

THE MODERN REMOTE ELECTRIC TRAINING COLLAR – Martin Deeley

It is now over thirty years since the first commercial electronic collar or 'shock' collar as it was popularly called hit the market. This was a true 'shock collar' with only one intensity - "Wow!" Because of this its use was very limited to making behavioral changes that had to be dramatic such as car and livestock chasing, and dogs that could take or be conditioned to take this intensity of stimulation, such as hunting dogs. It was, because of the technology, a very crude form of tool by today's standards. One button and one level – hot, and it deserved the name – 'shock' collar. However other tools in their early days are equally as crude and difficult to apply. I can remember the first chain saws with engines that cut out, saw blades that easily came off, and machines that kicked back with no safety feature designed to stop the motor in the event of this occurring. Surgery at one time was done with knives but today we have microsurgery, lasers and non-invasive operations. Cataracts can be rectified and sight deficiencies corrected in minutes using modern virtually painless technology and any pain or discomfort that is present is acceptable because the wonderful results are worth it. Over the years technology has brought about many revolutions, electronics and its improvements has been the catalyst in many of them. Cars are easier to drive and safer because of it. No matter what we see in everyday life, developments have created tools and equipment that make our jobs easier and safer.

The Remote training (electric) collar has also taken advantage of modern technology. No longer is it the 'shock' collar of old but provides us as owners and trainers with the precision of an easily understood electronic piece of equipment. Its development and design has provided us with a humane piece of equipment that is of benefit to all dog trainers and owners and provides us with the most comprehensive piece of equipment to develop, change and modify a dog's behavior. Our own fear of electricity and the word 'shock' with all its connotations created trepidation about the use of the collar. It was related in the minds of many to touching a live terminal or a hot wire fence. In the early days this was the experience but today with the ability to control the 'feel' of the electronic cycles, there is a tendency to refer to it as a 'startle' at high levels and a tickle at low levels. A feeling similar at low levels to a light tingle vibration and at higher levels to a Tens machine which is used to relax muscles in athletes. Today's remote trainers bear no resemblance in intensity or feeling to cattle fences or live electric home wiring, which many imagine. In fact when encouraged to feel the collar most exhibit surprise at the sensation. "It tickles' or "Oooh, it's a funny feeling, like a vibration" are the most common comments. The tickle or vibration of course comes from the cycles of electricity at an extremely low current. Children who have never experienced the feel of electricity and therefore have no pre-conceived fears or unpleasant experiences, smile or even giggle at the sensation.

Where the early collars only had a 'Wow' button the new ones now have the ability to start at a very low level of intensity, in fact for many people and dogs it is an imperceptible level. The new collars also have the ability to provide a continuous 'feeling' for a few seconds, or apply split second 'taps' or 'distracters' which can be almost subliminal, - so quickly are they given. Using the collar we now have the ability to interrupt, shape and correct a dog's behavior in a way that is as near to perfection in accordance with all the rules of learning using aversives and punishment.

As with the word 'shock', aversive and punishment have been misapplied by some people to create extreme thoughts in our minds of cruelty and abuse. Both those words are often selected and highlighted with extreme examples of aversion or punishment to show they should not be used. Aversion and punishment does not automatically co-relate with cruelty and abuse which every respectable owner and trainer rejects. We all encounter aversives everyday and change our behavior or ways of living to deal with them. If it is cold outside and we are uncomfortable, we do not suffer this, we move inside or put warmer clothes on. Similarly if we try to do a job or an action in an incorrect way, knowing that we are tempting luck, and an accident occurs or we suffer because of it, the next time we do this job we change the procedure/behavior to avoid that 'punishment'. If we look at the definitions of these words we realize that they do not indicate extremes, but a wide range of sensations and feelings, it is how we perceive the words that provides the problem in using them.

We all learn by consequences – good consequences and unwanted consequences. Punishing consequences however have to match the misdemeanor to be effective, it has to be timed to occur at the time of the misdemeanor or be related to it and this is where the remote trainer is of the utmost benefit. There are degrees of aversives and punishment and to intimate that they are always either life threatening or abusive is to state examples far from the truth. If we feel a slight discomfort in one place we move to an area where there is none. If we touch something that creates an unwanted feeling we leave it and we learn because of this. We relate the consequences of our action to the action itself and therefore the action becomes favorable or unfavorable to us. We teach ourselves through experience, through making choices and learning from the outcome. Dogs however have an advantage in that we can help them make the correct choices. We can guide them, manage them and provide controls. Like ourselves they are given opportunities to do right, and when they do there are rewards. In this way the dog itself can make decisions regarding the right actions to take, what is pleasurable, rewarding and acceptable to society and owner and what is unpleasant and not a good habit to adopt. Society has developed morals, ethics, legislation and behavior based on these premises since time began.

The electric collar is where technology has triumphed in dog training. Aversives and punishment can be applied at just the right moment, the right level and at

varying distances. They can be applied at a level that will penetrate the focus of a dog whether it is calm focus, intense focus or anything in between. The level and duration can be adjusted to meet the needs of the moment and once the unwanted behavior ceases and the correct behavior chosen it can be immediately ended and praise or other rewards given. The aim is to stop the unwanted behavior immediately and build on the good behavior the dog exhibits

In fact this is the big advantage of using the remote training collar as part of the learning process. Firstly the dog changes the behavior in many instances on its own volition – let's call it auto-change or auto-shaping, and secondly when it does what is right this activity in itself becomes self-rewarding. The dog has found a way to avoid a funny feeling or escape punishment. The relief value in itself is a prominent factor in developing the new and wanted behavior. The new behavior becomes far more acceptable and habitual because it is pleasurable or avoids unpleasurable feelings.

Although able to be used by the amateur in its simplest form, the use of the collar can lead us into many exciting and advantageous new methods if we are experienced dog trainers. With our knowledge of dogs and their behavior the e-collar can become a very flexible and comprehensive piece of equipment. For example we can use it to 'stimulate' an action – I would even call it a motivator. In this instance the momentary stimulation is used to prompt the dog into an action such as a sit or down. By simultaneously pressing the momentary button as you give a command the dog understands, you can prompt the dog into a quicker response. The emphasis is on a command the dog understands. The stimulation has to be one the dog just feels. It's sharpness and the momentary stimulation actually makes the dog's mind focus on the right reaction. It becomes almost a spontaneous reaction and because the stimulation is so short, approximately one thousandth of a second, it comes and goes so quick that the dog hardly shows he has felt anything. The e-collar also leaves no residual feeling and therefore the stimulation can be described as subliminal in prompting the action.

With new technology often comes the association in the minds of many people of complexity. However this is not always the case. Computers have become easier to use, cars easier to drive, eye surgery easier to perform – video recorder, well they will always be the most complex things I try to operate! But the Remote trainer (electric) collar because of its ability to change levels of intensity and duration has become easier, more versatile and flexible in its applications. It can be the most simple at its basic level for the everyday dog owner, and yet allow complex learning to be achieved by a trainer in sophisticated training sessions. It allows a trainer to be creative, to bring more learning approaches to his training and to constantly remain in contact with his dog developing a relationship built on trust and respect.

I have to emphasize at this stage that the collar is not a method, it is a piece of equipment and as such does not substitute in any way a trainer's or owner's ability to train. For simple behavior training such as creating a good recall, heeling, sitting and staying the collar requires little knowledge and expertise, these are simple activities that require simple instructions. However for the trainer who wants to 'polish' a dog for competition or who has to change a well entrenched unwanted behavior the collar provides a very effective tool to achieve this with. It enhances the trainer's ability to train and achieve the desired results with the minimum of stress to his dog. There is no doubt that used in the recommended way the remote training collar creates far less stress in the dog and the trainer than any other form of aversive or punishment. For the trainer, reading a dog, building a bond, knowing the different ways to achieve the desired results, motivating a dog, and intuitiveness in training is not replaced. Understanding of the learning process and dog behavior is still essential to take a dog to a high level of performance, and change strong undesirable behavior. The ability to train using all training techniques and methods is still required to obtain the results required but by effective use of the collar the results can be achieved far more quickly and in a way which creates and maintains the desired behavior and reliability of this behavior occurring.

Old dogma and superstitions die hard especially among those ignorant of the collar operations and its effective application. It is time for the emotive thoughts surrounding the remote training electric collar and the bark collar, and the fears concerning its use to be dispelled. Today's collars have been designed by dog lovers to provide the most humane punishment and reinforcement of good behavior available to us. Their use provides that invaluable and natural part of the learning process of any animal –where they learn what is acceptable to the society in which they live by making the right decisions in their lifestyle and becoming acceptable canine good citizens and working dogs.