

Confident Working Protection Dogs: Training Chat With Matt Folsom Of Modern Malinois

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

MF Matt Folsom

Transcript

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SG: I have got a special guest that I want this community to be introduced to. His name is Matt Folsom and he's a certified master dog trainer. I'm going to read his bio, then I'm going to tell you a little bit about him, and then I'm bringing him on. He has 4.5 million [TikTok followers](#). Put it in perspective I think [we've got](#) like 60 or 70,000 I don't know. I think he's close to a million on [YouTube](#) as well.

His dogs are really impressive. We've got a couple videos we're going to share with you. So, Matt's known for his science-based positive reinforcement training methods, which he's applied through his training company, the [Modern Malinois](#). And if you've been on TikTok, if you've been on any social media and you're looking at dog training, you would've seen Matt's dogs. And he's really an engaging guy on camera, too.

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SG: So, his expertise in training includes socialization techniques, high level obedience, on command response, other strategies to help increase security and personal safety for high level executive and law enforcement professionals.

He launched his training company after his friend's experience with a brutal home invasion and is the owner of the most famous Malinois puppies in the world. So Matt is, as he said, he doesn't train for competition, he trains for protection, and he is a reinforcement-based dog trainer. He uses reinforcement in almost every single aspect of his training, and he is working extremely hard and that's how we met.

He reached out to me, he said he wanted to jump on a Zoom session, asked me questions about a certain behavior he was having you know, wanted to think about different approaches and we've been friends ever since. So, Matt, I'm bringing you on. Hello, my friend. How are you?

MF: Welcome. Thank you so much for having me.

SG: Yeah, I am so happy that you're here and anything I disclose about Matt, you can know that I've been given permission and one of the things that there was this kindred spiritedness, obviously I love a dog that's animated and loves to do what he's doing, and I love a handler who you can tell that's what they want to do.

They want to be training their dog right now and it just shows that there's nowhere else this guy would rather be than training his dog. Sure, maybe there's others, but I think Matt and I are two of the only that I see that train their dogs live. So, he will shoot up a live on TikTok and he'll just do training sessions. And I, when I'm walking my dogs, sometimes I'll say, "I think this is probably not going to work, but I'm going to try it." And I'll tell, because I sometimes I want people to see what happens when you're a reinforcement-based dog trainer and it doesn't go well.

Because sometimes it's the important things that people want to see. But one of the things that I've spoke quite commonly about is how I believe [my dyslexia has helped me be a better dog trainer](#) and Matt is autistic and you know, that's something that, has that helped or affected you in any way as a dog trainer, do you think Matt?



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MF: I think it's really interesting that you have dyslexia, and you focus a lot more on [shaping behaviors](#) whereas I focused a lot on luring them. And you know dyslexia people can really visualize three-dimensional space extremely well. I cannot, I close my eyes and I see nothing. I can't visualize anything, I can't see a table, I can't see chairs.

And so, I incorporate so much luring because I'm not having to visualize it. It's a visceral feeling. It's something that I'm doing with my body. And while I do use shaping, I find it much more of a struggle and it doesn't come as naturally to me.

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SG: And that visualization is, I've always said is my superpower, because I've been able to do it since I was like a five-year-old and I knew that my brain didn't work the same way other peoples' did. So, yeah. And isn't it amazing like that we just found a way that our dogs can really learn.

But as I said to you, your luring is not like typical luring. Because your dogs aren't trying to eat the cookies as they're being lured, so what's up with that?

MF: Well, I like to give them the, in the very beginning I want them to be trained to "eat the cookie" because I don't want to dampen their spirit. I want them to be excited. So, you know the first couple of weeks when I have a new puppy, you know I want them kind of almost fighting at the bit.

I want them really excited and don't want to take away any of that enthusiasm that they have. And I would've to say that I probably, you know you would have to really call it shaping that the way I kind of fade that out, just like I would fade out my lures to where they don't get the treat or the kibble.

Because I don't use treats very often. I mostly just train with their kibble when we're doing luring or food-based stuff. And so, you know, once they have a little bit of space, boom, they get the kibble.

SG: So, you're shaping while you're luring?

MF: Correct.

SG: Hey, listen, let's show them one of your videos. Can we do that? So that they can see what you're talking about. Which one would you like me to show?

MF: The one with the puppy would be perfect. And then I can explain how it, you know, shaping also is involved.

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SG: So, I wanted them to see like this isn't just you know, you think about like grandma luring the cookie like that, we're not talking about your basic luring.

Do you ever, does the hand, because I know you make this little gully for your hand. Does that ever become a target rather than a lure?

MF: No. I don't ever use that as a target.

SG: So, it's always loaded, it's never empty.

MF: Yeah, the hand is always loaded. Sometimes I might use it, you know I might have something without the, I might make a movement without the food in it, kind of almost giving them handler help in a way.

But I wouldn't consider my hand to be the target. I would consider that more of like fading up the lure because they're not actually following my hand per se.



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SG: Interesting. And so, like for at what age are you not luring them anymore?

MF: It's really dependent on the dog, but I am, I have not found any issue fading out the lure. I know a lot of people like, "Oh, you've got to get rid of the lure so quickly, because otherwise they're going to be stuck on it forever." And that has just not been my experience.

I want my dogs to have explosive movement. I want them to be precise, and I really want that to be from the beginning so that we're never rehearsing movements that aren't what I want. You know, like with change of positions, I don't want to rehearse having them go into the sit by moving their front paws backwards from the beginning. I want them to do it perfectly. And so, with one hand on the mouth luring and another hand on their body, I can ensure that they have the exact movement that I want from day one.

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SG: And do you think that it could be that the problem fading, obviously, Malinois are very driven dogs that love to work, that it is, like I say in dog agility, you could lure a Border Collie, or you could shape them and it's not going to make any difference because they're just so driven to work. Do you think that has an impact on why you can get away without fading the lure and they still are driven to do it?

MF: Oh, no. I mean, I still work on fading the lure tremendously. But I'm not worried about that in the beginning. So, I mean, it's a really popular thing that if you don't fade the lure within the first month or two, then they're just going to be stuck on it for the rest of their life. And you know, my main philosophy, I don't care how good my puppy is, I care how good my adult dog is.

It doesn't matter if I have a dog that's, or it doesn't matter you know, it's like for kids athletics, who cares if your 11 year old, was on the world championship team if they can't even make it to a DI College. I mean, that's really cool and it makes for good stories. But at the end of the day, I want to have professionally trained adults, not professionally trained puppies.

And so, I'm in for the endgame. And so much of what I have learned is that I just have to do it on the dog's time. And that if they're not ready, they're not ready. And once they, you know just having a little bit of maturity, all of a sudden, a dog who is 10 months and is really struggling with certain things, they're 18 months and out of nowhere it just clicks. I've done nothing different. Maybe I've even worked it less. And they're just like, "Oh yeah, I've got the maturity. I've got the intelligence. I'm ready to do it now."

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SG: There's a question. How well does that work on rescue dogs and older dogs? I would imagine it works brilliantly, wouldn't you?

MF: Yes. My main philosophy is keeping the dog's instincts intact and really remembering what they are working for. They're not working to please me. You know, we have a great relationship, but you know it's more they want their kibble, they want their food, they want a ball, a prey item. And you know, I'm always trying to make it about that, about how they can fulfill their desires to get based, 'I get what I want, and you get what you want.'

SG: And that's to be clear, you don't just use food? That you do use [a lot of different reinforcers](#). And so, it isn't just that you're creating all these behaviors just with food. You might be using a toy in the same game.



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MF: Correct. It's a lot harder to lure with the toy. You have to have a lot of things kind of instilled first. But I do you know, I do a lot of luring with toys, mostly for the older when they're, first few months I want to just work on enjoyment with the toy.

I'm way more worried about them learning that I'm not going to just end their fun and take the toy away than trying to lure with it. And so, I want to have a bunch of rules and kind of a relationship established before we ever try to lure with a toy.

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SG: And I think that's just such a nuance that gets missed is that it is [all about the relationship](#) at the end. Like if when you put your, like I've seen you with your dogs. If you put your food away, your dogs are still going to be there with you, right? That it isn't about the food, it isn't about the toy, it's about that relationship that you're creating. And that's just a factor to get you there.

MF: Yeah, like when I brought Alexandra home, my female, the only thing we really did with the toy in the beginning was you know get her used, like we would go out, we would do some food training or go out and just go for a walk. We would come in the house, and I would have a toy available, and I would just sit on the floor waiting for her to become comfortable sitting by me with the toy.

And then once she became comfortable with that, comfortable touching me, learning that, "Hey, he's not going to try to take this away. He's not going to try to end my fun." And you know I have all these little sneaky games or sneaky little tricks that I play on her for when it's time to go up and the toy has to go away so that she doesn't think that I'm taking the toy away. It just kind of magically vanishes.

And you know, I spent all this time just to get to the point of her letting the toy go so that I can throw it to get to that mindset of 'Oh, when I give him the toy, we restart this fun, we restart this game.' And so, I guess in a way that is shaped, you know that kind of behavior is slowly over time I'm using approximations to get to that relationship status.

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SG: So, Karla asked, does this mean Susan's going to be using more luring in her training? No, not at all. It means Susan can have respect for trainers who don't do the same thing she does. I just have the utmost respect for what Matt can do with his dogs, and we're doing different things. For me, I don't want my puppies to move fast because I want them to move intentionally to learn how to move from their backend. Because backend is the most important part of jumping.

And so that's really, and my puppies do move fast. That's [built into the shaping process](#). But there's you know, it's what is important or what I'm looking for. But I'm not, I'm never going to say never. The main reason I stopped luring anything is because it was an easy thing to do badly.

And so, when you're shaping badly, you're not going to end up with the right behavior. You're always going to end up with the right behavior when you're luring. But the problem is, if you're not luring correctly, you're not going to end up with the right relationship.

And so, for teaching every breed of dog and every motivation level of dog, I needed to be able to systematize training that I could get the predicted relationship because that's at the end of the day all that any of us want.

And so, I think it's super important for people to realize and this was a great comment from Steve White. I don't know if you [know Steve White](#), but him and I have been chatting. He said, "What I've learned is the methodology of the training matters very little compared to the skill of the trainer." And that's so true.



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SG: It's important to be aware of what is happening when you're luring, like the [biggest part of dog training is that dopamine release](#) we want our dogs to get when we're training with them. And so where does the negative prediction error happen with a lure? And that's the problem with a lot of dogs that have been lure trained badly is they're not motivated.

And it's true for shaping, too. I mean, it's just that they don't know when that click's coming. So, it's more of a dopamine hit than the lure when the cookies are gone. So, fascinating stuff. Okay, you also are going to breed a litter of puppies this year, are you not?

MF: This is the year of the puppy. I mean, I'm so excited that all of my social media accounts, the only reason I even have them is so that I can basically be an advertising arm for my breeding program because I love training dogs more than anything else. And I'm not becoming a breeder because I want to sell dogs. I'm becoming a breeder because I want to train as many of the best world class dogs as I can every single day.

And the only way I can think to have the best dogs is to breed them myself. And so, you know I'm all of a sudden going to, I wouldn't be surprised if we had, say eight puppies in the litter and I just decided, you know what they are all good enough to be fully trained, so I'm not selling any of them as a puppy.

SG: I'll foster one for you for a little while, how's that? Oh, that is so awesome. And have you even thought about what you're going to be doing at what time with those puppies?

MF: You know for me every time, I mean, I know this is going to sound blasphemous to a lot of people, but every time I've ever tried to come up with a training schedule, come up with 'I want to have this done at 10 months, this done at nine months,' it just completely crumbles.

One, because you know all of a sudden, I'm trying to put things on my timeframe and not on the dog's timeframe. But then two, it just kind of takes the fun out of it for me. And you know I just, I don't like to think about it.

I like it to be more spontaneous. I want it to be in the moment and I just want to kind of go off of my gut and experience the dog that day, what do we need to bring?

Not that I'm not thinking about long-term goals, or I am really not one of those people that, I've at times created extravagant Excel spreadsheets for everything I want my dogs to know. And then I don't look at it for six months. I completely, within a week I just totally forget about it.

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MF: And so, I love dog training more than anything in the entire world and I don't need that extra, to me, that just kind of bogs it down. It kind of takes away some of the fun. And I just want to wake up and just be super excited. I want to go to sleep thinking that I can't wait till I get to wake up and train more.

And so that's another reason I want to be a breeder is like, I only have four dogs. I mean, I could like train them all to exhaustion in 90 minutes and then what do I do?

And so, I want more dogs to train. I just, I really want to just have my life so that I don't do anything but train dogs. I don't go shopping, I don't even watch videos anymore just like everything.

SG: That's kind of way my life is. I either train dogs or talk about training dogs or plan for training dogs and that's it. I don't, I rarely drive a car anymore. It's yeah, I've become a dog hermit is what I've become.

MF: And now I'm on 40 acres in Oregon, so like, I can't see anybody when I walk out the door.



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SG: So, tell me what is the biggest misconception people have about either you or your training? Whatever one of those questions is easier to answer.

MF: I think probably the biggest misconception about me would be very similar to the, just really a misconception about everybody is that we're not changing, we're not evolving, we're not improving. You can look at videos that I did say two and a half years ago, and you can see a prong collar on my dogs.

And so, people will think, "Oh, well Matt, all he does is compulsion." Because they see a video that I put out two years ago and they don't realize that I am always trying to improve. I am always trying to become a better dog trainer. You know looking at my old videos, if I can't look at last year's videos and find at least five things wrong with what I was doing then I'm not working hard enough to improve as a dog trainer. I always want to be improving.

So, you know, it's things like that, just for instance, Alexandra and Magnus, my two youngest have never had a prong collar on them. Alrick hasn't had a prong collar on him in probably two years. And so, I'm not teaching the same things that I did two years ago or teaching them in the same ways as I am today.

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SG: That's the fun. That's what keeps the game fun for me is to always be experimenting with the foundations of what I'm training when I'm putting on what and how I can break down one thing and create more certainty for the dogs around that one thing before I inject it into a series or a sequence.

I want to share that last video with everyone. And it's Alrick, isn't it? The remote control. Okay, so let's see this.

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SG: That's awesome. That is if Swagger was a Malinois - so my red boy, Swagger, he plays that game, it's his favorite game, if you will let him like throw a toy and let him do a million behaviors before he can get it. Like what is it that makes them love that so much? It's crazy. But it's great. It's just a great demonstration of self-control on the dog, but also relationship.

MF: And it's been an everyday occurrence. You know, I think a lot of people assume that videos like that are you know, we're doing a hundred takes and just hoping to get that one take. And a couple months ago I had a couple dog trainers in the area asked me if we could get together and I brought Alrick and I basically did that exact same thing, you know I just threw the ball out in the field and then had him out at about a hundred feet away and then said all these commands and they were just like, "Wait, you can actually just do that anywhere, anytime?" I'm like, "Well, yeah." It's not smoke and mirrors. I mean, unfortunately there a lot of trainers are smoke and mirrors.

SG: True that, but they're not training live either. Go ahead.

MF: Recently on one of my YouTube lives recently did [bitework live](#). And you know, people got to see me doing bite work right there live, there's no do-overs, and not once did he just decide not to out. I like to push the barrier. One of the things that I probably do different than some people is I don't always want my dogs to be fully in obedience. So, if you watch that live, I was fine with him kind of inching a little bit, doing this, doing that where it wasn't a hundred percent. Because if I really want to push the boundaries on certain variables, I have to let other variables go just a little bit.



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MF: And because at the end of the day the dog is deciding how hard he's going to bite. And if he's not loving this, if he's not almost kind of like just enough, I'm going to have a lackluster performance from him.

SG: I'm reading the comments and a lot of people are saying, "Wow!" about that game. And we teach that game in [our Recallers program](#). We call it The Wow Game. Just for that reason. Because when people see a dog have that kind of push button control from a distance and like Swagger is 12, it's his favorite game. Loves it every day.

It's still, I just think that with dogs, we're giving them the opportunity to know. There's what I talked about, the negative prediction error, [the dopamine release](#). Because they don't know what behavior gets the ball. And that's what keeps growing and growing that.

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SG: Matt and I could talk for hours, and we often do. Matt, thank you for doing this and I hope you all could see the brilliance in that good dog training and good dog trainers, it's just so inspiring to be around them and to be watching them. So go over and if you are not subscribed to [Matt's page](#), go and watch his page and watch him train. And it doesn't matter that he doesn't train exactly the same way we do. He is somebody who's always progressing his training and I just I appreciate you. Thank you for being here.

MF: Thank you so much for having me.

SG: Okay, we'll see you soon, Matt.

MF: Cheers.

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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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