

BACK HEELING

From Heather Somers

If you've spent the time training your dog where and what, **proper heel position** is, then you should have no trouble just telling him to heel and he'll go with you. Unfortunately not many of us train our dogs the meaning of heel to this degree.

One thing that I've told others to try if they're having difficulty is to set themselves up with the dog between a **wall** and themselves, heel forward a few steps to get the rhythm then, in a kind of rocking motion, take a slight step backwards. 9 times out 10 the dog will try and stay with you and move backwards, even with just one paw and his body. If your timing is good, immediately click and treat that movement. Repeat this a few times, c/t immediately there is any indication of him moving back, no matter how small the movement may be. If this works for you, you can gradually increase your steps backward, c/t for progressively more backward steps from the dog.

Once he gets the idea and is moving well between you and the wall, step out from the wall a *small* distance, if he keeps going straight, then make a bit more distance between you and the wall.

You can also do this using store windows as a mirror and you can see how straight he stays.

Don't push this too fast. Too much, too quickly, and he'll start swinging his butt out or in, whichever feels more comfortable for him.

Of course, the very first thing *you* have to do, is to learn to walk back perfectly straight yourself!!!! Since you'll probably find this

difficult, then you'll understand a bit better what you're asking from your dog.

Aids can be used to help him keep straight if you want to use them: a wand, the end of the leash looped under his belly kind of like a sling, walk him along a curb or on a 2x4, train him to walk with a front and a back leg on either side of a length of PVC pipe. When using any aids, make sure the dog is well introduced to them so he isn't scared of them, otherwise your training could be set back days, weeks, or even months.

Hopes this helps some of you.

From Corinne Lawson

I have successfully taught students how to teach their dog a backing heel. First step is to teach the dog to back up. Once the dog knows this, then the dog should be able to do it in any position. My students taught their dogs to back while in front of them. Then, when the dogs were comfortable with this, they put the dog in heel position, and one step at a time, did a back in heel. Trick for the handler - do not step on dogs toes!

It is very easy to "push your dog out" with your left leg, and/or step on their toes with your left foot. Your dog is working to back up and stay in heel and often does a slight curl around you. One thing the handler can try is to step with their left foot directly behind their right. This helps keep both of you backing in a straight line and no toe stepping. Also - practicing with the dog against a wall (hall) or jump helps keep the dog from moving out. I also suggest practicing with the handler against the wall to keep the handler straight as well. Don't try to cover lots of ground at first, but build up

your backing in heel and then it can become very natural.

From Ray's Dressage Class

Ensure the dog knows the heel position and is rewarded for being there. Work on forward heeling and having the dog find the heel position. (move away from dog and have dog find heel position)

Take step back. When dog finds the heel position, reward. Progress in small increments to several steps.

Once you have established the back heel movement, there are many things you can do to sharpen the skill:

Vary speed: use a metronome to help with consistency. Spend much time on extremely slow pace. Some time on normal and fast.

Add movement to correct position:

- a pivot to keep the dog's hind end close to you.
back 2 3 4, pivot 2 3 4, back 2 3 4, pivot 2 3 4, etc.
- a side step to keep the dog close
back 2 3 4, side step, back 2 3 4
- serpentine to make dog find position on curve
- zig-zags or squares for dog to respond to your quick position change.

Tips for handler position:

Whether the dog is back-heeling on four feet, two feet, or in a crawl position, keep your shoulders facing forward. If you turn your shoulders to look back at the dog, the dog will likely move out of heel position.

How to . . . train the heel back

At every event, the back heeling element destroys many otherwise-good dressage routines. It's time to review some ideas from previous WAGs and add some exercises that should help handlers with this pernicious problem.

- Make sure your dog knows the heel position and is comfortable there. That way, given the added stress of the heel back, the dog will want to be in heel position.
- Move back 1 step. Have dog find position. Reward.
- Progress in small increments to several steps
- Use a wall and gradually move away from it
- If dog turns rear end out: add pivot to left or side step away. More advanced: back 4 steps, circle back, back 4 steps. Back 4 steps, spin, back 4 steps, forcing dog to find position.
- If dog turns rear end in: use leg to gently push it back out or pivot away from dog
- Back heel full length of ring, pivot, back heel back. During this exercise, do what you need to do to train the dog to find heel position (side step away, pivot). **WARNING:** Don't adjust your position to match the dog's!

- Practice backward zig zigs. Pause at each change of direction so that dog can find the heel position before moving on.
- Back heel in a serpentine. Start slowly, making sure dog has the position. Gradually increase speed. Vary size.
- Stand/stay dog. Handler back up 2 steps. Have dog find heel position. Reward. Gradually increase distance.
- Start at the end: pick a spot you want the dog to back-heel past. Start one step in front of it. Back heel to it, reward. Gradually increase distance, keeping the end spot the same. Make a game of this.

- Stand/stay dog at right angles to the line you want to heel along. (photo) Start a step or two in front of dog. Start backing up. Just before you reach dog, give your command for back heel. Keep backing up. As soon as the dog finds heel position, reward. (This is vital to do so that in a routine, if the dog swings out, it can still find the heel position)

