

Shocking humane! Chad Mackin

Used correctly, the e-collar is the most humane training tool I have ever seen. This may sound shocking, but nevertheless, it is true.

I was shocked too. I had been convinced that the e-collar was a valuable tool through my discussions with trainers who used them, but I was not prepared for what I would discover when I saw it in the hands of a master.

On a warm Monday morning in central Florida, I stood in a field waiting to be shown how to use this tool. I was not alone there were two other students with me along with our teacher Martin Deeley and Mary his helper. I was the only one who had never seen e-collar training before. Of the other two, one had learned a little from another trainer, but wanted to learn more, the other, has seen the collar used in a brutal manner, and was here to see if the tool could be used humanely at all.

Martin had provided a small hand-held citizen's band radio that would pick up on the signals from the collar transmitter. This way we would be able to hear whenever he tapped the dog with the collar. The radio was necessary. So gentle was the touch of the collar that without it we would not have had any idea when dog was being tapped.

What unfolded that morning was the harmony of a good dog man with the dogs who trust him. The collar is not magical, Martin is a magnificent trainer and I have no doubt that he could have worked these dogs beautifully without the aid of the collar, but the collar allowed him to finesse the dogs and tell them exactly what he wanted at great distances.

The collar was so subtle that, at first, I didn't recognize its value. I didn't understand what I was looking at. I was aware that these were veteran dogs; they had already been on the collar for a while. I wondered if the collar had been harsher in the beginning. I thought that perhaps the merest hint of a collar correct was a reminder of what the collar had done in the past. Even if that were the case, the dogs showed no signs of stress or apprehension in response to the collar. By the time I left that field, one thing was certain, any thoughts that the collar was inherently cruel were stripped from my mind.

As we drove away from that field, I knew I had seen something beautiful. But I didn't know how that beauty had been created. There is something wholesome and natural about seeing a good gundog working with a good handler. That is, if the dog has been trained in a manner that brings out his love for the work. These dogs had been trained in just such a manner.

While I was already in love with what I had seen, my mind was filled with questions. The truth is that I didn't really understand what I had seen. Having

never seen a gundog work before, I didn't know what the exercises were supposed to look like, nor did I understand entirely the complexity of them. I did not quite appreciate all the training it took to get the dog to the point I was witnessing. Nor did I recognize the complex combination of drive, attentiveness to handler, memory, initiative, patience and determination that was required to perform these exercises. I had no idea how the journey had begun, or by what roads it had arrived where I saw it. All I knew was that I had seen something special and I wanted to learn more.

The series of events that led me to that field that morning were complex, but quite organic and seemingly unavoidable. Early on in my career I had been told that remote training collars were a unique tool and that one should never try to use one without proper training. I had never believed, as many do, that the tool had no place in responsible training, but I thought this place was limited and had never, in the first ten years of my career, felt compelled to learn its proper use.

Even after I started talking to some of the most successful e-collar trainers around the country, I didn't really think too much about the tool. While talking with these trainers about the collar did begin to open my mind towards broader applications, I still didn't quite feel like the tool was for me. It is expensive, there was (or so I thought) a negative public perception of the tool and it would require me to start over with a completely different training philosophy. To be quite honest, I still feared the tool, the idea of "shocking" dogs seemed like something I just didn't want to do.

I had been told of the technological advances that separated the modern e-collar from the old-fashioned and harsh "shock collar", but I could not internalize that knowledge. I still thought of any form of e-collar as a shock collar. The first electronic collars had no subtlety, not finesse, no levels. It could only do one thing: shock a dog. Its force was similar to that of an electric cattle fence. It hit hard and the pain lingered for several minutes after the initial hit. Modern collars bear almost no resemblance to these primitive tools. The modern collar is capable of delivering the electrical stimulation in such low levels that they are hardly perceptible. They can deliver one single pulse for one 1000th of a second and then it is gone. There is no lingering "pain" or even sensation. It is over almost before the dog becomes aware of it. I know of one trainer who uses these "taps" in different rhythms to actually give commands to the dogs. All of these things I knew, or at least I had been told. Then in March of 2004 I went to a conference where several e-collar trainers were present. I asked them a lot of questions. Marc Goldberg offered to allow me to feel the collar. Reluctantly, I agreed.

I think all humans harbor an innate fear of electricity, and I am no exception. It requires a stout heart to allow someone to shock you. But I wanted to know so I took Marc up on his offer. I placed the collar on the palm of my hand pressing both contact points tight against the flesh. Marc said "This is a level one". I

thought I might have felt something, but I wasn't sure. Then he went to a level two, I felt that, I was sure, but it didn't feel like a shock so much as a tap. Until that moment I thought that word "tap" was a euphemism that e-collar trainers used to soften the emotional response to the word "shock" it isn't. "Tap" perfectly described the sensation. It was not even uncomfortable. Then he moved it up to three. That was more clear more distinct, and yes, slightly (but only slightly) uncomfortable. It was not what I would call pain, but not comfortable either. It was similar, in a sense, to being in the freezer section of the grocery store wearing shorts. You go in to get the items you need, but you don't want to stay there longer than you have to. Even a level four wasn't "painful" but it was definitely unpleasant. It was, however, tolerable.

Everybody feels the collar differently and for some a three is painful, others can take a five or six without complaining. The idea, it was explained to me, was to find the lowest level that each dog will react to. The handler looks for a flick of the ear, or a quizzical look, maybe a head shake anything to indicate that the dog has noticed something out of the ordinary. He is not looking for a yelp, or a whine, or any indication of pain, only awareness.

When this had been explained to me, and I had felt the way the stimulation is delivered, I was quite intrigued. I saw a value and use for the tool even for the average pet owner. I wanted to learn how to use the collar properly. After doing some research and learning a bit about the different people teaching the collar, I decided that Martin Deeley was my best bet.

A few months later, found myself standing in a field about to have my eyes opened to something I had never dreamed of.

I spent five days with Martin. In those five days I saw the collar used to build confidence in shy dogs, literally in minutes. I saw strong-willed, even resistant, dogs turn their attention towards their handler in minutes, all the while without showing any signs of discomfort. I could see the dogs literally thinking it through as the collar provided them with a steady stream of information. I saw dogs who came to Martin's home literally dragging their owners around heeling and coming when called off-lead in 10 minutes or less. By the time the leash was taken off, the collar was rarely being used.

I will say it again. What I saw was the most humane training I have ever seen. I lacked the violence of traditional leash and collar corrections and the nagging of purely positive training. The collar provided information to the animal in a gentle but clear manner. It punctuated commands, and prompted the dog to pay attention without causing unnecessary stress (all learning is stressful to a certain degree) and without clouding the issues.

The e-collar, the way I saw it used, blurs the lines of distinction in learning theory. The e-collar cannot quite find a place within the four quadrants of learning. While

it can be used as an aversive, it is not always or even typically used that way. It is not punishment. It is most often used as “punctuation”. It is similar to touching someone’s arm to get their attention, or to let them know that what you are saying is important.

This punctuation is, I think, the reason the collar is so effective. You literally tell the dog, “What I am about to say is important, I want you to pay attention”. This idea took me a while to grasp. I kept thinking of the tap as an aversive, or a punishment. “Why are we tapping the dog before we command him,” I kept thinking. “Shouldn’t we wait until he fails to obey?” So imbedded was believe that the collar was correction device that I could not think of it in any other way. Even though I had felt the stimulation and knew that it was not painful, I still had trouble thinking of it as anything but a punisher. Misconceptions die hard, but through the help of a skillful teacher, and the experience of seeing dog after dog introduced to the collar and learning the commands with the aid of the collar I finally began to see it clearly. The collar, like every other training tool, be it leash, training collar, clicker, treats, voice, touch, or a toy, is first and foremost a communication device. It is a tool for directing the dog’s attention where we want it. The beauty of it is that it can be used to guide and instruct, it can be used to gently remind distracted dogs of their responsibilities, or to create an unpleasant association with certain behavior (say digging). This one tool can do this and it can be done from a mile away.

There is, however, a down side. The collar can be used abusively, and it often is. It is my opinion that proper training is a must for proper collar use. People who think of it as primarily a punishment device will be likely to skip a proper introduction to the collar and to use a higher level than is necessary. Some will try to use the collar as a substitute for training rather than as a subtle and elegant tool for communication. While using the collar simply as an aversive is not necessarily cruel (that will depend on the dog and the user) it is a primitive application that easily lends itself to abuse.

But every single tool for training can be abused in the wrong hands. I have seen over-the-top corrections with training collars even buckle collars. I have seen people use their leashes in cruel and inhumane ways. I have seen seemingly reasonable people do entirely unreasonable things in their pursuit of obedience. People routinely punish their dogs, not for disobedience, but because dog doesn’t understand what it is being asked to do. I have known “purely positive” trainers starve their dogs in order to get them motivated to work for food. I have seen a technique called “free shaping” used in the hands of an unskilled trainer produce neurotic, nervous and mentally disconnected dogs. There is no training tool or skill that cannot and will not become abusive in the wrong hands. The collar is no exception.

However, the collar has unique possibilities for abuse. It allows the handler to “disconnect” from the aversive. If someone is to over-correct with a leash and

training collar, he will necessarily have an exact idea of the amount of force he is using. He will feel the exact same force in his hand that the dog feels in his neck. If someone starves their dog to motivate them towards food, he will be aware of the hunger the dog must be feeling as hours turn to days. He cannot ignore the fact that the dog's dish remains empty and unused. The collar correction takes nothing more than touching a button. The handler need not have any sense of what the dog is feeling aside from the dog's reaction. A handler can easily accuse the dog of "faking it" or "just arguing" and use that as an excuse to increase the correction level. Further, the collar, in and of itself, cannot guide the dog to do something he doesn't already know how to do. With a traditional leash and collar, the direction of the correction is instructive. With e-collar, unless you have taught the dog, the correction gives the dog nothing to go on. The e-collar correction (when it is used as such) requires that the handler's body language or voice (or both) direct the dog in the proper manner. The collar will not, indeed cannot, make up for a handler's poor ability to communicate with the dog. While I would not do it this way, one could conceivably teach a dog to lie down by yanking him down with the leash while saying "down". This is a somewhat common technique. The same is not true with the e-collar. One cannot simply hit the button saying "Down" and expect the dog to figure out what is expected. But if a trainer is the sort who instructs the dog, and shows him what is desired either by luring or physically manipulating the dog, the collar will not be abused in this manner.

As with all training, it is not the tool, but the person using it. In the hands of a responsible trainer, the e-collar is not only humane it is more humane than any other device I have ever seen.

I have seen so many marvelous transformations in so many dogs of different personalities and types that I am convinced that nearly all of my clients will be better served with the e-collar than with any other tool we have available.

We proudly offer those clients, who are interested, instruction in the humane and effective use of this tool. We can arrange for a free demonstration and evaluation for anyone who is interested.