

Positive Reinforcement Pigeon Games – Part 1

By Chad Hines and the Willow Creek Kennels Staff

Positive Reinforcement

Dolphin and horse trainers have been using positive reinforcement techniques for a long time. It is now becoming a more popular way to train dogs as well. For years, the common idea about training was that we must correct and punish in order to teach a command. The thought was that a dog must make mistakes in order to be corrected and ultimately trained. We believe that through the use of positive reinforcement dog training can be even more fun for the dog and the trainer.

If a dog brings a ball back after we have thrown it, and we pet the dog in exchange for the ball, we are positively reinforcing their behavior of bringing the ball back. The idea behind our training is to not only let a dog know when they are doing something wrong, but to let them know when they are doing something right as well. To accomplish this type of training, we use lots of homing pigeons. The following are some ways that we use our pigeons as a positive reinforcement tool.

Beginning to use a Pigeon as a Means of Positive Reinforcement

We have about 150 homing pigeons and on an average day we will use all of them. An average session would involve 15-20 pigeons per dog. We are going to start this session with our dog named Rooster.

We first catch all of the pigeons and go to a large field away from roads or other dangers to our dog. Then we start by holding up a pigeon and waiting until Rooster stops. He will try to get the pigeon by jumping or snapping at it at first, but he won't get it until he stops moving. Once he stops with all four feet still, we throw the pigeon and let him chase it. Dogs love to chase birds, especially Rooster. When we let him chase a pigeon, he has a lot of fun and comes back to us wanting to do it again. Once he stops moving and stands still, we toss another bird. Rooster is learning that when he stands still, he gets to chase the pigeon.

This is the beginning of our steady to wing training which means that once he goes on point in the field, he should stay there until the bird goes. Once the bird flies away, the dog can run after it. After Rooster understands that he gets to chase the bird after he stops and is patient, we have him stand for a longer period of time before we throw the bird. Due to Rooster not being able to catch the pigeon he wants to try again. Hold up another bird and wait until he stops and stands still. Give the release command and throw the bird. The dog is positively reinforced for stopping and pointing. He'll learn to stop earlier and earlier to make the pigeon fly. This also stimulates pointing instinct and triggers a faster stopping response.

Positive Pigeons and “Whoa”

After a few sessions the dog stops further away and stands firm, it is time to incorporate the “whoa” command. Always make sure your dog is properly whoa trained before using the cue around a bird. If he doesn't understand whoa, he may associate his confusion with the bird. This can result in a lack of confidence around birds and can lead to other problems. You can visit our website for more information

on whoa training methods at www.willowcreekkennels.net.

We use whoa after the dog has stopped rather than using it to make him stop. This way, he stopped himself and it is reinforced with the whoa cue. Allowing the dog to stop first provides the opportunity to use positive reinforcement and avoids a unnecessary correction. It works best to play the game with the pigeon so he will want to stop instead of forcing the response. A properly whoa trained dog should allow you to start slowly walking around before the release command and the bird flight.

The use of positive reinforcement is very enjoyable for the dog and the handler. Incorporating pigeons into these methods builds focus, drive, cooperation and style in an enjoyable environment.

To learn more about Willow Creek's training methods, visit www.willowcreekkennels.net.