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TRAINING YOUR ROAD DOG WITH THE
REGULATIONS IN MIND
by Peggy Ann Strupp (6/06)



In 1989, when I began training my first Road Dog, I was working with an un-neutered male who thought he owned the horse, the trail, and all the wild critters we encountered. “Tos,” as we called him, loved “the hunt”. “Hock position” was something he performed to appease me temporarily so that I would release him to follow the whims of his nose in the wild of the forest. When it came time for the “recall” exercise, I had no problem getting him to “leave” the horse’s side. My problem, of course, was getting him to return! This was accomplished through lots of ground work, long line work, and eventually by running him down on horseback when his BAER bi-lateral hearing would become “selective”.

Imagine my surprise when, in 1997, I began training a puppy that refused to “leave” the horse’s side! This was a new experience for me. That same year I helped chair the national Road Trial in Wisconsin (near Detroit), and witnessed several exhibitor dogs with the same “problem”. When certain dogs were “released” so that they could be called back for the Recall exercise, the dogs appeared to remain glued to the horse’s side. These dogs refused to “leave”. The original framers of the Regulations never imagined such a scenario, and the original directions for the Recall exercise assumed the dog would leave when a release command was given. The Regulations, updated in January of ’06, now address the possibility that some Dalmatians actually remain near the horse even when “set free”. For these dogs, the Regulations allow the judge to direct the handler to place the dog on a stay, ride away from the dog, and then call the dog (recall).

Training a dog to stay for the Recall is completely different from training the dog to “return” while it is moving away. The type of Dal who will not “leave” the horse also does not like to “be left”. To train this type of Dal, you begin by training the classic AKC obedience recall on the ground. The dog is first taught to stay, then taught to “come” a short distance, and eventually taught to wait as the handler walks 30 feet away and then calls. Once the dog responds well on the ground, the exercise can be taught on horseback. The dog must first be taught to stay. Then the dog is taught to stay while the handler moves the horse a few feet away. A dog that breaks a stay would be verbally corrected, and then gently placed back in the original position (this requires that the handler dismount). Once the dog holds the stay while the horse moves a short distance away, the distance and time can be increased. For the dog that does not like to “leave” or “be left”, it is *imperative* that the handler practice this exercise at home using a stay. Don’t expect to get to a Road Trial and have the dog hold a stay if you haven’t practiced it at home! Training tip: know your dog, know the Regulations, and practice the techniques that you will use at an actual Road Trial.

Another new addition to the Regulations includes the requirement that exhibitors remain mounted during the endurance portion of the ride, and that exhibitor/horse/dog teams continue on the trail making “forward progress”. Exhibitors will dismount at the vet checks and may dismount on the trail for brief water stops, emergencies, or brief tack adjustments, but otherwise must remain mounted and make forward progress on the trail. Most exhibitors already complied with this requirement; this addition to the Regulations will require the exhibitor to plan their rate of speed in advance, and to condition their dog at home if they wish to maximize their possible score at the vet checks. To train for this requirement, the dog must be conditioned at home for endurance mileage at a “working” gait. Once at the Road Trial, the exhibitor should trot whenever possible, or during the first half of the mileage before the mid-point vet check. If the trail allows and the exhibitor has planned their rate of speed correctly, the team will be able to walk the last mile or so before the vet checks, maximizing the condition of the dog upon arrival at the vet checks.

The original Regulations began the timing of each team right after the vet check; *before* the start of the judged exercises. In 1999, the timing was changed to begin *after* the judged exercises. Although the Regulations never stated that exhibitors could delay their start time to “pair up” with another exhibitor, this became an accepted practice after 1999. Unfortunately, some exhibitors used a delayed start time to “rest” their dog and delay their arrival at the vet checks at the expense of other exhibitors. The Regulations now clearly state that the start of the timing begins *immediately* after each exhibitor has completed their judged exercises. Because of the timing requirement, exhibitor teams will not be able to “pair up” on the trail unless they happen upon each other by chance. To train for riding the trail alone, exhibitors should practice handling a horse alone at home, or should bring an escort rider with them to the trial. Some Road Trials offer hired “wranglers” to ride accompany each exhibitor. For safety reasons it is recommended that novice or less-experienced riders bring an escort rider or hire a wrangler to accompany them on the trail.

Other updates to the Regulations include the limitation of no more than three dogs to a team, the allowance of bells on the dog’s collar if the exhibitor chooses, and more experience required of the judges. Additionally, the Coaching Companion certificate level no longer requires a gallop; the CC test now requires only a “change of pace” for the dog. For more information on Road Trials, check out the DCA webpage at www.thedca.org. Click on “events” for a copy of the Regulations. If you wish to be certified as a Road Trial judge or just want more information, contact the Committee chairman at <pstrupp@gmail.com>.