

Is Dog Training About To Change?

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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"It's impossible. What you're trying to do can only be achieved by experts. That can't work. You're not special enough to achieve results. This elite type of dog training, that might work for Susan Garrett, but not for the rest of us. Is it possible that I'm wrong?"

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I was listening to something recently and it really triggered a memory for me, and it made me smile. And it wasn't so much about what was being said, but more about what the conversation implied for the direction of dog training. And it wasn't because the people in this conversation necessarily agreed with my viewpoint on dog training, probably more the opposite.

It was more about a shift that I felt that triggered a memory from my past. More on that in a moment. But for the first time in a very long time, I felt something that I haven't felt about dog training in a very long time, and that was a glimmer of hope.

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No, nothing new or revolutionary was exposed in this conversation. It was more about that shift, the similar feeling that I had way back in the mid-'90s. I'm going to be honest, over the last six months, I've felt a little bit discouraged and worried about the general direction of dog training as a whole.

It wasn't so much that I was doubting what I was teaching, it was more because of people being told they should be reaching for a tool for their dog rather than being shown how to create more clarity for that dog.

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I think as professional dog trainers that are influencing so many people, we need to consider that where a dog's quality of life is concerned, being right about an ideology is far less important than how our beliefs are impacting that dog emotionally and physically while they're being trained. Now, let's go back to the mid-'90s.

Long before there was social media, there were these email lists where you had in-depth conversations with the elites of the elites in the dog training world. There was an agility L list (Listserv Mailing List), and somebody had written in and posing a question to the professionals saying, "How can I stop my agility dog from popping the last two poles?"

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Now, for those of you who don't do dog agility with your dog, this is very relevant to the episode I'm going to share. It's not about agility. It's about dog training. So, a lot of dogs, when they're weaving, may get distracted for one reason or another, and they may leave the poles early, and that's a fault, and nobody wants it.

So, at that time, the answers that came from the experts of the list told that person that they need to stop the dog with a firm no and give it a physical punishment, so it knows that leaving early is never an option.



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I remember reading all of those responses and then sharing my own perspective, which was a very different one, that with my dogs, I had never needed to use punishment when my dogs inadvertently left the poles early, which, you know what, all of our dogs did it from time to time.

And my perspective was that's just information, that the clarity of the behavior was not transferred to the dog. That the fluency of weaving means all 12 poles, not just 10, and that it was our job to create that [clarity through reinforcement](#), not with punishment.

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And that I believed then as I believe now that a shift from blame to curiosity is what's going to provide that clarity for the dog.

Now, as you can imagine, back at that time and era of dog training, that idea didn't land incredibly well with the general population that was writing on this list. But instead of dismissing my idea entirely, what was said was, "Well, that might work okay for someone like Susan Garrett, but it won't work for the rest of us."

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And at the time, I really didn't grasp the bigger meaning of what that statement meant. But when I look back now, I see that statement as a turning point. I see it as a shift. Because in the early '90s, there was a lot of punishment in all of dog training. And so, it was acceptable- to blame the dog and let them know they were wrong.

But that idea that 'that might work for Susan Garrett but not for the rest of us', today I look back and I could see it as that shift because sometimes the first sign of change isn't flat-out agreement. It's simply acknowledging the moment that you're no longer being dismissed. And that brings me to the conversation that I mentioned at the very beginning of this episode.

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It was another podcast episode that a friend of mine sent to me and said, "You should listen to it." And I looked at who was presenting, and it was a very, very well-known and very well-respected leader in the [balanced dog training](#) community speaking on a podcast with his podcast partner.

And I remember when I received it, I wrote her back and I said, "I don't listen to other people's opinions of me if I won't ask for advice from them." In other words, I'm very intentional about what toxicity I let into my life. And people can be very unkind, especially when they don't know you and they're not talking to you face to face.

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So, I simply avoid. And my friend wrote me back and said, "No, I think you'll want to hear it." And so, I listened to this conversation, and it was very respectful, and that I was so grateful for. I'm always reminded of the late coach John Wooden who would say, "Just because we disagree doesn't mean we have to be disagreeable."

And that's what this conversation was. It was not disagreeable. The leader of this conversation was sharing that somebody had asked about the methodology that Susan Garrett uses in dog training, particularly in [agility](#), where she believes in reinforcement-based rather than using aversives or positive punishment or avoidance in the training.



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And here is what I heard in that conversation, and I will be paraphrasing because I didn't take notes. The leader of the episode shared, "People like Susan Garrett and Simon Prince..." And by the way, both Simon and myself are longtime students of Doctors Bob and the late Marian Bailey.

But they said that, "People like Simon and I might be able to achieve this elite type of dog training without the use of the tools and the aversives and the punishment, but that doesn't mean it's possible for everyone."

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Do you know why that smile came across my face? Because that was a shift. A small one, but looking back, it was exactly the same shift that I saw in the '90s. And he even shared a little analogy saying, "There are some people who can climb Mount Everest without the use of oxygen, but that doesn't mean the rest of us should even try."

And that too gave me a little chuckle because the parallel of reinforcement-based dog training to Mount Everest. And I can see it might be if you were just thrown into the deep end of the pool, but done strategically, it absolutely should not be looked at in the same framework, in my opinion.

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Now, it's no secret that of all the dog sports on this planet, dog agility is probably the one where you'll see aversives and punishment used the least. It's predominantly a sport where people use reinforcement-based, game-based methodology in everything that they do.

I know many elite high-level trainers throughout the world, and I know they do not use the aversives that a lot of people think in other areas of the world that they need. And that reinforcement-based dog training that we see throughout dog agility, in my eyes, started with a shift.

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And the sport of dog agility has not been around very long at all. It started in the early '80s. It came to North America in the late '80s. And I'm talking about a story that happened in the early to mid '90s. The shift was just beginning. It was acknowledged.

And when something moves from being disrespected and dismissed to being acknowledged, it's no longer being rejected.

And I think that's something to celebrate because it's being reconsidered, and that matters. Because what we do most often is being dismissed or being impossible. But in this episode, what I heard was, it's probably out of reach for most people, and that's different, and different is good.

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Years ago, Karen Pryor shared an article where she went through the stages of change, and I think it was called "On Being a Changemaker." And I'm not going to get all of the stages right, but I just want to share them with you because I think it's important.

The first sign of change is there is no sign. People just like flat-out ignore you, much like what they did to me in the '90s, where they would ignore/make fun of what I was doing back then with Buzz.

Then they will resist you, like, "Don't try to bring that stuff over in my backyard because I want none of it."



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And they may go from resisting to flat-out attacking. And they have to. To justify why they're not doing what you're doing.

If what we're doing isn't causing a dog ever to be afraid, isn't causing a dog ever to feel any kind of pain, then they have to justify not adopting this methodology, because why else would they do what they do.

And eventually, as Karen described the stages of change, they absorb what's happening, what's around them, and they may take it on in one form or another.

They may share one idea, one part of a methodology, an entire exercise, and that's how momentum builds, and that's how change happens. There has been a shift.

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What has started out as, "That can't work," has shifted to "That's likely not possible for everyone." And that is a shift, and that makes me smile. The belief that the results that people like myself get require this elite, untouchable level of dog training is just not true.

Because in our online programs, we have thousands—Tens of thousands of people who've gone through our programs since we've had them in 2009 that have got amazing results.

That have taken a [rescue](#) Malinois who now can walk off leash near wildlife, who can achieve the things that I achieve with my dog, who can come face-to-face with a bunny on a trail and just turn and come running back to me.

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Not running back to me with concern of what might happen if he doesn't, but with joy. Running fast with joy. And it's not about a dog making a decision, "Do I want the cookie or do I want the rabbit?" Because no dog's making that decision.

My dogs, if the choice was, "Do you want a cookie or do you want to chase the rabbit?", they would never choose a cookie. My Border Collies really don't like food that much. They love chase, they love games.

But why do they make the choice? It isn't about the reward. The reward is an extrinsic reinforcement. It's something that motivates them if they see it. But what we do, what really good reinforcement-based dog trainers do, is they create [intrinsic motivation](#) within that dog.

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That dog ran away from that rabbit because of the value he had for me, and that's achievable by everyone. Why do I know that? Because I've seen it in so many of our students.

Everyday people, imperfect people, busy lives people, people with mobility challenges, people with dogs who have had four or five homes, dogs who have given other people the biggest challenges possible.

Everyday people getting results. Getting results not because they're special, although they may be special in my eyes.

Not because they're special, but because they followed a system. Great training is not reserved for just special people. It's built from clear systems.



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If something only works for a few people, it is not a solution. We call that an exception. Six months ago, when I was disheartened by what I was seeing and reading on the internet, I asked myself a question: "Is it possible that I'm wrong?" And that's a question I think all dog trainers should ask themselves on the regular.

And I didn't ask that question because I thought I was wrong. I asked that question out of the respect of how many people I influence, both in my online classes and in this podcast. I asked myself that question before I went into a morning meditation.

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And after reflection, the answer that came to me, funny enough, came to me in my father's voice. Now, my father used to talk to us all the time about how much he loved us, about how we should love each other, how when we would fight you know, I have eight brothers and sisters, and when we would get into these arguments, my dad would say, "Hey, love one another."

So, when I asked myself that question, "Is it possible that the way I'm thinking is wrong?" And then I went into that meditation. I heard my father's voice.

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He said to me, "If the solution is through love, then the solution is never wrong." And I remember what that gave me, the feeling of empowerment, of it can't be wrong. It's worked for me for over 30 years. It's worked for so many people, not just me.

It's a revolution. It's the way the world is moving. If the solution is based on love, it can't be wrong. And in dog training, solutions of love don't equate to softness.

They equate to clarity. They equate to fairness. They equate to joy. They equate to connection in everything you do in life.

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It's about building understanding for a dog to succeed. Love in dog training isn't about lowering our standards or not having rules. It's about providing extreme clarity right from the very beginning and having that clarity within every layer of training.

You know, today in dog training, there's so many conversations about things like errorless learning or building resilience or how dogs learn through failure, and I think those conversations are circular. The real conversations are, are we building understanding or are we building pressure? Confusion isn't a requirement for resilience.

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Clarity creates confidence, where pressure creates compliance. What gives me hope is there isn't any absolute agreement anywhere. Because when ideas stop being dismissed and start being considered, even in a very small way, that's when change is underway.

Curiosity is always the first step in any meaningful change. So, if you've ever been told what you're trying to do can only be achieved by experts, if you've ever been told that you're not special enough to achieve results, if you've ever been told that something is impossible, what you really need is a system that your dog understands.

Your dog is never failing. They're just responding to what they currently understand.



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And as I've said many, many times, dogs are doing the best they can with the information we've given them in the environment we're asking them to work in. So, for this week, how about we all try something different? If there's a moment in our dog training that's frustrating, how about we turn that into a moment of curiosity?

If there's ever a time you feel the need to correct, how about that gets turned around to, how can we be clearer? The assumption that a dog knows this is what takes the responsibility away from us, their caregivers, their guardians, their people who love them, and turns us into somebody that blames and punishes them.

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Instead of blame, let's ask how we can make that next repetition even clearer, and let's watch change happen.

Thank you for joining me today. And until next time, stay curious, stay humble, and keep making life better at both ends of the leash. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 313: Are You Learning Or Looping: What To Do When Training Your Dog Stops Being Fun](#)

[Podcast Episode 146: Balanced Dog Training: Does It Really Exist?](#)

[Podcast Episode 114: Dog Agility Training: 3 Big Mistakes All Dog Owners Should Avoid](#)

[Podcast Episode 78: How to Train a Rescue Dog with Behavior Problems](#)

[Podcast Episode 94: How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement](#)



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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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