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Article Contributed by Sondra Rolison:

Starting the Puppy the Right Way Through Play



Eilo vom Animas



Sondra Rolison is the owner and head trainer for Blitz Pet Professionals. One of America's foremost Schützen trainers, Sondra has a unique ability for creating an *"Irreplaceable Human and Canine Connection."* Sondra helps clients and their canine companions realize the full potential of a relationship with man's best friend. Her training includes behavior modification, personal protection, law enforcement support, basic and advanced on and off leash obedience, sport competition, field dog response, and all other aspects of canine assisted human endeavors.

Sondra entered two of her own dogs into the HZP for the first time this past fall, where they received a 191 and 189 respectively. Needless to say, she has caught the attention of the Drahthaar community! Here is a training "tip" from Sondra for starting your pup the right way.

The "Fair Game" and "Trade."

The greatest joy is watching a puppy in the euphoria of play. It is even more fun when you are the pitcher and catcher in that ball game. I don't mean to imply that play is always with a ball, but the ball holds a special value for most dogs, especially our versatile hunting dogs. In this fundamental experience, play items can be tradeable. In any case, we need a "fair" resource to begin. A ball, a studded toy all work, as does my favorite, a rag. Let me explain what I mean by "fair."

The "fair game" and "trade" is taught with two of the same exact toys, and rewards the puppy for returning and then giving up something of excitement and high value.

In the following game, the puppy is encouraged to be possessive, but in a fair and equal way. If, for example, during the game you always win, it creates an unfair view in the puppy's mind, and will ultimately cause the pendulum to swing toward possession. Remember, your puppy naturally wants to retrieve and return. They are pre-programmed with this natural tendency. So, if you find that your puppy or even older dog is no longer returning the toy as reliably as it once did, then I recommend this game.

Start by sitting on the floor with the young pup. Begin rolling the ball gently, not so far away from you at first, but so it moves enough to make the pup pounce on it. He/she will go to catch it. Keep things close to you, no more than an arm's reach. Later you will be in a chair, and eventually outdoors as the weeks commence.

Your own excitement will tempt you to reach for the puppy as it starts its retrieve. But, don't. Let the natural return happen. As it does, show the puppy that you have another item by

bouncing your second, equal toy. Most of the time, this will cause your puppy to hesitate, and he/she will let go of the first item willingly.

Hold back reaching to open your puppies mouth if they aren't letting go. Be patient and your puppy will give in. When this happens let them look at the ball you have, and they will naturally disengage the item they had. An attached dragging leash can help a confused puppy that wants to run off. And it gives you an important safety net assuring that your repetition will get finished.

Hold off saying anything at this time, don't use any words of praise until after a week at this level, and repetitions are reliable and gaining momentum. Simple marker words like "yes" or "good" is all you should need to encourage drive. Setting such a word to the behavior will become the foundation for your commands later on. I prefer using the work "drop" as I am not "taking" the toy away from the pup, just like later in a formal retrieve. Or, my other preference for a formal retrieve is the command "aus" or "out."

The goal is to have a play retrieve that has an equal value in the return as much as the pursuit. It is not about showing that you win. And you should end the game where your pup wants "one more" and drops the toy. Without causing a huge attraction, calmly pick up the toy and say "all done."

Remember less is more at this age. Focus on two trades and try to add one every few days. Careful not to overdo it. Our dogs learn the best by playing games. And learning to play for a natural retrieve as a puppy, will eventually become an obedience engagement, which will most certainly return its worth.

Other snippets

I strongly discourage both adults and children from playing rough with dogs. It creates many forms of imbalance later on, especially roughhouse playfulness with your hands. Physical combat play is the same, and will not translate to positives later. I will go into the science of this in a subsequent article.

Additionally, running hard with another dog is very stressful to a puppy's rapidly growing body. Keeping up with a well-built adult will only cause the puppy to push too much, stressing their growth plates that can and will alter growing rates. I only let puppies run at their own pace, and truly as themselves in a nice free romp. This not only eliminates injuries but allows me to observe my puppy's movement, gait and structure in a natural setting. Becoming familiar with your puppy's normal movement will give you a baseline observation if something negative should develop later on.

Happy training! SR