

GIVE THEM A TAP ON THE SHOULDER

by Martin Deeley

When I first started using the electronic remote trainer to help me train my dogs I was taught to use continuous stimulation. However after the initial level finding and basic introduction to the collar, more and more I am using momentary stimulation in the training of my dogs. Momentary stimulation has many advantages in the training of dogs. Advantages which owners not only need to be aware of to help them in their training, but will also give them the opportunity to use a form of stimulation to fine tune their dogs while maintaining style and drive. Think of the 'tap' as an attention-getter – hey listen to me. Like you would touch someone on the shoulder when you want them to listen to what you have to say. Sometimes when they are relaxed completely it only has to be a light tap, other times when they are mildly concentrating on something else it is a slightly harder tap and sometimes when they are totally focused on a subject it has to be a hard tap. The feeling, to the person you are tapping, will probably be about the same although it varies in intensity because of their thought and concentration processes at the time.

Most quality remote trainers now provide both continuous and momentary stimulation to allow the trainer to develop and use the best approach to training a dog. The best way will always bring out the natural abilities and skills of the dog, the desire to please, and maintain style and performance while providing the control and reinforcement of actions in a humane way. Many trainers have limited their use of Momentary stimulation, often due to insufficient experience and knowledge of its application. We are educated into the use of a specific method and we do not take it any further, few of us experiment.

Momentary stimulation was developed mainly for pointing dogs. The concept of using momentary was to maintain the point and 'whoa' command, and create steadiness while still retaining the style, which is so essential in bird dogs. Low Momentary provides a stimulation for a split second often one, one thousandth of a second, a single pulse - much faster than anyone could ever tap a button on continuous. This pulse has an attention getting affect, a 'tap'. Touch it yourself and experience the single 'tap' from this and you will notice something quite fascinating. It is so quick that at low levels it is almost unnoticeable, maybe even subliminal. At medium range levels, it comes and goes so quickly, it is virtually painless. It has a startling effect but because it happens so quickly and for such a short duration it does not overload the nerve endings. Touch an electric fence or other forms of electric stimulation and you will be left rubbing the 'touched' spot because the nerve endings have been overloaded. This does not happen with momentary at any setting. There are no residual sensations from the stimulation. For bird dogs this gave trainers the ability to hold the dog on point without creating any aversion to the game it was pointing. It provides the average dog owner the opportunity to correct a dog around game without overdoing it in such a way that the dog could 'blink' or even avoid game. When I started using the remote trainer just over five years ago for training retrievers and spaniels, I quickly realized the advantage of momentary, its versatility and more forgiving application. I began to use it more for specific situations in combination with continuous, momentary for a tap - a reminder, and continuous for the introduction to the collar or a major misdemeanor such as chasing. In fact, very quickly I found I could use a number of taps on momentary to stop chasing also.

Many models from a number of manufacturers provide the ability to adjust levels from the hand held transmitter as well as change from momentary to continuous. This is a major step forward in the ability of the trainer to select exactly the right level at the moment it is required. Momentary

because of its duration often needs a higher-level setting than continuous to be perceived by the dog. Therefore, once the right level of continuous has been found for the dog and the type of training being done, in most cases, it is necessary to step up one level on the switch, for the dog to feel it. Although continuous stimulation is the main 'vehicle' for introducing the dog to the collar through the classic escape and avoidance routine; - apply continuous, guide the dog into the action required and then stop applying stimulation as action occurs - momentary can also be used effectively in early training. Using momentary, give the command and at the same time give a single pulse stimulation – a tap - while guiding the dog into the action required. In both approaches, many recommend that the dog should already have been taught the commands prior to application of the collar. However I personally have found that through guiding using a leash or a long line and the application of momentary stimulation you can speed the learning process even though a dog has not been taught the command. You are actually teaching not reinforcing through the use of the collar. The momentary tap is prompting the dog like a light tap on the butt for a sit.

In the field the classic application of continuous is illustrated when we are teaching our dog to handle while quartering. We apply stimulation, give the command and then remove stimulation as the dog responds. With momentary, give the command, 'tap' momentary simultaneous with the command and repeat the tap until the dog complies. On some occasions you may have to give the command again especially if you have waited longer than 2 seconds after a previous command or 'tap' of momentary. At this stage your dog must have been taught what these commands are and what is expected when you give them. In this instance the use of the collar is to reinforce, speed up, and polish a command or correct a dog for willful non-compliance. With the momentary correction the speed of the stimulation is such that it is an attention grabber, a diverter of the mind from the wrong intention of the dog. It diverts his focus from what he was doing or wanting to do, and to focus on the trainer and what he wants the dog to do. That is the finesse of momentary and its main advantage. It gets attention without putting your dog's brain into confusion and even panic. Through correct usage a trainer can select just the right intensity of 'tap' to gain the dogs attention and willingness to do what is required without impairing its ability to focus and think. It acts as a focus diverter, redirector, changer or splitter.

Momentary can also be easily used as a distracter and controller before a strong focus is established which would make it difficult to control the dog. It is an attention grabber, "Hey listen to me" or a warning "Don't even think of it". Again so quick and non-invasive to the dog's mind that it does not create problems with their thinking. Take for example a dog that sees a deer ahead. With momentary it is so easy to 'remind' the dog before a chase really sets in. By tapping the button and giving the command 'sit' you have minimized or even eliminated the chasing and replaced the chase action with the more acceptable one of sitting. Exactly the same as with the bird dog that points game, we can replace the potential chase that can follow with a stand and watch the birds away. Watch a bird dog and just before it breaks, watch its muscles tense up and its foot begin to rise. By timing a low momentary pulse, we can stop the breaking sequence well before the dog is in full chase. This is much more subtle and far better on the dog when done correctly than a harsh correction when the dog is in full flight after a bird. If dog has been properly schooled on whoa, that one 'tap' is enough to stop it completely. Just one tap. In this way, when training in the field by reading our dog and anticipating the problems we can short-circuit those behaviors we don't want.

A trainer can finesse things so much more with momentary. However just because momentary is merely a 'tap' you should not overuse it. Any dog we are training should feel that it has the right

to make a mistake without being over corrected for it. We don't press a button every time an error occurs because we do not know exactly what is in that dogs mind. We like to see a little trend happening and give the dog the benefit of the doubt. You have to learn from and understand your dog by allowing it to make mistakes. Often it is not their mistake it is a lack of training on your part. If you apply stimulation incorrectly to a confused dog all you get is a more confused dog. If during training we put our dog in a position where it can do right, and avoid situations where it can go wrong we can build the foundations of a well-trained dog and minimize corrections. A solid correction should only be given when you know the dog understands a command. When a problem occurs ask yourself "Is it me, is it the situation, have we progressed the training too quickly or is it the dog?" Get to know why a dog does what it does. Be able to read your dog – its body language often shouts. Once you can really read your dog and you know he is willfully disobeying then you can correct with the collar. Always believe that the dog is trying to do its best for you unless it proves different. Although we want to avoid any errors on the part of the trainer, an error with momentary is a very short error and will not affect the dog to the same degree as an error with continuous. When in doubt - don't press the button.

I have found that Momentary stimulation is similar to a 'tap' on the shoulder. It is a, 'Hey, remember me? Remember what I am asking you?' Try it, get confidence in its application, I have found that it sharpens up a dogs performance without loosing the essential drive and style that makes working a hunting dog such a joy.