

Trials and Tribulations

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF TRAINING ALASKAN MALAMUTES



From basic puppy training to advanced exercises for high-level obedience competition, Tom learned treats and praise are the best way to teach his malamutes.

Full Stomach, Happy Heart

Obedience competitor Tom Batina shares the training philosophy that helped motivate his malamutes to multiple obedience titles.

My second malamute Kodiak's (Taiga's My Son's Best Friend, UD) five year journey from an untrained pup to a Utility Dog obedience title was not without mishaps. After all, he is still a malamute. During our first attempt

at a leg in Utility, Kodiak had a malamute moment during the scent discrimination exercise. His job was to find the one article that had my scent, among ten similar looking articles. When I gave him the command to "find it," Kodiak immediately trotted to the judge and began sniffing the judge in an unmentionable spot. Many thoughts raced through my mind, but I certainly knew he wasn't going to find it where he was sniffing! The judge froze, and I refrained from giving Kodiak a second

command. He finally found the right article, and we qualified with

Will Work for Food
With Alaskan malamutes, the path to obedience goes through their stomach.

a score of 189 out of 200 - after suffering a three point deduction for handler error!

Editor's Note:

Welcome to our new training column, Trials and Tribulations, which I abbreviate TNT - because it's DYNAMITE! This column will cover training tips for your mal in obedience, rally, agility, working - and more! TNT is the brainchild of this month's author, Tom Batina. What started out as a conversation about a single training article turned into some very productive brainstorming, and we soon expanded the idea into a regular column. A big thanks to brand new AMCA member Tom for sharing his vision and launching this column!

TNT will be written by different authors each time it runs. If you have an interesting story that might work for this column, please contact me. Do you have a "malamute moment" to share for Bloopers? Email your story (150 words or less) and a photo if you have one, to Karina Burger at info@winterstarfarm.com. THANKS!

Step-by-Step

Teaching Sit

Move the treat backward over your puppy's head. As his rump goes down, say "Sit" and reward with the treat.



Teaching Heel

Use the treat to get your puppy's attention and have him follow at your left side (also see photo on previous page).



Teaching Down



Move the treat from the puppy's eye level to the floor while saying "Down." If he does not drop immediately, do not repeat the command or push on his shoulders. Simply pull the treat along the floor until he drops.



How I Train Using Treats



My training begins using visible treats with a voice command, then moves to voice commands, reinforcing the desired response with treats. Here, my 12-year-old malamute Kodiak poses to demonstrate how I start training a puppy to sit.

In his book, *Everything I Know about Training and Racing Sled Dogs*, George Atlla wrote, "...the dog never makes a mistake. He is a dog and does what he does because he is a dog and thinks like a dog. It is you that makes the mistake because you haven't trained him to do what you want him to do when you want him to do it.... So if a mistake is made in the team, it is you that has made it, not the dog."

I found this quote after I made many mistakes while training my first malamute. We made progress, but I was not satisfied with the results from a choke collar and constant use of the word "No." While I saw the training time as a chore, it was probably a nightmare for my dog. After a year of headaches, I wondered if I could be the problem. Does a malamute's personality require a different approach?

My search for a better method led me to the writings of Bruce Fogle, DVM and Ian Dunbar, DVM. Fogle's book, *The Dog's Mind*, explained various types of behavioral reinforcement: food, touch, voice and negative (punishment). Fogle described food as the most powerful form of reinforcement. Ian Dunbar's video, *"Sirius Puppy Training"* demonstrated how to use food to manipulate and reward dog behavior.

When I got my second malamute puppy, Kodiak, I started training using the techniques suggested in Dunbar's video. I started with the "Sit" command, which required me to move a treat backward over the dog's head while giving the command "Sit." As Kodiak's eyes followed the treat, his rump went down, and he earned the treat. I then taught the "Heel" command by using the treat

to get Kodiak's attention and encourage him to follow me at my left side. When I stopped, I simply moved the treat backward over his head. He earned the treat as soon as he sat. I was shocked at the ease with which my eight-week-old puppy took to the training. Training sessions were short (10-15 minutes) and two or three times each day.

I taught the "Down" command by moving the treat from the dog's eye level to the floor. If Kodiak did not drop immediately, I didn't repeat the command or push on his shoulders. I simply pulled the treat along the floor until he dropped. Using food transformed our "training" time into "feeding" time.

Kodiak and I began attending puppy training class where the instructor reinforced Dunbar's methods. We did all of our basic training with a regular nylon collar and lots of dog treats. As our training progressed, I continued to use food as a training tool. Kodiak enjoyed his training sessions and earned his Companion Dog obedience title with scores of 194.5, 195 and 193 out of 200. He continued to enjoy feasting on treats while learning new commands for the Companion Dog-Excellent and Utility Dog titles. All new commands were reinforced with cheese or peanut butter. I used regular treats after he learned the command.

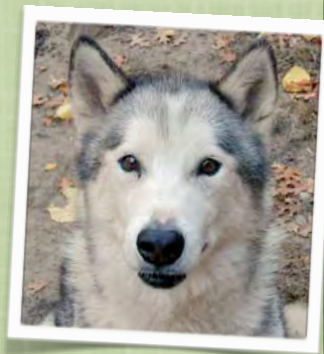
I am currently training my third malamute, Kenai. I find that training with food is not a silver bullet, but it is fun for the dog and easier on the trainer. Kenai started her training at eight weeks and earned her Companion Dog title at 12 months of age with a first place finish in Novice B. I do not yet know her full potential, but I do know that my best chance for reaching that potential is by appealing to her voracious appetite. For I have learned that if a mistake is made, I am the one who made it, not the dog.

Bloopers

Readers share their Malamute Moments

An Apple A Day...

My dog "Thyme," - Fire 'N Ice Once Upon A Time, CD, and I were competing in Fargo, North Dakota, in a horse arena. Thyme could be a wonderful obedience dog, and then turn around and put on a miserable performance. But that day, everything was going well - until the off-lead heeling pattern, when I heard people start laughing. I knew I should not compound whatever foolishness Thyme was engaged in by looking at her, so I just kept following the judge's instructions. When the exercise finished, I looked down, and Thyme was sitting precisely at my left knee, proudly holding a horse apple in her mouth. Spectators told me she snatched it up at the start of the exercise and did the entire pattern carrying it! - **Linda Dowdy**



Photograph of Thyme courtesy of Linda Dowdy.

Cartoon reprinted with permission of DrawTheDog.com.



About the Author

Tom Batina lives in Minnesota with his wife Kiki, three children and two malamutes. Tom's interest in mals began as a young child after reading an issue of "Northern Dog News," where he saw a picture of Ch. Boru's Guy, CD - and he knew then his next dog would be a malamute. Many years later, Tom and Kiki purchased their first and later their second malamute from Mick and Kathie McCormick, whose bloodlines included some of the early Boru dogs.

Tom began obedience training to maintain some control at home! It went so well, he decided to try his hand at competition. On his path to a UD title, Tom's mal Kodiak earned three firsts, two seconds and one third place when competing for his CD and CDX titles. The third leg of Kodiak's UD title was his only qualifying score where he did not place among the top three dogs.

A recreational musher who built his own dog sled, Tom subscribes to the philosophy that "a tired dog is a good dog" and works his dogs daily, alternating obedience training days and pulling days. The dogs sled in the winter and bike with Tom in the few months Minnesota doesn't have snow! Kodiak's pulling partner is a two-year-old female named Kenai, Winterstarz Cute as a Daisy, CD. She is currently pursuing her CDX and learning her Utility exercises. Tom plans to add another training challenge this summer with a new puppy. Tom is a member of the AMCA and the Minnesota Malamute Club.

