

The Value of the "Wait" Command

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D'Amico's Kate, female black and tan English Shepherd whelped 12/25/91. I had spent several months researching herding breeds and ultimately decided that only an English Shepherd would do. I was fortunate to find a breeder within a few hours of my home who was very supportive and willing to work with me on selecting a puppy which would hopefully fit my needs and household. The breeder kept in frequent contact with me as the puppies developed. One puppy in particular seemed to fit my requirements - mellow and extremely people oriented. When we went to view the litter only one pup consistently preferred people to the rough and tumble of the pack. Only one repeatedly searched out the breeder - only to fall asleep under her chair. That was the pup for me and at seven weeks of age I brought Katie home.

I have had dogs all my life. Spaniels, retrievers, terriers, Australian Shepherds. Though I had never shown my dogs in obedience competition I had trained my last two beloved companions to the point where they worked well off lead and were welcome almost anywhere because of their good behavior. My sweet "Charlie" was so well behaved he was even allowed to come to the office with me and sleep under my desk during the workday - in what was otherwise a professional setting.

With such a background I should have seen the warning signs. Six fuzzy black and tan faces in a row with the seventh all by herself away from the rest. Her consistency in leaving the rest of the litter, and seeking the breeder. Though I didn't realize it at the time I had selected the most stubborn, independent, intelligent dog in the bunch.

Katie was a wonderful puppy. She housetrained very easily, was exceedingly sociable and fit right into my family's routine. From the first she never took her eyes off me, followed me everywhere and slept in her crate beside my bed so that we might bond all the better. That she was extremely bright was evident from the first and she was absolutely beautiful!

Our problems began when we entered our first obedience class. (This was before clicker training became popular.) English Shepherds are known for their intelligence and Katie seemed to understand very quickly whatever was expected, but she simply refused to do it on command. And so we began what was to be a long drawn out contest of wills. Katie's first two trainers gave up on her completely, stating that she was untrainable. One even suggested I have her put down and get another dog.

Katie was so strong willed every obedience command turned into a wrestling match. While she would sit or down on command she would stay there for seconds only. If we insisted she remain there for more than those few seconds we had to physically hold her to the ground. She did not appear frightened or confused, only stubborn. And she was incredibly strong. She would unilaterally decide she had better things to do than what she was told.

I was determined that Katie would come around in the end and refused to give up. The "end" was a long time in coming. Katie was 15 months old before I found a third trainer (highly recommended) who was willing to come to the house and do an evaluation. What Gay found was a dog which thought itself Alpha with a capital "A"! By this time Katie was totally out of control - throwing herself at anyone coming in the door in joyous anticipation of company, blissfully ignoring any and all attempts to bring order to the situation, doing exactly as she pleased.

Katie's transformation was dramatic and immediate. Gay talked with us for a couple of hours and watched Katie interact with the various family members. After watching her work, Gay pronounced Katie to be one of the most intelligent dogs she had ever seen and we began planning her "downfall" as Alpha.

The first step in taking control was the command "leave it". Katie had a delightful habit of taking anything she wanted and refusing to give it back. She wouldn't come unless she wanted to and as she recognized food to be the bribe it was, we would end of having to give chase to recover the stolen article. That, of course, only made the whole thing more fun for Katie.

With Katie on lead so she couldn't get away, Gay put a bit of liver in her hand and gave the command "leave it". Katie, of course, took the bait and received a verbal reprimand and shake for her efforts. When she ignored the command

and went after the liver a third time, she was given a bump under the jaw with the back of the hand that held the treat. From that moment things changed. You could literally see her thinking the whole thing through and deciding that perhaps she couldn't have things her own way anymore. That one bump was the only strong physical correction Katie was to receive, but when Gay left 3 hours later Katie was not the same dog.

It was almost funny. You could see Katie was off balance, that she understood something had changed. Gay described my past discipline efforts as the equivalent of "nagging" a teenager. In spite of my best efforts and good intentions I had allowed Katie to get the upper hand and become Alpha.

The "wait" command promoted me to Alpha faster than anything else. Gay suggested that I command Katie to "wait" before going in or out of any/all doorways, allowing me as Alpha to go first. Frankly I thought she was crazy and couldn't see the connection. But since I obviously needed help and had been unable to train Katie on my own, I decided to follow the advice for which I had paid. The results were unbelievable!

It was awkward of course. At first I had to keep a tab leash on her all the time. When it came time to go outside I had to command her to "wait" at the doorway, which of course she was unwilling to do. A struggle would result which I had to win - and did. Every hesitation on Katie's part was praised, every break disciplined with a return to her previous position. We concentrated first on waiting every time we went outdoors, then every time we came indoors and finally as we moved from room to room. The result was that Katie learned I was the one who went first and made the rules. She learned she had to listen to me in order to move at all and the change was startling - my rank in the pack became higher, Katie's lower.

Thanks to the wait command, Katie was no longer Alpha. Once considered untrainable she went on to pass her canine good citizen test, attend advanced obedience (and attention) classes and participate in tracking classes. Her greatest triumph however, was agility, which became her passion and mine. Thanks to her, my library now includes dozens of books on dog training, agility, animal psychology and care. Instead of coming home from work each night to watch those television commercials I was out 4 nights a week at obedience and agility classes. My weekends were spent at dog trials, tests and practice sessions. Because of her I had the opportunity to meet wonderful people, enjoy stimulating conversation and participate in activities I never knew existed - and grow. And for all these endless hours, late nights and long drives I was rewarded for ten years with companionship and unparalleled devotion.

Katie thought herself Alpha because in my ignorance I allowed her to do so. I learned the hard way that basic obedience just isn't enough when you are working with an extremely intelligent dog bred to be independent and to use their own judgment. Since Katie's awakening, each and every dog that comes into our home is introduced to the "wait" command immediately upon their arrival. I won't make the same mistake twice.