

# When It's time for a Break

*by Deborah Lee Miller-Riley*

As a canine watersports judge, I have witnessed thousands of great dogs compete for watersports titles. While I always share the excitement of triumph and commend qualifiers for their success and skill, what I appreciate most in a team is not based on whether they pass. It is their display of partnership, a team performance radiating trust, focus and mutual joy.

It is a good handler who knows the difference between when discipline and pressure can guide her dog to a joyful performance, and when pressure should be removed by sacrificing task success for the dog's well-being. Delaying a training or competition goal, for what your friends might perceive as giving up or encouraging disobedience, is neither a private nor a painless decision on the day of a trial. It is why I exalt handlers who have the strength of character to ensure their dog's happiness during a man-made event. These dog-centric handlers are relationship architects and the true dog whisperers of our time. They appropriately assess the dog and always act in the best interest of the dog and their relationship.

I wish I had been born knowing everything about dogs, I would suffer less guilt today if it were so. Nope, I am not one of the natural dog whisperers I so admire. I am a recovering human - a person working toward being a better friend, leader and sage to each generation of dogs. And my education has been difficult at times - not just for me.

One of my most costly lessons came years ago. I sat, legs dangling in the water, ready to send my competition dog off a boat platform to complete her last task in a water test. It was to be her fifth leap from the stern that would earn my brass ring, a PWDCA Courier Excellent title, the highest water title a Portuguese Water Dog could earn at the time.

My dog was truly a gifted communicator. She usually did her best to please me but, at this moment, as I asked her to jump, she turned her head away from me and remained seated at my side. I asked her again with a more demanding tone. Her skin rippled up her back, but her eyes returned to me and she poked me with her cold nose. When she rose to her feet and shook the water from her coat, hope filled me like the wind opening a sail. Then

came the stillness when I realized her paws were not reaching for the gunnel. Instead, she twisted her body into an about-turn, planted her rump, tucked her tail and asked our rower how her day was going.

I couldn't believe she was doing this to me! Didn't she realize the costs, the time, the rarity of water tests, the hopes of adulation I had invested in this moment? I flushed, thinking of the stopwatch in the judge's hand and my fellow trainers watching from shore. I called for her to return to me. An ear flick told me she heard me, but she did not comply. I wanted that title so badly I only briefly thought the dog had a good reason not to enter the water.

Leaning toward the belief she was just getting bored with the whole test scene and my stress signals, I decide to cajole her. Our special play sounds and my giggles brought her back to my side. I begged her and promised her this would be her last jump, could she "pa-leeze" do this for me. She lifted her head, licked my cheek and took a soaring leap from the boat. We finished our Courier Excellent title, but as we were walking back through congratulatory friends, I saw my dog in pain. Little did I know how much she had trusted me or how much I had violated that trust. When the veterinary tests confirmed her spinal injury, the lesson was seared into my heart.

Knowing when we are asking too much of our dogs, knowing when it's time for a break from a trial situation or from a training session is something we can learn. We do so by declaring our intention to cultivate sensitivity, awareness, trust in, and with, our dogs. It begins by becoming aware of who our dog is, her personality traits, her desires, her fears, her abilities and her tolerances. It grows with the principle that we are the dog's one true advocate.

Such responsibility cannot be delegated to the dog, friends or a trial judge. It demands that we not only watch and listen to our dog, but that we find mentors who do so too, that they may teach us awareness and give us perspective. It requires that we have a sense of humor about our own imperfection so that we are able to recognize when our tension, negative thoughts or ambitions are fogging a loving relationship-in-training.

Real teamwork produces mutual joy. Knowing when you need a team break is as simple as recognizing happiness in yourself and your dog. If one of you isn't happy and focused, then it's time for a break. A break can be hours or months or a moment: it is the time that is required for reflection, change and action that resets the production of happiness.

## If you find yourself in one of these moments while working with your dog, it's time for a break:

- You are not intentionally setting the dog to succeed.
- You can't see progress.
- Your voice volume is rising and distance from your dog is not increasing.
- Your hands are frequently inhibiting canine behavior.
- You are using restraint devices to gain compliance.
- You think what you want is more important than what the dog wants.
- Making the dog do "it" is more important than earning the dog's willing participation.
- You feel anxious when the dog's performance is unexpected or disappointing.
- You lack joyous non-food reinforcers or you are out of food reinforcers.
- The word "no" is replacing the word "yes" or click.
- Your focus has moved to how to suppress behavior.
- The duration between smiles is increasing.
- You are confused about the purpose of the training or where to go next.
- You think the dog is just "blowing you off" or that her intention is disobedience.
- People or dogs are annoying you.
- Suggestions offered by fellow trainers create defensiveness or anger.
- Clock watching or chatting with friends is more frequent than dog watching.
- You are not having fun.
- You think it's time for a break.

As you may have noticed, dogs don't talk to us in words and they are usually poor about setting physical limits when high on adrenaline. It is up to us to become astute students of canine ills, discomfort, distress, frustration, over-arousal, and most importantly, canine happiness. If you observe any of these signs in your dog during training or a trial it may be time for a break and an assessment.

The dog:

- refuses to enter the water (This is also a common symptom of a tick-borne illness if you normally have a water-loving dog);
- refuses to swim;
- swims lower, slower in the water;
- suddenly refuses food, toys, or play;
- repeatedly swims to shore, disengages from work;
- repeatedly leaves the handler, disengages from work;
- pants excessively with a long tongue;
- has dilated pupils, a glazed-over look;
- breathes heavily; chest and stomach are heaving;
- shows signs of injury, lameness, touch avoidance or sensitivity;
- exhibits any hesitancy atypical of the dog;
- licks you repeatedly, paws or pokes you;
- changes in behavior - normally energetic, focused, engaging; now disinterested or slow to respond;
- changes movement or carriage;
- avoids jumping up;
- shows symptoms of swimmer's tail: tail is drooping, dog is not lifting the tail during arousal;
- repeatedly shakes or scratches: body, head or ears;
- barks excessively;
- exhibits aggression including: hard eye contact, growling, snarling, or snapping;
- is inattentive, not interested in the task or the trainer;
- does not respond to cues for familiar and basic behaviors;
- will not respond to a recall cue;
- refuses to repeat a behavior;
- refuses to hold, carry or swim with a familiar object - but usually does or will do so on land;
- refuses to leave a boat platform when asked;
- appears desperate to board a boat, repeats swim circles around or tries to climb onto the boat;

- refuses to leave the water, obsessed with something in the water;
- sniffs when trainer engages dog;
- urinates or marks when trainer engages dog;
- laps water beyond thirst;
- rolls in the sand or grass, creating "sand angels," in response to trainer engagement;
- gets the "zoomies" - wild bouts of racing around the trainer;
- yawns in response to trainer engagement;
- tongue flicking in response to trainer engagement;
- deliberately turns head away or turns back to trainer in response to trainer engagement;
- crouches with no or slow deliberate movement, tail tucked under or between legs.

*Keep fresh the passion for friendship, the goodness of feeling your dog's joy and desire to play with you, to work for you. These feelings are the reason we train, the real reason for sports. Learning when it's time for a break from the conformity of trial rules or a backyard training session will help preserve your intention to be a better, wiser human friend to your beloved dogs. When in doubt, give yourself and your dog a break. When it doesn't feel right to you, trust yourself, stop and find answers. Learn everything you can about your dog. Be a student for life. Actively seek answers and wisdom and they will come. Your effort will shine through your teamwork and leave you with something priceless.*

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[http://www.caninewatersports.com/Canine\\_Water\\_Sports/Home\\_Port.html](http://www.caninewatersports.com/Canine_Water_Sports/Home_Port.html)