

Rehabilitation Training Using an E-Collar – A Case Study

By Larry Tillack

Summary

This paper was written after using an e-collar to retrain a dog that had serious aggression issues and is intended to document the success of the training. The paper will outline the methods used to conquer the aggression that was displayed by the dog and will hopefully show how the e-collar can be used to quickly and effectively alter the behavior of an animal to the benefit of itself and society.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to the following people whose support and patience made this rehabilitation training not only possible, but so far a success.

Marlys Staley, executive director of Circle Tail Inc., for the opportunity to work with an animal that was marked for euthanasia because of his aggressive behavior. Also, for letting me have unlimited access to her facility to train the dog.

Lou Castle, police officer/dog trainer - Culver City, CA, for his willingness to talk me through the procedures over the phone without asking for anything in return. His detailed explanations of what to do and what to expect from the dog made the training go much smoother.

Dogtra Company for making an affordable, effective e-collar that is easy to use but still rugged enough to withstand the abuse that I have put it through in six short months!

And of course, Simon the Black Lab for being an A+ student, none of this would have been possible without him.

Description of the Subject Canine

Name: Simon

Breed: Black Lab

Age: 18 Months

Simon was returned to Circle Tail on April 8th, 2002, after being fostered by a handler for three months that was having some problems with his behavior. Mainly, Simon was acting aggressive towards men and women alike. The handler noted that Simon had been “rough” from the day that he started working with him, but thought that he may be able to work through any behavior issues on his own. Simon had been previously donated by a private individual to Circle Tail for use in the Assistance Dog Training Program.

This problem was not detected prior to Simon being placed with the foster handler because Simon has never shown any aggression towards Marlys, even upon his arrival on April 8th. After completing a full evaluation of Simon, it has been determined (to the best of our abilities) that before Simon was donated he was subjected to physical abuse in a deliberate effort to bring forth the aggressive behaviors. As best as we can piece together, it is believed that Simon was deliberately “trained” to attack people.

His foster handler had noted to us that Simon would attempt to bite the forearms of people, especially if they were heavily clothed. We believe that the previous owner was attempting to do a home protection training method and was wrapping his arm in heavy padding to simulate a bite sleeve. Of course, not having any knowledge of how to properly train a dog to do this type of work, we believe that his solution was to tease, poke, beat, and abuse Simon until the desired result was achieved (the bite).

All of this can be substantiated through Simon's reactions during the evaluation. First and foremost, Simon was extremely agitated simply by my presence. Upon my first appearance in the training center to administer the evaluation Simon went into a frenzy that was coupled with urination and the expressing of his anal glands. Upon any confrontation from me at all, he expressed his desire to bite to let me know that I was not welcome within his space. Simon never once transferred from defense drive during the whole evaluation, so this was not a bite out of confidence, merely an attempt to get me to leave.

At this point, different articles were presented to Simon to observe his reactions. A four foot piece of 1/2” PVC pipe was presented and Simon backed away in fear. As I raised the pipe to a threatening position Simon started to bark, growl, show his teeth and foam. After making notes about Simon's behavior, I attempted to put him at a more comfortable level by giving submissive gestures, making myself “small”, averting my eyes, etc. My actions were to no avail as Simon's recovery was extremely slow. This led us to believe that the abuse had taken place over an extended period of time (probably his entire stay with the first foster handler) and was not an isolated incident.

Because the conclusion was that it would be impossible to place a dog with such serious behavior issues as Simon had displayed we made a list of our options.

1. Attempt rehabilitation training. The problem that we faced with this option was the amount of time and effort involved in rehabilitating a dog whose behavior had escalated to this point. I have done this type of training with dogs in the past and on average had to spend a full year to completely rehabilitate the dog. These were all family pets that had someone who was willing to put in the amount of time and money that takes to complete such training.
2. Euthanize Simon. This seemed to be our only real solution due to the limitations involved with trying to rehabilitate him. Since it was a Monday, the appointment to euthanize Simon was set for Friday.

When I returned home from Circle Tail, I went through my old e-mails and found information from Lou Castle about utilizing the e-collar to quickly and effectively rehabilitate dogs with aggression problems. Being a novice with the e-collar (having only used one for about four months to work with my very stable SAR prospect), I was not sure how to begin such training or if there was even hope for a case as severe as Simon. Since the appointment to put him down was not until Friday, I decided that there was no harm in giving this course of treatment a chance. I then contacted Lou Castle who very willingly talked me through the stages of training that we would need to complete.

As of the writing of this paper, Simon and I have completed four training sessions. The first two were approximately 1-1/2 hours each, the third was approximately 2-1/2 hours and the fourth was approximately 1 hour. The fourth training session was completed on Saturday April 13th, 2002. Simon had displayed such a drastic change in behavior after only two sessions that his "appointment" had been cancelled and we are very optimistic that we will be able to safely adopt him into a pet home in the future.

Outline of Training Methods

Below you will find an outline of the methods that I used to bring about the behavior changes in Simon. This is not a complete description of the training. I would recommend if you have never worked with an aggressive dog that you not attempt to do so without supervision from someone that has experience. I would also strongly recommend that you not attempt to apply an e-collar to training without first attending a seminar on their proper usage. While I'm not an expert on either subject I have had experience with both aggressive dogs and the proper use of an e-collar, this was simply the first time I had paired them together. It should be noted that all of the commands and discovery lessons were completed to multiple cycles of completion and at a minimum of four different locations (on the same property) before moving on to another step.

- 1) Allow Simon to discover that I am not all that bad. In fact, I quickly became his "safe spot".
 - a) Using a 16' flexi, apply stimulation to Simon while giving gentle guidance with the lead.
 - b) Slowly close the circumference of the circle until Simon realizes that I am his safe spot.
- 2) Allow Simon to discover that I am always his safe spot, if I move, he should move also.
 - a) Move in the opposite direction of Simon while applying stimulation and gentle guidance.
 - b) Slowly reduce the pressure applied to the lead until it is non-existent and Simon is moving with me automatically with just the stimulation.
- 3) Teach Simon the SIT command. This is an intermediate step that will allow further progress.
 - a) Apply stimulation, gentle guidance upward from the lead, gentle guidance downward (with my hand on his hip), and give the "SIT" command simultaneously.
 - b) Simon quickly learns the SIT and I find that he is getting his butt to the ground without my hand guiding him.
 - c) This allowed Simon to discover that attention to the SIT command was the important factor to his comfort while next to me.
- 4) Allow Simon to discover that attention to the command is important even when away from me. This is an important turning point in Simon's training. He is now learning that he is in control. It was during this portion of the training that I started to notice his confidence level was rising.
 - a) Back Tie Simon to a tree and walk out about 20'.
 - b) Apply the stimulation while giving the SIT command.

The above items were completed during the first two training sessions that were done. At this point in the training, Simon's behavior was very different than during our first encounter. Instead of constantly being in defense mode, Simon was starting to relax and learn that he can control his actions. He is also displaying a much higher level of confidence and really starting to look like a lab. He has that lab "bounce" in his step and that wonderful lab grin.

We were now at a stage that Simon understood that not everyone would bring him harm. The third training session was used to springboard from the above. Now that Simon understood that it was his attention to command that brought him relief we could really teach him just about anything.

Lou had suggested the "PLACE" command, so it was the next item that I taught. The speed at which Simon was learning was truly incredible. Now that he had control over the stimulation, he only needed guidance pressure from the leash for a few repetitions before he was excelling at commands.

After the "PLACE", I unhooked Simon from his lead and gave him some well deserved play time. We did ten solid minutes of fetch that wound up with Simon running into me and flipping completely over for a belly rub. The entire time we were playing there was absolutely no sign of the dog that had gone through the initial evaluation. Simon was even OK with me initiating some rougher play with a bump to his shoulder. I got down on all fours and gave him a couple of steady bumps. He did a play bow and darted around in front of me and after we ran around for a little bit, Simon collapsed on top of me on the floor where he allowed me to manipulate him into several very vulnerable positions without ever complaining.

During the fourth session we reviewed everything that Simon had learned in the previous three sessions and also added the "DOWN", "SHAKE HANDS", and "SPEAK" commands.

Conclusions

Simon and I have a lot of training ahead of us, this is a fact that I don't take lightly. He's not ready to be pushed out into the public eye, yet. But the rate at which his behavior was altered was astounding. I've worked with aggression cases that had not evaluated to be anywhere near as severe as Simon's that have taken well over a year to get the dog to the same point that Simon has reached in just four sessions.

Some people may attribute Simon's fast success to him being a "Lab" or some might even try to point to other factors that may have been undetected. I, on the other hand, believe that it was the e-collar that gave Simon clear direction on what was expected of him and also gave him control over his learning that led to his rapid success. I have never witnessed such a rapid transformation in a dog's behavior and I have no other explanation for what transpired other than attributing a large portion of our success to the e-collar.

It should be noted for those reading this paper that the e-collar was never used above the low range (Dogtra Model 1100NC). Placing the collar on my fingers, I could not even feel the stimulation. Moving the collar to the palm of my hand it felt like a sharp tickle. Putting the collar on the inside of my forearm, the stimulation felt equivalent to getting hit by water in a shower that has just a little too much pressure.

For all of those people who think that the e-collar is a horrible device, I would ask you to reconsider. Revisit the e-collar and take a look at today's technology. Not only has the e-collar evolved in the past few years but so have the training methods for applying the e-collar. And if you're still in doubt, then just give a thought to a Black Lab named Simon that is getting a second chance at life thanks to this remarkable device.

The remaining pages contain pictures that were taken of me and Simon right after our fourth training session.



