



Banbury-Bedrock Bull Terriers

Who's Walking Whom?

by Mary Remer

Do you have a trained leash puller? Unwittingly it is possible to create a dog who believes that part of the task in getting from point A to point B is to pull with as much conviction as can be mustered. Puppies often learn to become successful pullers at an early age. The puppy is so cute pulling to get to the neighbor or the neighbor's dog to say hello – we follow the tugging pup while the neighbor, crouching down with open arms, cheerleads with encouragement: “Oh, what a cute puppy. Come say Hello!” And, after all, we certainly do not want to have a shy or aggressive pup, so we hold tight with half-hearted “slow downs” while thinking how adorable and outgoing our little Champ is. It only takes a few reinforcements for the behavior to stick. Before you know it Champ is 7 months old, has become an expert puller, your neck and shoulders are requiring massage, and no one wants to walk the not-so-little Champ any more. The neighbor is suggesting obedience school but the breeder has told you NO obedience school – Champ is going to be a SHOW DOG and he must not learn to sit or have his spirit taken out of him by the regiments of obedience school. The bottom line is that whatever Champ's career is destined to be, show dog or not, he should learn to walk without pulling on the leash. Further, Champ can learn to walk nicely along with many other behaviors without having his spirit broken by the jerk and release method.

Let's rethink leash walking and teach a prevent-pulling approach that can be used with puppies and proficient pullers. Starting from the first leash lesson, pulling is never reinforced, nor is a tight leash. At What A Good Dog!, Inc., leash walking lessons start with teaching a “following” exercise inside in a low stimulus environment. I am assuming that the puppy has been desensitized to a collar and leash. For puppies that are used to a leash but use it as a chew toy, we spray the leash LIGHTLY with a Bitter Apple or Bitter Lime spray and use treats as a distraction. Step one of the “following” exercise begins with the leader (that's you) having a hearty supply of soft treats (string cheese, hot dogs, chicken, tortellini) the size of your baby fingernail (no energy wasted chewing – that is a distraction – or getting the crumbs off the floor – that is another distraction). Face the pup, holding a 6-foot leash in your right hand – leaving 4 feet between you and the pup – with treats in your left hand. Happily, say your puppy's name and “with me” and then back up using the treats to lure the puppy to follow. When your pup follows, praise and feed. Do multiple, fun, treat-filled training sessions. When this is going well inside, move to the yard, and then to the sidewalk.

For step two, go back to your initial low stimulus training area inside. Being sure the leash is in your right hand, treats in the left hand, start moving backwards. When your pup is following well, plant your right foot, step back with your left foot and, now with both feet planted, lure your pup with the treat in your left hand in a counter clockwise circle to your left side so your puppy is now facing the same direction as you. Step forward with your left foot and walk, encouraging your puppy with “let's go” and treats. You might want to practice this without your puppy, as it is important to keep your puppy's momentum going while changing directions. Keep the treats in your left hand (leash remains in your right hand) and feed from your thumb and index finger with the palm side of your hand facing your pup. Praise and feed when your pup is beside your left leg on a loose leash. After going forward for 15 to 20 feet stop and go backwards again using your puppy's name and “with me”. Repeat both steps a couple of times.

Slowly increase the distance going forward but whenever your puppy begins to get ahead of you or pull, immediately go back to following. If your pup lunges ahead and pulls you can also STOP, say nothing (no reinforcement, positive or negative), wait till your pup comes back and then resume. If your pup holds back or lunges forward repeatedly, you need to do more “following” exercises. As your puppy becomes more proficient at following and walking beside you, decrease the frequency of the treats but continue with lavish praise. Be sure your praise and treats are being timed correctly. Remember: what you reinforce will be repeated.

If you would like to retrain an older, committed puller, we recommend the “following” work. As an added impetus, take out some of Champ’s food allotment for the day – put it in a baggie with some special treats and this becomes an incentive and potential reward. Try working well before or well after designated meal times. The rewards are not earned unless Champ is following well or walking beside you on a loose leash. The food and treats that are not earned in the daily sessions are not added back to the food bowl and no additional food is added to the bowl the next day. Depending on the amount of incentive used, the most committed puller will usually catch on in a couple of days with this “Learn to Earn” program.

An additional technique, “Stand Like a Tree”, can be used for puppies and the committed puller. Whenever the leash is tight the consequence for Champ is everything stops – trees don’t move and trees don’t speak, so NOTHING happens until the leash is loose. As soon as the leash becomes loose, continue walking forward. If you walk and the leash remains loose, even for a couple of steps, capture the opportunity to praise and treat.

Ultimately we teach two gears for leash walking. The first is the above “Let’s go” which is walking by your side for the purpose of getting from point A to point B. The second gear we call “Walk on” which is taught after “Let’s go” and gives the dog more length of lead and allows for some sniffing – but never any pulling. More on “Walk on” next time.

Leash walking as taught at What A Good Dog!, Inc. relates to the basic premise that HUMANS should lead and dogs should follow. Even with your puppy walking at your side, you are the guide and director of the walk. In concert with this idea, remember it is important for your puppy to learn to follow humans in and out of doorways and up and down stairs.