

Food Luring VS Shaping In Dog Training: How Science Changed How I Teach Dogs

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG A week or two ago, I made a comment on social media that I do not use food lures or toy lures in my dog training. And that created a lot of conversation, some hurt feelings. And I did say “Listen, I will address the reasons why in a podcast.” Well, I thought it best that I explain [how I train](#) first which I have been doing over the last couple of weeks, which has led up to today's podcast: all about why I choose not to use food luring in my training.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. I am going to preface today's podcast by saying I was taught to food lure way back in the 80s. The books I read back in the early 80s, all about dog training - I was training other people's dogs back then - they were all about lure and correct. The first school I went to taught lure and correct.

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I started teaching for that school. I learned how to lure and correct so well I ended up having Jack Russell Terriers that got perfect scores in obedience. My Border Collie was one of the top obedience, agility, and fly ball dog in all of North America. So, I learned to do it and learned to do it exceptionally well. “So why change, Susan?”

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Before I get to that, I'm gonna state what I saw back then as some of the advantages to using luring in your training. First of all, it's simple. It's super simple for somebody who's an educator of people how to teach them how to train the dog with a lure. Just stick the cookie on the nose and get the dog to move into positions. I don't have to explain it to you. You probably have lured a dog at some point in your life.

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So, it's easy for the educators to teach the people how to get their dogs to do something. Right. Sit, down, stand, come, spin, whatever it is that you want to do. Number two you're in with the vast majority. I would say of all the people who use positive reinforcement using food, I would say probably I guess 95, 98, maybe more percent of them use food lures as part of their training, at least to initiate training.

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So, I am definitely in the minority when I say I don't use food lures in my training. And I'm going to include my mentors in this.

So, Bob and Marian Bailey, they would say in their lectures way back when I would sit in their class, “Listen, just get behavior to start. If you don't have anything, get behavior. People would say, “Can we use a lure?” - “Yeah, if you— you know what, do what you need to do to get behavior.” They would say that.

Now Bob and I have gone back and forth on this, but I'm gonna share today why I don't use it and I don't teach it. Okay. I'm sticking with the advantages though. Advantage number three, it requires very little understanding of the science of dog training.



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That we're in an unregulated business here in the dog training world. So as soon as somebody has a pretty well-behaved dog at home they can actually go to a park, hang a shingle and say, "Hey, dog training lessons, 25 bucks an hour." All they have to teach you to do is get your dog to follow the cookie up, down, around, beside me, heel, whatever it is that most classes would teach. They could teach it with a food lure.

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They don't have to understand about dog's emotions or reflexes versus operant behavior. So, just put a cookie on the dog's nose. It's super easy and anyone can call themselves a dog trainer. Now I want to say I'm not being disrespectful to the very high-level trainers out there at the elite level of dog training who use lures in their training and are exceptional dog trainers.

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There are a lot of people at the top level of all areas of dog sport and dog training that choose to use lures and are doing a great job. As I mentioned, I had great success with it. So, there are people doing it very, very well. I'm just shining a light on the fact it's an unregulated industry and anyone can call themselves a dog trainer and just teach you how to use a food lure.

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Number four, it's got a history of relative success. And I say, I myself had a great history of success. And if 98% of the people are doing it still and there's a lot of people winning sports, there's a lot of people having really well-behaved dogs that at least start behaviors with lures, so I can't deny that training with food lures works.

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"Okay Susan, so why aren't you doing it really? Why?" Back when I was training my dogs, my first Jack Russell Terrier Shelby, I noticed that she would never go in her crate when I'd tell her "kennel" unless I threw the cookie in first. That was my first aha. And let's face it, is it a great big deal? No, just throw a cookie in they'll eventually—.

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Now, if I took her by a collar and said, "Come on, get in there." she would get in without the cookie. But she would prefer that I threw the cookie in first. Now, why is that such a big deal? Because the next thing that happened is about year two or three of agility, I noticed that she would go – near the end of a trial – she would go a lot slower over the first five or six obstacles and would run like her pants were on fire for the last three or four. I mean, she was a lightning bolt.

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So, it wasn't like she was tired because she would just go crazy fast at the end. And I realized this is a dog who did agility for what she got out of it. She didn't do it because she was crazy about the obstacles like my Border Collie was. That got me thinking and it brought me to a place back in Dr. Hurnick's animal behavior course that I took in getting my undergrad degree at the University of Guelph – go Gryphons! Back to a class on classical conditioning.

Remember Pavlov? He had a bell, gave the dog food paste, the dog would salivate. And what we had, little science was the bell was an unconditioned stimulus, the food was an unconditioned reinforcer, and the salivation was an unconditioned response.



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But what they found after many repetitions of bell then food that the dog would salivate on the bell alone. You guys all know this I know that. But I want to share with you that what happens, why would the dog salivate at the sound of the bell alone? Because the bell had become a conditioned stimulus.

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It had value, transfer of value, remember that? Pavlov also did, he did a lot of experiments, but he tried this. He tried something called backwards conditioning or reverse conditioning. And this is what stuck in my mind. So, I went through my science book back then in the early 90s because of course there was no Internet back then.

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And I was looking up this phenomenon of conditioning. And with backwards conditioning what they did is they put the food first and then rang the bell. They have food, rang the bell. Now they know with proper conditioning within 15 to 25 repetitions all the dogs are salivating on the sound of the bell alone.

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But with backwards conditioning when they got a new group of dogs, they didn't salivate after 15 or 25 repetitions of food then bell. Backwards conditioning. They didn't even salivate after 200 repetitions. They found that the dogs just did not get the same conditioning. Now I'm gonna put an asterisk here. The only time that they did is if they were causing pain, let's not go there.

But if they use the pain and then a bell, or at that time they used something else, but a pain and then unconditioned stimulus, we all are survival-based and so the animal did start noticing the unconditioned stimulus as a conditioned stimulus. So that was the only time they found backwards conditioning worked.

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So why am I taking down this little memory lane of my science class? Because I realized that's how I trained Shelby to do agility. I used a cookie to get her to weave. I used a cookie on a plate to get her to do a dog walk. I used a cookie to get her to go over a jump. I used a cookie in my hand to do sequencing and she would tug at the end but at the end she got her most favorite thing of all, mostly was her rock. And so, what I realized was, there was no conditioning happening with her. She wasn't learning to love agility because I'd been doing backwards conditioning.

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Now for all of you who say, "Oh Susan, no, no, no. You see, my dog I did the same thing, and she loves agility." Because there are dogs like in the sport of Schutzhund there's lots of luring initially, but they learn to love it number one because a lot of those great trainers will learn to do the conditioning properly.

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But also, here's what happens with agility and with these high-level sport dogs is because even though the food (the unconditioned reinforcer) was coming before the obstacle (the unconditioned stimulus) what happens is they learn that "Hey, I kind of like this running and chasing my owner." "I kind of like this running and going over the jump." So, what you really had was the food first to get the dog to go over a jump, which was giving backwards conditioning. The dog took the jump but then the dog learned they loved the chase. And so, they got even more value after the jump.



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Hence the conditioning of the jump or the dog walk or the seesaw or the weave poles or anything in sport. So, it looks like “Hey, backwards conditioning work for my dog.” Oh, nay nay. There was some reinforcement, but it came in a different form. It wasn't the food. Okay.

So, knowing that, I realized I want to try and get rid of these lures. And here's another thing that happened to me. One Sunday at a trial Shelby refused to leave the start line. So, I asked the question what happens if the dog says “no” like and they said “well, just get a bigger meatball”?

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So, when you have trained with lures and your dog says, “Yeah, I don't really feel like sitting or lying down.” You really are given two choices. Get a better lure or correct the dog because he's blowing you off. Those are your two choices. And if you look at the definition of bribe and I know people who use lures hate when those of us who don't refer to them as bribes, but if you look at the definition of a bribe, it is offering something of value to someone in order to get them to do something for you.

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Now, often a bribe is a negotiation. “Hey, if I give you \$5 will you wash my car?” “Wash your car for \$5, Susan?” “Okay what about \$50? Will you do it for \$50?” “Nah I'm a little bit—.” “Okay a hundred bucks. It could be a hundred bucks.” Right? And that often is what happens with lures. And so, if you listen to [episode number 174](#), the episode I gave on dopamine, I shared in there that the dopamine response happened when the dog made a choice that they can work.

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What one researcher referred to as a choice point. The light came on, the choice happened, I start work. The dopamine happened at the choice point to work. And so, when you're luring that dopamine release doesn't happen because they see the food first. You get a neutral response which makes sense to me because I see a lot of dogs whose handlers rely on food lures way too long, they don't get that addiction to what it is that they're trying to do.

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They don't get that addiction to walking on leash. They don't get that addiction to bringing the toy or to doing sports just like my first dog Shelby. But that isn't really the biggest reason why I chose not to use food lures in everything I do. That was certainly the thing that pushed me over the edge, the dopamine release. Well, I'm not using it for my own training but then what about my students?

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I'd like to tell you a story about when I was teaching in Japan the very first time, I think it was the very first time I was there. And I wanted to see what their dogs could do. And so, I asked the trainers, I said, “Come on out and show me, do tricks, do obedience.” And so, I kind of had everyone and just mingling on the floor with their dogs. I was blown away how amazing these dogs were. Fast, excited, really driven to do things with their owners and the tricks were spot on.

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Then I said to these trainers, “Take off your bait bags and I'd like you to leave them on the window.” And when they did that, “uuuhhh”, it's like it took the motivation button out of the wind-up toys and the dogs were like “Okay. We can do something but when do we get the cookies back?” They just weren't driven.



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Remember? Dopamine is responsible for motivation. So that was another big ah ha for me that I saw. But let me go over why the main reasons other than the sci— the science are the two biggest reasons why I choose not to use lures in my training but there's a few other that are observational. Just like the story from Japan.

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So, I said that training with lures is easy but it's dependent upon pattern training. So, you do this pattern of put the cookie over the head or put the cookie in the seam of your pants while you teach the dog to walk on leash. But you have to repeat that pattern over and over and over again. Some books tell you hundreds of times depending on the behavior like heeling, it might take thousands of times of walking with the cookie there for the dog to really understand no matter what the distraction you need to stay on my seam.

Just like a GPS, if you ever used a GPS. If you have, you've been lured. Because if you get somewhere with that GPS and then it goes on the fritz, you're unlikely to get out, right? You likely have no recollection of even the last turn you made to get into your parking spot, because the GPS lured you. It requires a lot of patterns for your dogs to get the behavior. And some breeds of dogs you know what, "I'm so over it after the tenth pattern." "Uh, you keep your cookie. I don't want it."

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So, there's a lot of repetitions which means it takes a long time to get excellence at some behaviors. As somebody who's done both and I can't say 'I think I did the luring really, really well. I had great results.' I know what I do now allows me to do things like do these podcasts, teach my online classes, run a business, have a team of 24 people and still train my dogs really well.

Number two, observational reasons why I don't use lures. You're a prisoner to the motivational value of the food. So, dogs that are crazy about food, they're blinded by that value. "Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! What?! What?! What?!" They'll do anything but they don't really have a recollection of what their body is doing because they're so obsessed with the food.

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Now, dogs at the other end of the spectrum after they might be full, or they don't like food or they "Yeah. I just don't care about that. No." Now those of you yelling at your screen saying "Susan, it's the same. It's the same whether we use food lures or you're training with shaping because you have to give the dog a reinforcement." But remember I talked about the transfer of value. I can take any dog and teach them how to love food.

As a matter of fact, teaching an obedience seminar in the late 90s in Atlanta and somebody showed up with a German Shepherd and she said, "Look, you are my last chance. You have to help me teach this dog to retrieve by the end of the day or my coach said we have to do a force fetch." For those of you don't know force fetch, it means causing pain to the dog in order to get them to open their mouth so that they'll take a dumbbell in their mouth.

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The problem was the dog didn't like any of the food she had. She had chicken, she had steaks, she had cheese, she had the best smorgasbord of treats, and the dog didn't like them. Guess what, by the end of the day the dog was retrieving. If you'd like to know how I did that, leave me a comment. Jump over to YouTube, leave me a comment and I'll do another podcast sharing that one.



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So, I'm not limited by the current value of food. And even if a dog is crazy about food, you know, time of day changes the type of food you're using. I'm not limited by that.

Number four reason, luring limits the need for the trainer to grow. And I'm not saying people that use luring in their training would never do a [deep dive into dopamine](#) the way I have over the last couple of weeks. I'm just saying there's no need for it. It's about how well you can lure what you can use for a lure.

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There's no need for it. Training the way that we train, you have to always be open to learn new ideas, always be open to grow, experiment, try different targets, use different motivations. Like there's so much more involved in training in the way that we do.

Number five, you kind of develop a lumping mentality when you lure, in that you're often luring final behavior.

For example, the first time I taught my dog a seesaw, you got the cookie, you kind of got the dog to go on the middle, have them wait a little bit, give them a cup of cookies and then get them luring along to the end. You might hold the little bit of the seesaw and then let it come down. But that's a luring mentality. You lure the final thing.

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If you watch my YouTube video on [how I teach a down](#), there's several different ways that I do it but I'm using targets so I'm actually not teaching the final behavior all at once. Everything is taught in slices. And the nice thing about everything being taught in slices is that I have layers to go back to when my dog says, "I don't want to do that behavior right now."

So, if my dog says, "I don't want to do that behavior right now." I go, "Okay. What layer are you not crazy about?" I want you crazy about all the layers. So, I'll just go back to my fundamental layers, get the dog crazy about them. And they never say, "I don't want to do that behavior." Unless they're sick. And I'll give them that when they're sick.

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Number six, a lot of dogs that are used to being lured have so much hand focus. So, they're really obsessed about hands or pockets. And yes, dogs who are trained with shaping, they get reinforcement so they may be obsessed at where the food is coming from. But we can keep the food on the floor and just grab a handful when we want to because the food, they understand, comes after the behavior. There's no sense even looking at it before.

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Number seven, dogs who are lured will wait to be told or showed what to do. So, people will say to me, "Oh, I tried that shaping, it doesn't work with all dogs you know. My dog, it just didn't work for him." Think about this fact that our good friend B.F. Skinner— *[I like to think we're good friends okay. In my mind.]* B.F. Skinner stated reinforcement builds behavior.

Every time you pull out a cookie for a dog to lure them, what are you reinforcing? The sight of the cookie is reinforcing, isn't it? If you came up here right now and you had a vegan chocolate chip cookie I would be, "Yeah okay. What are we doing right now? Let's go."



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The sight and the proximity to their mouth, super reinforcing, isn't it? I bet they're salivating. I bet the dog who's being used to lured is thinking "I'm gonna get it. This is good." What is the dog doing when you pull out that lure? They're doing nothing. Over and over and over again, they're doing nothing.

So, the dog who's been lured a lot, my dogs included because guys I started at a place where all three of my dogs were lure trained and I had to teach them how to work without the lure. And my Border Collie was the hardest. She was like, "What's going on here?" She ran and hid under a table. "Uh, I don't get this."

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Our dogs who have been lured a lot have been reinforced for doing nothing. We have told them what to do. "Don't pull ahead. Ah-ah, back here. Don't go out to the side. I will tell you when I need you to do something and how to do it." And so, it will seem it'll appear like those dogs aren't good at shaping, but you just have to kickstart them and they will be great at shaping.

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Number eight, it takes a lot more time to create complex behaviors with lures and some of them I honestly don't know how you would do it. So, targeting leg. So, my dog will point his back leg, point his other back leg, that's not captured. That is [trained with targets](#). They'll target any other leg.

I know when back when I was using lures and I wanted to get my dog to raise their hand to wave they said, "There's two ways you could do it. You could pick up the paw and shake it and then give them a cookie and the pattern they'll figure it out. Or you can lure their head off, the paw will come up when they lose their balance, and you could reward that. Or you could just pick their paw up and put it on a target. And then—" Oh my gosh guys. It's just crazy how long that might take.

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So, there are some behaviors that would be exceptionally difficult to train. And there are others, the complex ones that might take a long time and even then, the dog may not have full understanding. And I'm like thinking like a running contact in agility or weaving, they can get it. There's a lot of dogs trained that way, but the absolute brilliance that they have that independence, it's gonna take a long, long time.

I'll give you an example. Our 17-week-old puppy has got really great heel position. We're never gonna put her in obedience, but it's just through the target training that she understands to walk at our side.

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It's beautiful and she's 17 weeks old and there's no food. We don't even have that food on our body. It can be out there and grab it as we go by.

Number nine, and this is a biggie. What you learn first, you learn best. So, this is one of the big reasons why I don't teach luring to my students. Because at a time of stress you go back to what you learn first. So even if I taught you super important that you need to fade the lure, "Oh well, he couldn't do it, so I had to bring the lure back because I didn't really want to correct him."

So, it's what happens when you call your dog, and he doesn't come when he is called. Well then you might squeak a squeaker. That's a lure. You might go "Cookie, cookie. Mommy has got a cookie." A lot of times when you have that lure mentality when the dog does something you don't want to see repeated, in order to stop it you offer up a lure.



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If you've never been taught to lure and none of my students, even my online students, none of them have ever been taught to lure by me then you don't go back to that. You don't revert to that. That isn't in your toolbox. It doesn't need to be in your toolbox. If you like it in your toolbox have at it. This is all about [what I do, what I teach](#), and why I do it. I'm not saying you're bad.

Somebody said, "Well, do you think it's better that you don't use lures?" Why do you think I would do it this way for the last what, 20 plus years if I didn't think it was better? Better for me, better for my students. Do I think it's better for all dogs? I do. But that's my opinion. It doesn't have to be yours.

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Number ten, dogs and humans do less thinking when they are using lures. So, dog just waits to be showed and follow the cookie around. They aren't actually thinking about what they are doing which is why it takes so many patterns to get what you want.

And humans, you don't think about behavior design. You don't think about how to manipulate the environment, how to cut— Now some of the great trainers are still gonna do some of those good things, but there's still a lot of people out there when the dogs get distracted, just tell those people, "Get a bigger meatball. Get something more attractive as your lure if your dog isn't doing what it is you want to do."

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So, I'm really trying to be as nonjudgmental about this, but let's face it, we all have an opinion. And mine is I choose not to use lures and I choose not to teach anybody how to use lures. And for me, I think when we teach solution-based dog training, when we teach people to evaluate the response of the dog and ask yourself: What have you missed? What layer is not there? Is the dog showing joy in everything they do? You're connecting with the dog.

You are saying 'Okay, what can I do to help communicate what I want better?' 'What can I do to give the dog the benefit of the doubt?' They're doing the best they can with the education I've given them. And that seeps into people's life in other areas.

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Instead of getting furious as my friend Dr. Ellyn Bader says, they may get curious. Instead of going, "That dog's blowing me off. That dog's trying to be dominant," they get curious. What is a different approach I could be taking to this problem? And personally, I think that is a pathway to making this world a better place for everybody.

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I'm gonna leave one last thing. I know this podcast has been a little long, but I'm gonna leave you all with one last thought. This is particularly for those of you who've had an amazing career using lures in your training. You've had great success maybe at the highest level. What you've done to bring you to this point in your training can be repeated with your next dog and your next dog and your next dog.

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You know that. But what you don't know is where you could be if you chose to make a dramatic change in what you've done. It's a risk but that's how growth happens by taking risks, right? So, I'd like to challenge you. Because by trying something new, you can always go back to what you've had before. But you'll never know unless you're willing to take a chance.



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I'm gonna tell you one more story. Final story. There was a dog trainer, a very, very successful dog trainer in the sport of Schutzhund. Her name's Debbie Zappia. She lives in Rochester, New York. And I have all the respect in the world for Debbie. She's done some amazing things in Schutzhund. She purchased a dog. It was already a level three Schutzhund dog, and it had a phenomenal bloodline, a phenomenal pedigree. But it had just gone as far as it could, and it wasn't gonna be much of anything according to the person who owned it.

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So, Debbie was at one of my seminars which number one, somebody who trains in pretty much opposition. She used a lot of food in a lot of games, but she does – or at that time did choose – to use a lot of corrections and used an e-collar I believe and maybe still does I'm not sure. But she came to my seminar which good on you, girl. What you've done— I believe at that time she had already been a vice world champion in Schutzhund.

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So, she asked me if she could come up and take private lessons with me. She wanted to learn how to use shaping to bring this dog out of its shell, to give this dog more confidence. Long story short, she did learn how to shape that dog's behavior. That dog went on to win the world championships in the sport of Schutzhund.

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Be brave, take risks, see what else is out there for you. That's a challenge I have for everyone. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 171: Dog Training With Layered Shaping: Why Classical Conditioning Must Come First](#)

[Podcast Episode 174: Dopamine In Dog Training: Anticipation, Rewards, And The Transfer Of Value](#)

[Podcast Episode 145: 10 Ways To Teach A Dog To Lay Down And How To Shape It Without Luring](#)

[Podcast Episode 173: Target Training For Dogs: How, Why, And When To Fade Targets](#)

[Podcast Episode 172: How To Teach Your Dog Anything With My Training Plan](#)



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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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