

The Stay Command

Last month we worked on the sit and down commands. The natural progression from sit and down is the stay command. As a competitor in AKC obedience trials and a hunter with a pointing dog, I actually use three different commands that I believe mean different things to my dog. When I want my dog to remain in place and then obey a later command, such as come, I use the command, wait. In obedience trials, at the Novice and Open levels, there is an exercise called a recall where you leave your dog sitting at one end of the ring while you walk to the other end. When directed by the judge, you call your dog to you. This is where I use the wait command. Also at the Novice and Open levels is a long sit and long down exercise. In Novice, you are in the ring with your dog for the 1 minute sit and 3 minute down. In Open, you are actually out of the ring and out of sight for the 3 minute sit and 5 minute down. When I want my dog to remain in position until I return, such as in the exercises above, I use the command, stay. The third command I give for my dog to remain in place is whoa. This is a command used to steady up pointing dogs when they have scented game and are on point. I use this command in the field when needed but I actually use this command in the obedience ring when I want my dog to remain in position, on her feet, while being examined by the judge. (In a future issue, I will devote much more time to the whoa command for pointing dogs) Truth be told, I see other people in obedience trials use just the stay command for all three applications and it seems to work just fine, you decide what's best for you.

As in any type of behavior we teach our dog, there are multiple ways to accomplish the task. Especially as the behaviors get more complex like staying in place or retrieving, the ways to train them become more varied. The art of successful dog training is finding what works for your individual dog.

To teach the stay, I start with the dog in the sit position and gradually add distance and time to the lesson. At first, you should be right in front of the dog and expect it to remain sitting for just a few seconds. As you get more success, wait longer and longer before rewarding. Then add a step or even a half step of distance between you and the student. Always use a release word to let the dog know it is released. A common word is OK. This serves two functions: 1) The dog knows, when he hears the OK, he can move and 2) He knows when he hears OK, he is doing the right thing and will be quickly rewarded. In the Open level of obedience competition, I had the problem where my dog, who knew she had to stay in that spot while I was gone decide that even though I told her to stay while she was sitting, she might as well get comfortable and lie down while I was gone. Of course, this was an immediate disqualification and forfeiture of the \$20+ entry fee. I solved that problem by borrowing a concept used to steady pointing dogs on whoa, the whoa board. Because dogs are very place oriented, this technique broke my dog from lying down on the long sit. If you are having trouble with the stay, try a piece of plywood or even a carpet scrap just big enough for either your sitting or lying dog. Once you have a reliable stay with the board or carpet, you can try the stay without it. When your dog is remaining in position with you in sight, you can work on a stay while you are out of sight. Again, start with short intervals of being out of sight and gradually increase the time you are gone. It helps if you have a way of spying on your dog while out of sight such as a wall mirror so you can see her from another room or a window you can peak through. That way if your dog moves, you can make an immediate correction.

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Here is a game you can play with your dog that incorporates the stay behavior. I actually use the wait command here but again, you decide. As a boy growing up in Indiana, I recall my Dad playing hide and seek with our German Shepherd Dog. Dad would have us kids hold ole Charger while he took off into our two-acre back yard to hide. There were lots of trees and bushes for the old man to hide in or behind but Charger never failed to track him down. I play this game with my dog and she loves it. I started playing this in the house but you can start outside as long as you work your way into it. Get a dog biscuit and either put your dog in a stay or have someone hold him. Go in to the next room and call the dog and give him the treat when he finds you. Now put the dog back in the same spot, I use the rug in front of the kitchen sink. This time, hide in an easy spot such as behind a chair, but in plain sight. Call the dog and give him the treat when he finds you and make a big deal over the fact he found you. Gradually increase the difficulty of your hiding spots. Your dog will catch on to this game quickly. As in any other game or behavior you are training, stop when your dog shows the first sign of losing interest.

The stay behavior is a valuable one to teach as it provides that important element of control over your dog that can come in handy whether in the home or field. In the words of one of my obedience instructors, "dog training is a journey, not a destination." So keep training and practicing, your dog will be happier and better behaved and that will make you happier too. If you have a training question, email me at grgdubois@comcast.net.