

Prairie Skies – Dog Training for Open Spaces Dogs Aren't Whales

In the late 1980s, the Port Chester Dog Training Club in New York state hosted the first-ever seminar by Karen Pryor – the club members who put on the seminar (Sue Cone, and Margie English) had read Pryor's book and thought she might have some interesting things to share with dog trainers. That one little seminar fostered a MOVEMENT in dog training, now known as the Positive-Only, or 'Truly Dog Friendly' method. While there is plenty to learn from reading Pryor's book '*Don't Shoot the Dog*' (most of it is about how to train people), the simple truth is that *positive* is in the eye of the beholder, and dogs aren't whales.

And here's a note from Margie herself:

The use of a clicker or other bridging stimulus is a wonderful tool for training an animal with whom you have no social relationship. You can train a killer whale to pee in a cup. You can train a chicken to play tic-tac-toe. You can train a homicidal elephant to put his foot through a hole in his cage to have his hoof trimmed.

While the behavior of these animals has changed and made them more convenient to care for or exploit, the social relationship remains unchanged. The homicidal elephant will still kill anyone who enters his enclosure. The killer whale doesn't feel any different about you after he pees in your cup. And who knows what chickens feel?

None of these animals live in our homes. They are not our companions. When their trainers go home at the end of the day, the animals are on their own doing whatever they get to do when left to their own devices in captivity.

We expect much more from our dogs, and our clients expect much more from their dogs. Fortunately, we are blessed with an animal whose ancestors picked us out and figured out how to get along with us. (If you are interested in this topic, read THE COVENANT OF THE WILD by Stephen Budiansky on how domestication evolved in some species.)

Consider this: You can't herd dolphins. If you want to move dolphins from one tank to another, you can't just drop a net in there and shove them along. They'll panic and drown themselves before they'll yield to that net. You have to take the time to train them with R+ to move themselves from one tank to the next, or you'll drown some dolphins.

If want to move sheep from one pen to the next, you send a Border Collie in there to act as a canine aversive *net*, and he'll get them shoved in no time. Sheep are domestic animals and dolphins are not.

When domestic animals evolved, one of the adaptations they made was as tolerance for informative aversive stimuli. In other words, they can learn from informative negative reinforcement. They learn quickly, and the lesson learned becomes self-reinforcing. When a dog beats the R-, he wins every time. Negatively reinforced Behaviors are very sturdy and need very few reminders. Positively reinforced behaviors need lots of reminders. This is why they're harder to maintain and why everybody has so much trouble weaning dogs off food rewards for behaviors that don't come naturally to them.

Sue Cone and I put on the first seminar Karen Pryor ever gave for dog trainers. Back then, Karen was totally up front about not being a dog trainer. We didn't care. We felt that dog trainers had a lot to learn from wild animal trainers at that time.

We had no idea then that the field of dog training would be taken over by people who thought dogs should be trained as if they were wild animals.

I don't think dogs want to be wild animals. They want to share our homes and our lives,

and they've programmed by domestication to learn the rules on how to do that--even if they include some informative aversives. They want all the information they can get.

I once attended a seminar featuring Ted Turner the famous dolphin trainer. He was asked why dog trainers use aversives and he replied, "Because they can."

Later he said, "Good trainers give more information than bad trainers."

To sum up: Dogs can tolerate and use more kinds of information than wild animals can. And they thrive on all the information they can get. Don't short-change them.

End of rant,

Margie English, NY