

The Cop and the Clicker

A drug-sniffing dog (and her handler) adopt a positive solution.

BY ROBIN MCHALE EHN

Recently, I got a chance to work with a drug-sniffing dog who had been purchased about four months prior by my local police department. Sally is a small mixed breed who looks a lot like a miniature black Labrador; she can't weigh much more than 25 or 30 pounds. I have a friend who is on the police force, and he asked me if I would come with him to one of the dog's regular training sessions, in hopes of teaching the police dog handlers about clicker training. Specifically, he wanted me to see if there was something I could contribute regarding a problem they were having with Sally: she had no "recall" off-leash. Once she was taken off-leash, they couldn't get her back!

My officer friend has started using some more positive approaches while helping local police agencies and their dogs. He managed to arrange for me to meet with Sally's handler, Frank. The three of us met at the police station and then we all went to an old abandoned warehouse. The place had no electricity and it was about 9 p.m. – pitch black! We drove right into the building, which made it feel exactly like one of those movies where the bad guys all meet in the abandoned warehouse. Also, this place wasn't even solid – the front of the building was missing several sections of wall.

In this far-less-than-ideal training arena, we got out of the vehicles, and under the glare of the spotlight on the police car, I gave Frank a basic lesson on clicker training. I explained how a click "marks" the behavior you want, somewhat like taking a picture of it. I told him to make sure he always gave the dog a treat if he clicked the clicker, even if he hadn't meant to click. I told him to carry and use *really* good treats, and I explained the concept of "shaping" a behavior. At first, I told him, we wouldn't necessarily expect Sally to do a full recall; while she was still learning, he should Click! and treat her for being in front of him when he said, "Sally, here!" I handed him a clicker and told him to play with it for a minute or two, so he could get the "play" clicks out of



More and more law-enforcement and anti-narcotics officers who work with dogs are discovering the power of positive reinforcement for fast, easy, reliable training.

his system before we got the dog out. People just have to click that clicker when they first get their hands on one!

Then Frank got the dog out (it was the first time I saw her) and he began clicking. Yes, he just clicked for no reason and didn't give Sally any treats. I made some sort of joke to try to correct his mistake, but I could see that he really didn't think this was going to work; he just wasn't taking this very seriously. (This is fairly common. Many people believe that you need physical force to teach an animal anything. No way are they going to believe that a noise-maker and a piece of food will work!)

Window of opportunity

We had been at it for only a couple of minutes when Frank received a call on his police radio; he had to report for a brief duty. He jokingly asked if we wanted to keep her as he'd only be gone about 15 minutes – of course, my friend and I said sure! Frank left, and I started working the dog on leash (a Flexi retractable) letting her wander away from me and then calling her, clicking and treating her every time she came back to me.

Sally was doing great, but her problem

really only occurred when she was off leash. Offhand, I said to my friend, "Too bad we can't let her off the leash." My friend said, "Well, Frank has lost her twice and had the entire department out combing the city for her. I guess it wouldn't be too bad if we lost her." I couldn't believe it! I told him that if the dog got lost, it was *his* responsibility! I know I can't afford to pay the city what it would take to replace her! Fortunately, he had a lot of faith in these training methods generally and me in particular, so he gave me the go-ahead.

With some trepidation, I unsnapped Sally's leash – and she wouldn't walk away from my side! Velcro dog! I started to jog across the building to loosen her up, and off she went, galloping gaily. She got about a hundred feet away, and I said, "Sally, here!" . . . and she nearly gave herself whiplash turning so quickly and *racing* back toward me. I clicked her at the turn and gave her several treats and warm praise when she came back. We did this several more times and she came every time. My friend, who had been leaning on his police car watching all this, said, "Robin, you're awesome. Just awesome." I did feel wonderful!

Putting new skills to the test

Just then, Frank drove back into the building. I put Sally back on leash and we waited. Frank got out of his patrol car and my friend said, "Well, Frank, your recall problem is fixed." I thought Frank was going to fall on the floor laughing – but then he realized my friend meant it. I had him take the leash off and do a few recalls using the clicker. Sally performed *almost* as well as she did with me – although a bit slower on the turns, I think because of the difference in our voices. I use a very upbeat tone, and this man had a fairly deep voice.

Pushing the envelope a bit, Frank suggested that we try a small drug-sniffing test with her off leash. Sally made three finds and each time he was able to call her back to him. I was so pleased! This was the first time that she had done a search off leash!

Actually, I had another great opportunity to show them how to use a clicker to its best advantage. Normally, when a drug-sniffing dog finds drugs, they reward her by giving her a play session with her favorite toy – a great practice. But for the handler to get the dog's toy back, he would grab the dog's collar and hold its front feet off the ground until she let go of the toy. Then he would pick it up, put it back in his pocket and have the dog continue her search. That night, after the first drug-sniffing exercise, Frank made a comment that he always had the hardest time getting her to come back after that first search and reward. Now, why wouldn't a dog come to him with her toy when she knew she was about to be choked and the toy would be taken away?

Anyway, I told him to be ready to Click! if Sally dropped the toy, and I told him to call her to him. He called her, she came to him, he clicked the clicker, and I shoved a whole handful of treats under her nose. To eat the treats, she dropped her toy, he clicked again, and I treated her to another handful while he picked up her toy. They were both pleased – or maybe I should say that all four of us were pleased! I was thrilled that she wasn't going to have to be choked anymore, the guys were pleased with the clear-cut results we achieved that evening, and I'm sure Sally was pleased to discover that her handlers were finally making sense, from her perspective! 🍌

Robin McHale Ehn is a positive trainer from Cottonwood, California. The motto of her professional training business is "Changing the world, one Click at a time!" For contact information, see "Resources," page 24.

Pickin' Clickers

The evolution of a fantastic training tool.

BY PAT MILLER

First, there was the box clicker – a strip of steel encased in a small plastic box that makes a resounding CLICK! when pressed on the free end of the steel strip. The clicker, used to mark the instant of desired behavior and communicate to the dog that he has just earned a reward, has become a familiar training tool in the last decade. (See "There's More Than One Way," WDJ July 1998; "Doggedly Clickin' Chickens," December 1998; "Tricks for Clicks," May 2000.)

These wonderful tools – inexpensive, sturdy (although not indestructible – they can rust) are incredibly powerful, though they don't require even an ounce of force to be exerted on the dog. Massachusetts-based trainer Karen Pryor deserves thanks for this. It was she who launched the dog training industry's interest in clicker-training with her unassuming and now-famous paperback book, *Don't Shoot the Dog*, published in the late 1980s and re-released in 1999. The only drawback of the original box clicker was that it was hard to hold onto with hands that were

covered in dog spit and hotdog slime. We can thank human ingenuity for solving that problem, and for the slew of clicker innovations that have been developed in the last decade, each better or more fun than the last.

If you are still struggling with dropping the original box clicker on the ground when you reach into your pocket for treats for your dog, you are in for a treat yourself. You are about to discover the wonderful world of clickers for the new millenium.

These clickers are unrated

Because of our extremely biased attitude about clickers – we've never met one we didn't like; we've simply met some we like more than others! – we're going to forego our usual zero-to-four-paws ratings for these products. We'll simply present you with a chronological history of the clicker, which has evolved (and continues its evolution) with numerous helpful features; choose the models that suit your training style. You can't go wrong – only one of the clickers featured here costs more than \$5; most are much less.



Clickers come in a wide range of styles, from plain box clickers to fully accessorized models. Most are inexpensive (less than \$1), although the accessories can add up.