

Relax on a Mat

Objective: The dog assumes a state of **disconnected** relaxation when on his mat or in his crate.

Why:

The entire point of this exercise is boredom. The vast majority of the time spent at a trial is waiting. During that time, the dog needs to learn to chill out, rest, and relax. We don't want them wasting their valuable focus energy throwing behaviors at us to earn reinforcement that isn't available, when we have hours yet to go before our run

So, to that end, we are going to teach the dogs what to do when they are not working. Doing nothing is about the hardest task possible for a young sport dog. This isn't something that is super fun for the dog, and we don't want them to perceive these times as punishing, so we will train it. The goal is to have a dog who is resting and saving their mental energy for tasks later, and not take up any of your mental energy to do so.

We are going to teach a version of down on the mat, where we deliberately disengage from the dog. I like to use a mat as part of the cue to let the dog know what to expect, especially at the beginning. You will also want to repeat this with your dog's travel crate, both at home and in other environments.

We will eventually be using this behavior in contexts where we aren't really able to pay attention to the dog. Of course, to train it, we have to pay some attention. However, we are going to PRETEND to not be paying attention at all. Our body language is also part of the cue and reinforcement contingency. At the beginning, you'll want to be pretty much paying attention to the dog. Work your way up to paying less and less attention to the dog and more and more to what you are doing. **So choose your set up wisely. We want to avoid accidentally creating a chain, where the dog lays down, you get engrossed in what you are doing and forget about the dog, the dog gets up and bugs you, you cue the dog to go lay down, and then he does and you reinforce it.**

So we'll start with a fairly easy set up, where it looks like you aren't paying attention, but really you are. Look at your phone or a book for a few minutes while keeping one eyeball on the dog...don't read something that is going to absorb your attention!!!!

For this exercise, you will set up your mat near your chair. You will also want some fairly low to moderate value treats that do not bounce. Flat jerky treats or cheese. Nothing round. You will NOT need your clicker for this exercise.

To teach this behavior:

1. With the dog on leash, walk the dog onto the mat and sit down. The mat should be placed close to the chair, so that the dog can't help but step on it when you are in the chair.
2. Reinforce by dropping treats onto the mat, as close to the dog's front paws as possible, any time the dog looks down. ***No event marker.*** If your dog has already been exposed to mat training, he may offer a down quickly and that's fine.
3. Keep the leash fairly short so the dog can't stray too far from the mat. You can hold it, step on it, or tie it. Use your judgement.
4. Do not look at the dog. Do not speak to the dog. Give every appearance of ignoring the dog.
5. Continue to watch the dog out of the corner of your eye, dropping treats whenever the dog looks down. Say nothing when you drop the treats. Just make them magically appear under the dog's nose.

6. Eventually your dog will lie down. Reinforce that by dropping treats.
7. Continue until you have identified all of the things you want your husband/wife/significant other to buy you from this catalog. You may want to circle the items and note specific sizes and colors where appropriate.
8. When you are ready to stand up, cue your dog to Let's Go, stand up and reinforce walking 3 steps away with you.
9. Repeat this game for gradually longer durations and in more interesting environments.