

What's More Important Than Your Dog Training Sessions?

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Over the past few weeks I've been running an online agility masterclass. And recently I dropped a statistic on people that blew their minds. And the result that I was sharing was how my dogs, they're start line is a given. I'm going to jump into why I believe that and why what I do is so very different. And how, if you're just wanting a dog to be well-behaved, it can happen based on your life 24/7. It has nothing to do with formal training.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And it was a pretty enlightening masterclass. I absolutely love online masterclasses because I get feedback from people just like our dogs give us feedback on what we've taught them. People in my masterclass give me feedback. Especially recently, we've been running VIP sections in our masterclass where I get to actually jump on a zoom and watch people train their dog. I love, love, love that. And it's a part of life that I've missed over the past, well, definitely the past couple of years with the pandemic having me be at home.

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But honestly, since I've been running online classes, I really don't get to see as many people train in person. So, I love when people say, "Oh, I haven't trained my dog all week." because what they don't realize is you sure as heck have trained your dog all week. You just haven't intentionally trained your dog all week.

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Well, I am intentionally training my dog and that's where something like a start line in agility comes into play. The data that I shared on one of my Facebook lives was that over my career, all the dogs I've trialed I sat down and I added up all the years each of my dogs has spent in agility and then how many start lines that was an equivalent to. And it was over 61 years, and it was around 9,100 start lines. And I don't remember the exact date, but we did the math online. The bottom line was my dog's success percentage was 99.96% in that I had one dog back in 1994, break a start line three times. Other than that, my dogs over 30 years just don't break start lines. Well, why is it? Is it because my dogs don't love agility as much as other people's dogs?

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Nope. My dogs are really driven to do agility. They absolutely love it. Well, how can that be? It's because training for me happens around the house. Training for most people in agility happens in agility and it's lost at a competition. And let me share with you what that looks like in response to a start line. And it's why our Handling360 program works so well because I get people to train behaviors around the house. Okay, let's start about start line. So, start line, a dog is put in front of a jump and the handler leads out a set distance and then, when you teach dogs that agility is a lot of fun they can't wait to go. Here's what happens.



What's More Important Than Your Dog Training Sessions?

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Most people train in the agility environment. And let's say your dog has a seven-year career in agility and you run in 12 trials a year. Now that number may be more or may be less, you can figure out this number all on your own. But for rough numbers, let's say you do two days of trialing on average over 12 trials a year. And in those two days you have four start lines a day. So that means that in your dogs seven-year career, it will have done 672 start lines where their reward for waiting at the start line is the chance to take obstacles and chase you. Super important. Now let's look at what training looks like for the average person.

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So, on average let's say you train 150 days a year. I mean, you may train more or less but we're looking for averages. And on average over the career of your dog you might do two start lines per training session. Now I know when we have young puppies and we're doing jump grids, we'll do a lot more start lines than that.

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But as our dogs get older, near the end of their career you probably won't do as many start lines and maybe you might not trial them or train them as much at home, but you can change this number as you like. So, on average if you did two start lines per training session and you train to 150 days a year that means you've got in about 2,100 practices over the course of the dog's career.

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Now the difference is when most people are training their dogs and they want to reinforce a start line they'll do one of two things. They'll either walk back and give them a cookie or they'll throw a toy back and say, "good job, good stay". They may say "good job" and they throw the reward back. So, the dog is getting reinforced, that's brilliant. But they're getting reinforced for something different than what we need at agility.

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Because the reinforcement is in the form of food or a toy. And so, you might have 2,100 practices and if you look at the ratio, 2,100 practices where we reinforce a start line for 672 start lines over the career of a dog. So, for every 1 agility run we run, we reward our dog three times for three good start lines and practice. Now let's say you do more training than that. Let's bump that up to five or even six, double that. You do double the training I'm suggesting. You do six practice start lines where the dog gets it successful for every 1 you do in training.

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And you go, "Wow, six to one. That should be pretty good right?" But six times you're walking back and you're rewarding the dog, or you're throwing a toy back and you're starting over. Now I want to shift to what I do with my dogs. Number one, I never ever walked back and rewarded a dog even when they're puppies. I don't walk back and give them a cookie. As soon as I line them up in front of any agility obstacle, the only reward they're ever given is [permission to take the obstacle and chase me](#). Because that's the reward that I want them to understand, that becomes our start line. So, I started experimenting with this when my now 10-year-old dog Swagger was born, and I only rewarded him until he was 10 weeks old.



What's More Important Than Your Dog Training Sessions?

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And then with Momentum and This! it's just been a standard. I never reward a dog who's in front of an agility obstacle with a cookie or with a toy. The only reward they get is the chance to do that obstacle. Now how do I get such a great start line when they never get an actual reinforcement, other than the permission to move? Now, let's look at my ratios. My dogs early on, I play [Crate Games](#) with them. So, Crate Games is the foundation of all of this and yes, at first, they get cookies for holding position in their crate. But very quickly the reward for not paddling your feet, the reward for holding position with all these distractions is your release out of the crate and the chance to chase me and play with me.

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So, they start with Crate Games as a puppy. I'm not even going to count any of those repetitions. But I'm going to count the number of times I release my dog as an adult from a crate, from an ex-pen, from a Hot Zone, because they are always given release. If we're cutting their nails, we ask them to hop it up. If they're standing in line waiting for their chance to cut their nails, they're asked to hop it up. There's always a release, which is you get permission to come and do what's next. So, throughout the course of a year, I estimate that's going to happen about, 1,825 times. 1,825 times they're either going to be released from a crate, an ex-pen, a Hot Zone, or if we're gone for a car ride, they're released from the crate, the same criteria hold. I open the door, you wait in position, and then I release you. And the only reward you get for that is the chance to chase me or to go and run to the backyard or whatever it is. Okay, 1,825.

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The next layer as many times as I'm trialing. So as many start lines as I've done with my dog, I actually have to release them out of a crate or out of an ex-pen and go to a warmup jump where I will warm them up. And the permission to come out of the crate, the permission to leave the ex-pen, the permission to do the warmup jump, the reward is always no reward, no food, just chase me. So, I figured that's about 2,000 rewards that they get in the context of practicing agility every day or going to a trial. So that's about 2,000 releases that they get over the course of one year of their life with me when we're either trialing or we're training or we're practicing training.

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Now let's go to the big number. And that is everyday life with me. We get up in the morning, all my dogs go outside. They all sit at the door, and they wait for a release. Their reward for sitting at the start line is the chance to go. If I see, I release one dog and another dog's butt goes up, that's a chance for me to say, "that's not what start lines look like". So, you don't get to go, another dog has to go until you can settle back and be calm and then you get to go.

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Then first thing in the morning after breakfast, a morning walk, and they go out in the afternoon, afternoon walk, an evening walk, anytime we train. I figured it's seven days a week. It's relentless. So that's about 2,555 releases from the front door. And then if you include when we leave the training building, we'll just tack on another 150 releases over the course of a year.



What's More Important Than Your Dog Training Sessions?

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So now, my annual number of releases which are rewarded with permission to do something, chase me, or chase another dog or go outside or leave the car I'm at about, I figured, 6,430 releases a year multiply that by seven. Now where you've got your three to one, I've got 4,510 pseudo start line releases where I'm not giving you a cookie for holding position where you're learning the chance to earn reinforcement is by you holding position. Now that is going to work out to a ratio of not like three to one, not like five to one, somewhere around 70 practices per trial release.

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Is it any wonder that my dogs have got good start lines? You've got to consider you might not be training your dog in agility every day, but [you are training your dog every day](#). So why not be intentional about what you're doing? Why not be a person who sets up their home life to support what it is you want to do. Maybe it's to be a great family pet, maybe it's to be an amazing search and rescue dog, maybe it's to be a phenomenal agility dog. Why not set up consistency so that you're just rehearsing skills that will lead you to better skills? And it's easily done, and the dog learns life is fun because there's clarity in their life. Clarity builds confidence, confidence builds this amazing team. And it really doesn't matter if you have any intention of doing the sport at all. It's just about having a calm and relaxed home life.

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And as long as we're on this topic of calm and relaxed home life, I got a question in, somebody said, "Susan do you believe there's a place in dog training for the word 'no'?" Now, I'm not going to say what is right or wrong. I will just share with you. I did a little experiment. When I read this question, I turned on my iPhone and I faced it at the dogs who were sitting near me as I read this question and I tested their response. "What do you guys think when I yell 'no'?" or "I point my finger at you and yell 'no'?"

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Check it out. The response is their ears stay up high up on their head, they wag their tail, they're like, "We don't understand what you're saying, but usually when you pay attention to us something amazing is about to happen." So, it's clear [I don't use the word 'no' with my dogs](#). And I'm not saying that I'm right or somebody else is wrong. So, if my dogs were into something they shouldn't be, let me just think, Tater Salad would be the most classic example. Tater Salad likes to pee on my flowers, and I don't like him to pee on my flowers. So, what do I do? Two things. I call his name. If I'm calling your name I'm saying, 'I need you to orient to me. Stop what you're doing in orient to me.'

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And so that's what my dogs know. 'Stop what you're doing and orient to me.' Now, is that a reinforcement? Yes, it is. But that's where being present for what your training life is like with your dog comes into play. So, when I'm saying your name and saying, "I don't like what you're doing, so stop what you're doing and orient to me." and then I'm going to give you, you know, either "come here" or "get away from that", or "let's go on and do something else". I'm also taking a mental note.



What's More Important Than Your Dog Training Sessions?

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"Is that something that you want to spend some time in training?" Tater Salad came to us when he was 15 months old. And I swear, even though he's neutered, he's got some testicles hiding somewhere in his body because oh my gosh, he is so driven to mark everywhere. And he is, I mean, he's neutered and so is Swagger, but he is far more interested when my females come into season than Swagger is who's actually been used to breed bitches. So, I don't know what's going on with Tater. But I know he loves to mark. And so, do I want to train him to not mark on my flowers or do I want to manage it? And so, what I do, I know along the side of my house is where he likes to mark. So, when I take him out for a walk, I walk with him on my left. There's a big, big evergreen tree, where I call it the pee tree and he can pee on the pee tree. And so, by walking on my left I don't have to tell him to stay away from my flowers. I'm just managing it.

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Could I train him to not be in my flowers? Sure. But I'd much rather be training weave poles or agility or even how to be a cool family pet inside the house. It's just not that important to me. Plus, my dogs are never outside without us. First thing in the morning, maybe they go out for a quick pee and come back in but again that's not happening around where he could be peeing on my flowers. So [why I don't use the word 'no'](#), I believe the word 'no' is saying 'you should know better'. And if we truly believe that our dogs are doing the best they can with the information we've given them in the environment we're asking them to you know, be in, then 'no' it's just such a judgment. It's like, "yeah, you're wrong". And are they really wrong or did we set them up to make a choice that we didn't like? If we set them up to make a choice that we don't like, does that make them wrong? Or possibly it's us that's wrong. And so that's why I don't use the word 'no'. However, what I do have is an amazing what I call ['head whip reaction' to your name](#).

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I don't care where you are, I don't care what you're doing, if I say your name, stop and turn because it could save your life. And so that's what's truly important. And if I find I'm saying your name and inappropriately reinforcing you for doing something I don't like, let's say my dogs were [jumping on the table](#) to look at what's up there every night. I said, you know, "Tater" don't keep saying that every night, because you are rewarding him by saying his name for him getting up on there. Say the name and then be present to, "Is this something that I have to train?" Just be more aware of how your everyday life, your everyday interactions with your dogs can help you or hurt you, because it's all dog training. And no matter if you think you're training or not, you are training. You just might not be doing it intentionally. I'll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 52: The Five Most Common Words in Dog Training and Which Ones I Never Use](#)

[Crate Games Online](#)

[Podcast Episode 11: The Power of Permission in Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 83: The Dog Training You Do When You're Not Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 19: One of My Biggest Pet Peeves in Dog Training](#)

[Blog: How Do I Train My Dog To Come When Called?](#)

[Podcast Episode 33: How Do I Stop My Dog Counter Surfing?!](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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