

A Life Saving Lesson

When the phone rings at an odd hour, it's almost never good news. If your caller ID shows the name of an owner of a dog you've bred, you cringe. What illness or accident has struck a dog you've brought into this world?

Unfortunately, I got one of these calls from a puppy owner whose dog burst through the front door, ran into a busy street, and was instantly killed. After that fatal front door incident, I vowed that I would do as much as I could to make sure the same fate did not befall another of my dogs. Here's the lifesaving training that I use and try to impress on all puppy owners.

The solution is training your dog that the front door's threshold is a barrier, one that is not to be crossed without permission.

There is nothing elaborate about the training. Achieving the "slam on the brakes" at the front door is a simply training a "sit stay" command and coupling it with a release word. Put your dog on lead, go to the closed door and give your command for a "sit stay." You drill and practice until the "stay" inside the house by the front door seems to be indelibly imprinted into your dog's DNA.

The next training step is to put the dog on a lead and practice the "sit stay" command at an open door. The positive rewards for doing this should be "over the top" and the corrections done in no uncertain terms. There should never a thought in the dog's head of, "Did she really mean it"? The idea of always stopping at the front door becomes a cardinal house rule.

Now comes the hard part...add distractions. We all know how easy it is to distract a Weimaraner, so adding distraction is a vital part of the training. Start with minor distractions, like a person walking by, and once that does not make your dog budge, up the ante. At my house I tried it when there was especially active squirrel traffic on the front lawn. Another option is to ask a person to slowly approach the door and see if your "sit stay" training keeps your dog safely at the door. When you think you've got it, test it and test it again with the most tempting lures you can imagine.

Once you have the automatic stop at the door, the second step is to train a release word for when it is OK to proceed. I use the word "free" rather than something like "OK" since "free" is a word that is less likely to be inadvertently used in conversation at the front door. How did I test if the release word worked? I tried to pull my dog from the "sit stay" position without the release word. When I consistently got resistance, I knew that we were on our way to mastering a potentially lifesaving skill.

A bonus to this training is that it can be carried over to crate training. Train your dog that the crate door is his front door and it is not to be crossed until the release word is used. Do this and there's no more getting bowled over as your Weimaraner springs from his crate.

While we love our Weimaraners for their energy, zest for life and seemingly endless curiosity, all of these things can work against them living to a ripe old age. Give them "front door" skills and you've increased their safety margin.

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