

# Puppy Imprinting for Ringsport

by Shannon Nieuwkoop

The following description of puppy imprinting is the method I and my club members are currently using to prepare our young dogs for careers in ringsport. My methods are constantly evolving as each puppy presents new challenges, and I'm always learning from the other trainers I encounter. I have to give a special thanks to Shade Whitesel, a professional trainer who joined our club last year, for helping to update and refine my methods and for sharing her process for teaching the Send Away exercise. I've used her method on my young dog, with tremendous success.

By no means is this an exhaustive list, nor is this the only way to introduce the ringsport exercises. Those of you who are experienced ringsport trainers may not find anything useful here, but for those of you who are somewhat new to ringsport training, I encourage you to take from this article what works for you and your puppy, and leave the rest.

I like to teach these behaviors to very young puppies as a foundation for the more complicated things I'll expect of them later. I've found that the things I teach the very young puppy tend to be their default behaviors later on, which seems to work well as their training becomes more intense and my expectations of them increase.

Generally, with a very young puppy (7 or 8 weeks old), I begin with food rewards, and as the pup gets older, I switch from food to tugs, balls, squeaky toys and bites on the decoy. I transition away from food once the pup starts to show a diminished drive for the food, and/or when I get sick of dealing with treats. I begin teaching these behaviors in non-distracting situations, and gradually increase the level of surrounding distractions as the pup progresses. Keep in mind that just because the puppy understands a behavior or a command in one context or location, they might have to learn it all over again in another – don't hesitate to step back or slow down to account for the abilities of the particular puppy.

**Eye contact.** I begin with a treat in my hand, and hold it away from my face. Mark any flash of eye contact with a

clicker and reward. The rewarded behavior should increase in frequency, and in duration. Gradually, I increase the amount of time to maintain the eye contact before I release her, and change the location where I'm holding the treat – left hand, right hand, up high, off to the side, etc. Once the pup has a basic understanding of this concept, I associate a command with it (I use "watch"), and I require eye contact for the pup to get her dinner, to go outside, to get out of the car, to have a treat, etc.

**Waiting for permission to come out of her open crate.** I open the crate, and if she starts to come right out, shut it in her face (not too hard, obviously). I tell her "wait" as I open it again. If she actually waits for a moment, I capture that by telling her "okay" in an excited voice so that she knows she's been released. I gradually increase the amount of time I make her wait before coming out. She is never allowed to come bursting out of her crate until I give the release. I find this behavior to be very helpful at the training field as it is the first place that I require the pup to control herself before she's allowed the reward of bitework.

**Waiting for permission to eat.** I begin by preparing her food and then waiting for her to offer eye contact and/or a sit or down, or command a sit or down if she doesn't readily offer behaviors. Once she's offered eye contact and/or taken a position, I tell her "okay" to release her and give her the food. I gradually extend this to placing the food bowl near her and requiring her to wait for the release until she can eat it.

**Whistle recall.** I prefer to use the whistle for out and recalls and my voice for out and guards because I believe that the two sounds are very distinct to the dog, and therefore clearer to her when she's in the midst of biting and needs to respond appropriately. I begin by taking the puppy to a park, or somewhere

unfamiliar where she can wander a bit and get distracted (I let her drag a long line in case I need to catch her). I wait until she's not paying attention to me, then turn around, start running and whistle. She's startled by the noise, sees me running away, and she'll chase me. Once she's chasing, I turn around and congratulate her for coming to me. I've found that I may only be able to get away with this once or twice per outing, and she'll learn quickly to keep a better eye on me. The object is to imprint an urgent reflexive reaction to drop what she's doing and find me at the sound of the whistle.



Cory Hart with Tarzan, eye contact

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**Jumping and climbing.** I take her for walks in the woods, in a terraced yard, on a playground, etc. where she has a chance to jump and climb. I mark those moments with lots and lots of praise. Formal jumping once she's older is much easier if she already loves to jump and knows that she'll be praised lavishly for it.

**Barking on command.** I've found that this behavior can be captured and named with the use of the clicker. I find a situation where she'll offer a bark then click and reward it. Once she's offering that behavior often enough, I associate a command with it, and practice getting her to bark on command. It can be handy, but not necessary, to teach a "quiet" command as well. Later, I'll use the bark on command to teach the dog to bark at the decoy in the blind in order to earn a bite.

**Teaching the puppy to "out" when she hears her name.** I exchange one equivalent item for another – two balls, two tugs, etc. I play with one item with the pup, present the other equivalent item to her and say her name. I try to encourage her to drop the static item from her mouth to take the one I'm holding and moving. The objective is for her to cue on her name to let go while anticipating that she's going to get an equivalent reward for doing it.

**Putting her feet on an object.** I introduce this foundation to the object guard exercise with a clicker and food. I shape the behavior by starting with any interest in the object and toss the food reward away from the object. I reward her for returning to the object by clicking and tossing the treat away. If necessary, to help her get started, I'll pat the object to see if she'll put her feet on it so that I can click and reward that behavior. I want the pup to learn that returning to the object and putting her feet on it leads to a reward. I gradually increase the amount of time she waits with her feet on the object before I click and toss the reward.

**Change of positions.** I like to teach the positions on top

of a crate, at the top of stairs, on a picnic table, etc. – somewhere that the pup cannot move forward so that she will learn to change positions by moving the back end of her body, rather than the front. Then I use food to lure the pup into tuck-up sits, backup downs and stands. Once the



**Degas, down on a placemat**

pup understands the nature of this game, I start to associate the command for each position. As the pup progresses, I begin to reward intermittently, rather than for each position change, and increase the distance between the dog and myself. The goal is to teach her to change positions on command without displacing herself by creeping forward.

**Long sit and long down.** Once the pup understands the sit and down commands from learning to change positions, I do these two

positions independently, for increasing durations in increasingly distracting situations. I like to vary being in and out of the pup's sight so that she becomes very comfortable with the fact that I could come strolling back at any moment.

**Downing on a placemat.** I use the placemat to give the dog a place to go after an outbound jump to wait for the command for the return jump. I begin independently of jumping by simply using food and a clicker in the same way as I do to teach her to put her feet on an object. Once she understands that going to the placemat yields a reward, I give a down command so that she'll lie down at or on the placemat in order to get her click and reward. When I begin to teach her the protocol of formal jumping, she's already familiar with downing on her placemat, so it's easy for her to incorporate that as part of the more complex behavior of the formal jump. Once I'm using the placemat as part of the formal jump, I always place it at the same distance from the jump (which depends on what works for that dog) so that she can always anticipate that it will be in the same place once she clears the jump. As she progresses, I reduce the size of the placemat. Once she's ready to compete, and the placemat isn't there, she still knows how far she needs to go to down herself for the return jump.



**Cory and Kaida, change of positions**





Degas and me, send away

**Send away.** Until the dog has a solid understanding of this exercise, I don't do it anywhere but my home field.

**Step 1:** I begin by placing a special toy that I only use for this exercise in the center of one end of the field, then drag the puppy back about 5 or 10 meters, allowing her to see the toy the whole time. Then I release her so she can run and pick up the toy, and encourage her to bring it back to me for praise and play. I gradually increase the distance I drag her back so that even when she can no longer see the toy, she knows where the spot is so that she can find it. Once she can do the whole field length reliably, she's ready for the next step.

**Step 2:** I again take her with me to place the toy in the spot, but rather than dragging her back, I require her to turn her back and walk with me away from the toy. When I reach 5 or 10 meters, I turn her around and release her to the toy. I increase the distance until she can do the whole field length.

**Step 3:** I place the pup in a sit or down about 5 or 10 meters from the spot, and have her watch me place the toy in the spot. When I return to her, I release her to the toy. Again, I increase the distance until she can do the whole field length.

**Step 4:** I repeat steps 1, 2 and 3 with a spot at the opposite end of the field.

**Step 5:** I show the special toy to her while she's in her crate in the car. Then I go out to the field to place the toy. I walk her out to the field and place her in a sit or down 5 or 10 meters from the toy – close enough that she can see it. Then I release her to the toy. I increase the distance until she can do the whole field length, and then I repeat the process for the spot at the opposite end of the field. My goal is to have her see me with the toy

before I take her to the field so that she'll anticipate that it's out there waiting for her.

**Step 6:** I go to a new field and start again with Step 1 and work through the progression until the dog knows the two spots on that field. Then I repeat the process on a few more fields so that the dog can generalize the behavior. The incremental changes in distance for each phase depend on what an individual pup can handle. If she's not going directly to the spot where the toy is, then I've progressed too quickly, and I shorten up the distance. The goal is to have her run straight and fast down the center of the field directly to the spot, without having to wander around looking for the toy.

**Heeling.** This behavior is one that I tend to teach a little differently to each pup, depending on what seems to work for that dog. There are a million different ways to teach the heel, but currently, with a young pup, I use food and/or a toy get her offering eye contact while walking along with me in approximate heel position, and sitting automatically when I come to a stop. I use a clicker or my voice to mark the behavior I like, gradually shaping the correct heel position and behavior.

**Hold an article.** This is the precursor to the retrieve, which is another behavior which can be taught by a multitude of methods. I've had the most success with teaching a Koehler-type forced retrieve, but, regardless of method, I like to teach a calm "hold" behavior and command to the pup while she's still young. I do the hold and retrieve training with a wooden dowel or dumbbell, and then switch to my final retrieve article later on, once the behavior is exactly how I want it so that I don't accidentally create a bad association with



Degas learning to hold an article



Loki accepting her muzzle



the final retrieve article if I run into problems along the way.

**Wear a muzzle.** I introduce this with food to make a positive association to putting her face in the muzzle. I begin by rewarding her for simply putting her face into the muzzle, and gradually increase the amount of time she has to keep it there to get the reward, and I prefer to give the treats through the muzzle, so that the reward happens while the muzzle is in place. When I think she's ready, I put the straps around her head for only a second, and slide a treat into the muzzle before removing it. Again, I gradually increase the amount of time she has to keep the muzzle on in order to earn her reward. Once she's quite comfortable with the muzzle, and has a good grasp of heeling, I introduce the muzzle into the heeling exercise.

**Food refusal.** I like to teach this relatively early, once the pup has a reasonably reliable long down in distracting situations, as this exercise is essentially that – simply a long down with edible distractions. I begin with the pup in a down next to me so that I can stop her and calmly tell her “no” if she tries to investigate the food. I have the food thrower show the pup her tug toy and then put it behind his back before tossing a single piece of food about 2 meters from the pup. Then the food thrower approaches and I release the pup for a vigorous game of



Matt and Loki, tug reward

tug, making sure that she has no chance of getting to the food. The pup will learn to ignore what's being thrown at her because she'll be anticipating the vigorous game of tug, and the food thrower can gradually increase the quantity of food thrown and the proximity of the food to the dog. I've found that this method yields a dog who is very confident during this exercise, rather than one who is concerned about it, and prefers to leave the scene in order to avoid the situation.

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Teaching these behaviors to your young dog can provide the foundation she needs for a productive ringsport career, and I've found that the more complex training she'll encounter as she gets older seems to come more easily as a result. Just remember that there is no need to follow any sort of time schedule as each pup learns at a different rate. I hope that you've found at least some of this information to be beneficial – as I said before, take what you like and leave the rest. Happy training!



Cory and Kaida, long down