I added my body language. Will I use the headcollar with my next dog? Probably, because I like the results I got this time. Was the headcollar really needed? Maybe, maybe not. The turns can certainly be taught without it.



You be the Judge

Does my dog *really* know the difference between right and left? I'm not certain. What I do know is that when I say "right", I get an instant response and a 90-degree *right* turn from him. And when I ask for a "left", I get an instant response and a 90-degree *left* turn. That's good enough for me.

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Sandy Birdsall has been training and showing dogs for 27 years. She and her dogs have earned 43 performance titles in obedience, tracking, and agility. Her two-year old Border Collie, Flyer, is the first dog she has trained in agility.

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