

Episode: #300

Replying to Zak George About Crossover Dog Trainers

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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In July of 1996, I won the largest Agility Championship in North America at the time, the USDAA National Championship. I, also that month, was on a Flyball team that set a world record in Flyball. And I actually owned and trained two of the four dogs on the team. And in addition, I competed in the World Series of Dog Obedience, earning the highest score of the day in the top utility class.

All of that in the month of July 1996. And just two months later, I did the unthinkable. I became what's known as a crossover trainer.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And if you don't know what a crossover trainer is, it's somebody who previously trained with physical punishment, verbal corrections, intimidation, and aversives. Of course, they probably used a lot of reinforcement, I did. And they changed to become force-free reinforcement-based.

Of course, in 1996, I did it really, really badly because nobody was doing what I decided I wanted to try. And so, with this being our 300th Shaped by Dog episode. I thought, let's focus on getting more people to become crossover dog trainers.

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So, I want to talk about why people may be hesitant to become a crossover dog trainer, what was my motivation to become a crossover dog trainer, and I'm going to be completely honest. The motivation for me to do this episode came from a comment left by none other than dog training advocate, [Zak George](#).

Zak wrote the following, "As you've moved away from balanced training towards force free methods, was there a particular scientific discovery, ethical argument, or perhaps even an awareness of how power dynamics or colonial thinking shape our relationship with animals that led you to abandon aversives? How might addressing these deeper cultural issues help trainers still struggling to fully embrace modern approaches?"

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That statement credited me with a lot of deep thinking, which I don't think I did at the time. And honestly, when I reflect back on the changes I made and how I came to be, I think it's a path that any one of you listening to this podcast episode or passing on to another dog trainer could mimic and actually do it much better than I did.

Now, before I get too far into this, if you are watching this episode on YouTube, please give us a like on this video, let's get this video shared far and wide. Let's give people a reason to at least consider becoming a crossover dog trainer.

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For me, the decision to abandon all forms of positive punishment happened in 1996, but I do believe there were events leading up to that long before. And let me just remind you that when I started formally training my first dog, it was in 1988, my Jack Russell Terrier, Shelby.



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She was a 12-week-old puppy when I took her to class. And about four weeks into our training where she was on a chain collar and she was lured to do behaviors. And then when I was told she should know them, we were encouraged and taught how to properly correct the dog.

Now, little 12-week-old Jack Russell Terrier, proper correction, let me just tell you, it means you bring your hands towards the dog, which loosened off the chain around the dog's neck in order to get more leverage when you pop the dog.

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Because if you didn't move your hands towards the dog's neck, then you might have already a kind of a tight chain. We needed more leverage to have the longer chain go through the loop and then pop the dog and really get some snap into that. That hurts my soul even describing that.

And as a side note, let me tell you, that little girl was so smart. I continued to train in this environment. There was an event that caused me never to use a chain collar on her. More about that later. But what Shelby did, whenever she heard the chain of another dog about to get a correction, she dropped to the ground.

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She knew what was going to happen and she wanted to make sure it wasn't going to happen to her. So, what was the event that caused me to take that chain collar off? It was an exercise where we were teaching our dog to come when we said the word "come." We were encouraged to let our puppies visit the instructors who were kneeling down in the middle of the hall.

As they fed the puppy, we were told to sneak in behind the puppy, say the word "come," which they were getting cheese, so they probably didn't want to, and then pop them off their feet so that they'd come towards us and we would run away and try to engage them and give them a cookie when they got to us, three times.

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On the third trip across the room, Shelby dropped like a boat anchor and said, "Not going near those people. Those are bad people. Bad things are going to happen to me if I go near those people." And the look on her face, she had her ears pinned. This wasn't my happy go lucky little Jack Russell. I asked, "What should I do now? She doesn't want to visit you people."

And I was told "Pop her towards us." I didn't do that. I said, "That doesn't make sense to me." So, if I'd been a more spiritually evolved human being, that probably would've been all it would've taken for me to have said, "This kind of dog training is not for me."

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But the truth is, back in 1988, that was the only form of dog training available. All dogs were trained that way, and in order for it to not hurt your heart, you had to justify it by "Hmm, they're just dogs." Or 'This has to happen or they're going to get killed on the road.' There's a number of excuses why you had to train this way.

But I made the decision that Shelby could be trained just on a flat collar. She didn't need to endure that chain collar anymore. But I continued to train [in a balanced way](#). So, my three dogs that were trained with balanced were Shelby, Stoni, and a puppy that I trained for 13 months before she was unfortunately killed on the road named Speki.



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Now Speki taught me that Terriers can take any form of correction, and they will still do what they want. So, you have to be willing to come up with a way to engage a Terrier and make it be their idea. That planted the seed for me to look at games that could help my dog want to do what I wanted them to do. Because I knew corrections weren't going to do it.

The school I was training at was doing a lot of dog sports, so that was fun. So it wasn't that my dogs were miserable, although I'm sure they would've been happier without all the corrections. But the corrections were very well timed. And so, the appearance, when you saw my dogs work, was that they were pretty happy.

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That was early in my dog training and trust me, I was really good at the verbal punishment. "Ah!", "No", "Hey, leave it!" I was really good at well-timed physical corrections. That's what allowed my dogs to still work and be happy. That's what allowed my dogs to have a great relationship with me because my timing was really, really good.

And at that time, I was as I am now, a very curious learner. And so, I asked one of the instructors teaching that class, "I really want to learn more about this obedience. Can you recommend a good book?" And they said, "There hasn't been one written, but go buy the book '[Don't Shoot the Dog!](#)' by [Karen Pryor](#). That will be more enlightening than any obedience book written today."

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And I bought the book, and I loved the book. And so, I started shaping tricks with my Border Collie Stoni. And in 1994, Karen Pryor came to teach at the university where I had got my degree. It was just 45 minutes from where I was living.

And so, myself and my friend Ruthie, we went to this seminar. It was a two-day workshop, and I mentioned Ruthie because honestly, I don't know if I ever told her how pivotal what she did after our first night was to my dog training journey.

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Ruthie had an English Pointer named Emma, like all English Pointers, she really wasn't a dog interested in obedience or doing things the way you wanted them to be done. So that night after the seminar, Ruthie and I were at my house. We had supper, and she said, "Hey, why don't we try to do that target stick stuff that they talked about in the seminar?"

Well, we bought target sticks, so I said, "All right." So, she went first, and her Pointer went crazy. The first time I saw authentic autonomy, giving a dog the opportunity to choose what they wanted, and all we did is clicked and rewarded them for their choices. Funny thing, my Border Collie was horrible at it.

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My Border Collie, who had been lured and corrected her whole life, who at that point was four years old, when I stood there with the target stick and I was quiet, she shrunk away like a wilting violet and went and hid under the coffee table.

She was used to being prompted with lures or being corrected to be told what to do. Standing there staring and waiting for something was way too much pressure for her and she left. You might have that same experience the first time you try to shape your dog.



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But the good news is, that was shaping in 1994. Shaping in 2025 is so much easier on a dog. We'll get to that. So, I call Susan from 1988 to 1994, the 'balanced dog training era,' even though there were some changes along the way.

But being at that seminar, which I'd gone to a lot of other seminars, but they were just from force-based dog trainers. So, I just learned more about force-based dog training and things I didn't want to do, like ear pinching a dog, or force fetching a dog.

So, this was my first seminar that I went, "Wait a minute. I want to do things differently." So, I started playing around with this shaping and enter the era I moved from becoming a balanced trainer to the era that I call 'shaping badly,' where I started with just tricks.

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But September 1996, when Buzz was born, that's when I decided I was going to use reinforcement and not use any positive punishment on this dog at all. And as luck would have it, in 1997, I went to another seminar by dolphin trainer, Ted Turner.

Now, he said, 'Not only is there no place for positive punishment in animal training, there's also no place for negative punishment.' And here I was with Buzzy using a halter, which in fact was negative punishment. And I thought, "Okay, I'm going to take up that challenge."

And what I learned when I took that halter off is I wasn't a skilled enough trainer to be able to do this, and so my dogs during that era, my Jack Russell Terrier Twister, my Border Collie Buzz and my mixed-breed Decaff, those three dogs didn't get positive punishment.

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They didn't get the "Ah-ah!", the "No!". They got a reinforcement-based approach, but there was nobody ahead of me doing this in competitive dog sports. I was making it up as I went and oh my gosh, I was doing it badly. If they got the correct behavior, it was by accident.

Because there were so many antecedents available to them. The manipulation of the environment wasn't even in my vocabulary back then. And so, the dogs chose things wrong more than they chose things right. And that kind of shaping makes a dog frantic.

They might start vocalizing, they might redirect when they get more frustrated, which my dogs did. They might have given me a little nip under the arm, or a little nip on the leg when they were trying to figure it out, but they just couldn't get it because honestly, that isn't reinforcement-based training.

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I think that's more negative punishment than it is reinforcement. Because you're withholding the reward and they're trying their best. On top of that, if my dogs did something where I previously would've punished them with a correction, instead I gave them a timeout.

If you listen [to podcast episode number 34](#), as you know, causes a great deal of frustration. I don't even like to think of what my dogs endured. I was doing so many seminars back then because nobody was doing this in sports, and the world wanted to know.

I was doing so many seminars, and I know we are moving from physical corrections to a place where the dogs had more options and more choice, but it was shaping badly, and that was frustrating for all of us.



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Let's move into the new era. What inspired the next era for me was meeting my [mentors Bob and Marian Bailey](#), and I flew down to Hot Springs, Arkansas.

I went to as many of these progressive thinking workshops as I can. They all were between 11 and 56 hours of classroom time to learn about the science and the application of the science in dog training.

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And when I found the Baileys, to me, it was nirvana. Things made sense. I moved from shaping badly to creating clarity for my dogs because that's where I really focused on, it's not the dogs that are creating the behavior. It's our mechanics that are creating the behavior.

And if the dog is getting frustrated, it's because we have frustrated them with the [antecedent arrangements](#), we've set up for them. The dog doesn't get the right behavior by accident. It is 100% intentional.

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I learned how to create certainty in behaviors by manipulating the environment for the dog. I learned my role, placement of reinforcement, how efficient and effective my movements were, or lack of movements were. So, there were so many things about my mechanics I learned from Marian and Bob Bailey that I will forever be indebted to them.

In addition to the great mechanics I learned, it was the [record keeping](#), the data collection, [the use of video](#) that exponentially improved my training for my dogs through that era of intentional success of shaping with clarity and the benefactors of that stage were my Border Collies Encore, Feature, and Swagger.

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And when the clarity happened for them, the relationship deepened between my dogs and myself. Not that I look back at my dog Stoni and Shelby and Twister and Buzz and Decaff and say, 'I didn't have a great relationship with them.'

I thought I had an amazing relationship with them, but I had moved into an era where I was allowing them to be who they uniquely were. And instead of suppressing who they were, I was embracing it and arranging the training so that, that unique personality could get success on their level and their terms.

Of course, I was still teaching, I started teaching in 1989. If you remember, I started training my first dog in obedience class in 1988.

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They thought I had talent and within three months asked me to be an assistant instructor in their school. And I've been teaching dog training ever since.

But once I decided to leave punishment behind, I was absolutely intolerant of anybody being what I deemed as being unkind to their dogs. And honestly what I know now is nobody would purposely be unkind to their dogs.

Balanced trainers do not think they are purposely being unkind to their dogs when they're using a collar correction or electrical stimulation or shock, whatever you want to call it. They don't think they're being unkind to their dog.



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My tolerance for people when they were being unkind shut off a lot of possibilities of me helping people. It was my late husband who came up to me after a seminar and said, when I was teaching people that were being unkind to their dogs. He said, "I don't like the person you become when you teach these people. You either have to not teach them anymore or find out a way to reach them differently."

And that stuck with me, and I didn't change immediately. But I realized just like dogs, when you're trying to teach people, you cannot help someone that you're judging. So, if a balanced trainer comes to me and says, "Can you teach me some things?"

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And I'm judging them for the way they treat their dogs, I'm never going to be fully available to them. And so that thought brought me into what I believe is the current phase of dog training. And it's one of alignment and it's one that's certainly Prophet and This!y, have got the benefits of. It's one filled with more nuances than ever before.

Always evaluating the clarity, the ease, the level of frustration, the emotional state, the engagement, all of those things that make training so fulfilling for not just me but my dog. Because I know when we get it right, it's magical for the dogs.

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So, getting back to Zak George's comment to me, 'Why do you suppose people should all put away any form of intimidation or punishment in the training and all become reinforcement-based dog training?'

There is a litany of reasons why people should, including people like [The Association of Veterinary Behaviorists](#), all agree there is no place for physical corrections or fear and intimidation in dog training. Including the [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#) recently have changed their guidelines to do away with any opportunity for somebody to believe it's okay to mildly correct dogs.

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So, all of the governing bodies say, 'everybody should train this way.' Now, that's not reason to change, is it? Because I think doctors worldwide agree that nobody should eat junk food, but yet that's not a motivating reason for anybody to not eat junk food.

So just because it's the right thing to do doesn't mean anybody's going to do it. So 'why you should be a crossover trainer' has nothing to do with the judgment of others. But why you might not, might have something to do with the judgment of others. Because change is hard.

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When I decided to train Buzz [without physical corrections or verbal intimidation](#), people called me out in public. I have videotapes of Buzzy running agility and people saying, "This woman is going to learn this clicker shit won't work for a dog like this." There was so much judgment levied down on me. I had to decide, is this worth it?

You might not want that kind of criticism thrown at you. For me, I knew it would be worth it, and I knew I knew how to correct dogs. But I don't know how good I could be without corrections. So, I'm going to try this for a week, a month, a year, and see what's possible.



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I can always go back to what I knew last week. If I feel this is getting me in trouble, because I knew how to correct dogs really, really well. And I think you have to question why. I believe I was really good at punishing dogs because of some trauma deep within me that needed healing, and it was easy to control a dog when I couldn't control people.

Obviously, I never, ever went back to last week. I never went back to yesterday. It's always looking forward. But why people might not want to become a crossover trainer is the narrative that is so popular, especially with social media. There is a lot of very confident, well-spoken, unfortunately mostly men who have this patriarchal voice that is so compelling to who trains dogs mostly, women.

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And the narrative is 'some dogs need this,' or the narrative is 'this is faster,' or the narrative is 'the positive reinforcement folk are lying to you,' or the narrative is 'not all punishment-based trainers train this way.' And that is a loophole that allows you to say, "Oh, oh, oh, okay, I'll keep doing it."

But you've got to recognize that for every balanced trainer that is really, really good dog training chops, there's probably thousands, tens of thousands more that don't. Because you can buy an electric collar at the hardware store. You don't need any understanding of animal behavior or of dog training.

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You could slap it on, you could push the button, and you will get results. You will get a suppression of behavior, and you will feel you have arrived. I think it's going to be really hard, especially if you've had success in something. It wasn't hard for me because I felt there was something compelling me to do this, even though nobody had done it.

But it might be hard for people, especially if they've got a successful dog training business based on this. One person I talked to probably five years ago, this man said to me, even if I thought I could do it, and even if I could continue to have the success I have, it would be financial ruin to me.

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Because I've promoted so much that these tools are necessary for dogs to learn. So, there's the economic reasons why people might not take me up on this challenge of becoming a crossover dog trainer. There's the appearance of faster results. There is the misguided story of [dominance theory](#) that still makes its way up through the gutter.

There's confirmation bias. You believe that all creatures, humans, dogs need to be corrected. They need to know wrong. I think the reasons why people might not change really comes down to the judgment of others. And I encourage you all to just let that go and listen to your heart. What might compel you to just say, "Okay, Susan, I'm doing it."?

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Number one is really taking a deep dive into somebody who's had success for more than 30 years, doing exactly it. [Jump over to my YouTube page](#). There's all kinds of playlists that will guide you. You might just start with one area of your dog training.

I had somebody say to me recently, "You know, I follow everything you do, but for the really important things, you know, we still need force." And I said, "What? Give me one thing." They said, "Well, a recall. You have to have force for recall."



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I don't, I don't. If I don't, then I'm pretty confident that you don't. If the answer isn't what you've tried, it doesn't mean the answer doesn't exist. It just means that maybe you haven't tried the way that can best reach the dog you're training. Why else might you want to change? You might have, like me, an ethical awakening. That didn't want to see my Terrier all cowering away from me.

That didn't want to be that person that my late husband was describing that he didn't want to be around. You might be more compelled to change if you were in a community of people doing exactly what you're attempting to do. It might be compelling just to try it and see the change developing in your dogs. That I hope would be compelling enough, but really, you have to have a big why.

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If you're listening to this, consider. It may not have been possible for you yet, but that doesn't mean it's not possible. It just means you haven't tried the right things. And I encourage you, jump over to YouTube, [check out any playlist](#), and if you want to be coached by myself and my team for our 300th episode celebration, we have a promotion on where we have all of our online programs on, at the lowest price ever.

Now, I don't care when you're listening to this episode, it could be 10 years down the road. We could be at episode number 1000, but if you have found this podcast episode because you're interested in being a crossover trainer.

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And my team will give you the opportunity to join any one of our programs that you want at the lowest investment because you're listening to this episode regardless, if you are a balanced trainer or you are a reinforcement-based dog trainer, and you want to really learn more about the nuances that helped me to become even more aligned with my dogs, just write us at wag@dogsthat.com with a subject line 'Crossing over at 300.'

Regardless, if you're going to deep dive into our playlists over on YouTube, you're going to seek out another great reinforcement-based dog trainer to be coached by, I really hope I've inspired at least the consideration of what is your big why to put down the tools and jump on board with an effective, efficient, engaging, and an emotionally cooperative way to train your dog.

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I'd love to hear from you. Please jump over to YouTube, write a comment on this episode. Let me know where you are in your dog training journey. There is zero judgment. No matter what you're doing, no matter what your breed of dog, let me know your mindset. And if you have any questions that I could potentially answer for you, please leave them in the comments and I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





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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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