

Puppy HTM/Freestyle Training

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Photos: Helle Larssen and Allan Brown



Before Heelwork To Music was officially recognized by the Danish Kennel Club, most handlers in this country competed in other sports and the HTM training was limited to the days when a bit of spare time could be found or if a demonstration was coming up. The few HTM teams that did demonstrations took their training very seriously, but the dogs needed to be able to compete in other sports and therefore those sports were their first priority.

HTM in Denmark has grown and developed rapidly since 2006, when it

was recognized by the Kennel Club and if you want to be placed in the advanced classes today or qualify for the big international championships, it requires just as much training as any other dog sport at elite level. This means that the best Danish HTM handlers are leaving other sports to focus fully on HTM and Freestyle.

This is a new situation for the handlers. Previously, most dancing dogs got their basic training from obedience or agility and exercises from those sports were twisted and bent to fit into HTM and Freestyle routines. Most of the time it worked ok, but the dogs did learn behaviours and habits from the other sports that did not benefit their HTM careers. Obedience dogs would always seek the handler's left side and be very unsure in the other HW positions and they would automatically sit when the handler stopped. Many agility dogs had learned to bark their excitement out when working. Now HTM handlers can focus on the one sport that they really want to do with their canine partner and the training can be targeted towards that from the very beginning of puppy training.

The new generation of HTM/Freestyle dogs will have a basic training, containing the elements that are important for a dancing dog.

I have, over the last 4 years, trained 2 dogs solely for HTM/Freestyle. Biscuit, my now 4½ years old sheltie, was the first. He is Danish Freestyle Champion and has represented Denmark at Crufts twice. He was also on the team that represented Denmark at the Nordic Championships in Sweden 2008.

Beat is a Border Collie and he is now 11 months old. In Denmark you can start competing when the dog is 10 months old. Beat has been to 3 shows and gained 2 x 2nd and 1 x 1st. He has qualified for Freestyle Class 2 (Intermediate).

This article is written because I want to share my experiences with 'Puppy HTM Training'.

Socialization is important!

An obedience dog must be able to work in an obedience ring. An agility dog must be able to work on an agility course. Granted, some obedience rings and some agility courses are more challenging than others, but none are as challenging as what an HTM dog must be able to do! An HTM dog

must be able to perform at country fairs surrounded by cows and horses. It cannot be put off by different surfaces or stages where the floor is creaking when you walk on it. An HTM dog must be able to ignore children's excited screams close to the ring and ice creams, which are often held exactly in the dog's eye/nose level. It must be able to cope with the sounds of carousels and fireworks. And it has to be able to handle all the above mentioned challenges even when working at a distance or behind the handler's back with no eye contact to support it and let it know that it is doing alright.



Beat – 9 mth old – training on the stage in a big amusement park after Biscuit did a demonstration.

Of course, you can choose only to perform at competitions, which often take place under much more controlled and quiet conditions, but demonstrations are a big part of our sport and that is where the dogs really show their worth and also where they get the best training, so it would be a shame to miss the experience. You just need to prepare your dog for that kind of work from puppyhood.



Karen and 11 week old Erin are listening to music on the town square

Take your puppy out as much as possible and as early as possible and take advantage of all the different training opportunities that you can get.



7 month old Beat performing at a 'Cabaret Night' along with my other dogs. It was challenging for him, because the audience was very close to him and we did not have much room to work in, but it was a good training session.

I don't know how it is in England, but in Denmark every little town is visited by some kind of fun fair at least once a year. That offers the perfect opportunity to socialize and train a puppy. Take your puppy and a big bag of its favourite treats and go for a good day out. Take the puppy around the fun fair and when it settles and feels comfortable, you can train some of the moves that it normally does well and likes to perform. Do not make it too difficult. It is supposed to be fun and the busy surroundings will make it hard enough. Reward the dog for doing the moves, but also for being attentive to you and for ignoring people passing or stopping to look at the cute little puppy.



Do not let the puppy greet the 'audience' when you are working. It can meet people before and after your training session, but when it is performing (because this kind of training is the first steps towards future performances) it should only pay attention to you and ignore the surroundings. People do want to cuddle a cute puppy especially if they see it perform moves like weaves or spins, but they are usually very respectful and willing to help, if you explain to them, that this pup will grow up to be a dancing dog and needs to learn to perform in public areas.

Beat has had about one training session every 2nd week either on the town square or in the parking area in front of a busy supermarket. When I train in town, I always keep Beat on lead. He is a puppy and impulsive. I cannot trust him 100% and it would be horrible if he got hurt in any way. Also I don't want to give him the opportunity to loose attention and run off to greet 'his audience'.



To run off and greet someone is a 'self-rewarding behaviour' – a behaviour that does not need to be rewarded to be attractive to the dog as it is a reward in itself. You can't expect a bystander to ignore an enthusiastic and happy pup that comes to say "hallo". Chances are that the dog will get a lot of cuddles and attention. The dog will get something out of running off, which will make it more likely to repeat that same behaviour. The lead will ensure that the pup is never put in a situation, where it can get it wrong.



Another thing that I do with my dancing puppies is that I make sure they get used to music and noises from crackling speakers. I take my ghetto blaster, turn the radio on, but do not tune in on any channel. I turn the sound up and the radio will make a very annoying and loud noise, which can be scary to some dogs. I will sit on the floor with a big bag of food and feed the puppy from the top of the ghetto blaster. It has to take the food from the source

of the noise. Soon it will learn that crackling speaker noises are nice as they mean food and together with all the other experiences that I try to give my dancing puppies, it will prepare them for the life as dancing dogs. Hopefully they will grow up and be fine with bad mikes and speakers – something that I have seen many dogs be put off by (the sport is new in Denmark – maybe it is a bigger problem here than in England)

Puppy Class

It is a very good idea to take your puppy to a puppy class. It will learn to behave around other dogs, it will learn that there is a time to play with other dogs and a time to play/work with the handler and it will get lots of nice and happy experiences.

When you talk to the trainer that you want to work with, you should let him or her know that your dog will be a dancing dog and that there are things you may do a bit differently and there may be a few exercises that you are not happy to do at all.

Both my dancing puppies have enjoyed the Danish KC's puppy classes and it has been good. The trainers all thought it was interesting that my dogs were trained for something that they knew very little about and they have taken it as a learning opportunity.

There have only been a few exercises that I did not want my puppies to do at all. We had one where the handlers were supposed to switch dogs, to teach the puppies to be comfortable with strangers. I am happy for my dogs to meet people and I travel a lot, so I need my dogs to be happy staying with dog sitters. They should learn that strangers are just friends they have not met yet, but not when they are working with me! When my dogs are working with me, I am the centre of their universe and all good/fun comes from me. I don't want them to walk off with someone else and be rewarded for doing so.

Another thing that I do not teach my puppies is to sit. The most common way to teach the sit is to hold a piece of food over the dog's head and when the dog sits, it gets the food.

In HTM it is not a very good idea that the dog sits when the handler stops. A stop in a HTM routine normally means that the dog has to change position or direction. A sit every time the handler stops will spoil the flow of the routine.

Also I want stylish heelwork with high leg-lifts and a beautiful high head position. To get that I have taught Beat that a treat held over his head means that he has to stretch his neck up as high as possible to get the food. He will learn to sit some day, but at the moment it just makes his heelwork training easier, that he knows a sit will never be rewarded. Sit was another exercise that I did not do in puppy class.



First Beat was taught to stretch his neck and front as much as possible to get the piece of food that was held over his head. Jumping, sitting or biting my hand to get to the food was not rewarded.



When he could do that, the exercise was moved in to a heelwork position, which taught him that 'Close' means 'keep your shoulder close to my leg and stand parallel to my body with your head up as high as you can' He is 10 weeks old on the first picture and 11 months old on the other.

Then we started moving...

At first we moved slowly to help him keep the position on the move, but soon we could speed it up.

When he keeps his head up, his legs will come up too.

On the first photo he is 4 mth old and on the other two he is 11 months.





Beat is still a young dog and it is hard for him to keep the position on the move for long. It does not come naturally to him as it does to some dogs. This is an older dog that has been trained the same way. He demonstrates how the high leg lifts and head position looks when performed at a HTM show.

There were lots of good things in puppy class that were as useful for my dancing puppies as they were for any of the other pups. We played on some small agility obstacles one time. Running around and over things is great for dancing pups. One of the trainers had found different materials for the puppies to walk over, to teach them that it was ok to step on things that felt different. There was plastic, wood that wobbled a bit when they stepped on it and some kind of plastic net that would feel funny under their paws, but could not hurt them. And of course all the traditional exercises like recall and stays are great for HTM puppies.

Open images.

Dogs create images in their heads of what to do with things that look in a certain way. An agility dog knows exactly what to do when it sees a tunnel. No matter if the handler yells ‘Over’, ‘Jump’ or ‘Through’, the dog will run through the tunnel, because that is what the tunnel is for. In the dogs mind, it is the only thing it can do with a tunnel.

A HTM/Freestyle dog needs to have a more open mind – it needs to create more ‘open images’ of how exercises must be performed or how to use the props that it is presented with.

It is no good if a freestyle dog starts to circle the cane every time it sees it, because circling it is just one of the moves that can be done with a cane. Some times it has to circle one way, some times the other way and sometimes it has to hold the cane between the paws.

It is very important to introduce more possibilities with the same prop early in the puppy’s training. It will teach it to listen and think instead of just guessing what is expected.



Sometimes the handler’s body language and how the prop is held, will help the dog understand what to do with it...



- But on these 3 photos the handler is standing and the prop is held in the same position, yet the dog has to perform different moves. It is going clockwise around the cane, anti-clockwise and it is standing with paws on the cane.

It is also useful to teach the dog to use skills learned in one situation in other situations. For example if a dog has been taught to touch a target on the ground with a paw, then the skill of touching something with a paw can be used in other situations too. We want the dog to learn that 'Touch!' means 'Touch whatever is in front of you with your paw' and not 'Touch the small white plastic target that is placed in the grass in front of you with a paw'. We want the dog to create an open image of what 'Touch!' means.



When the puppy has learned to touch a target in the grass in front of it, it needs to learn to transfer that skill to many other situations.



Start by placing the target in your hand and ask the puppy to touch it there...



Soon it will have learned to touch your hand without the target.



And in time it will understand that 'Touch' means 'touch anything that is held in front of you'.

Some dogs are better at ‘transferring skills’ than others, but it really makes training so much easier when the dog is good at it. I think it does make a difference that the dog has learned from a young age. My old dog Robbie, who started HTM training when he was 9 years old, creates very specific pictures of how things have to look. He once had a stool in his routine and if the stool looked different, he would miss moves.

HTM handlers often perform in colourful and fluttering costumes. The dogs needs learn to cope with that especially if it has to perform at outdoor shows or demonstrations on a windy day. It is a good idea sometimes to ‘dress up’ for training. It doesn’t have to be anything big. Put on a pair of sunglasses, a big hat, a mask, a dress or put a sheet over your head... It may look silly, but it helps your dog understand that your weird ideas don’t have to affect the training or how it has to work. If your puppy gets used to funny costumes from an early age, it will never be a problem later in its career.



Beat’s heelwork is the same whether I wear funny clothes or not. He knows his position and as long as he can find my leg he is happy.

Teach the dog not to depend on the handler’s body language.

A good HTM/Freestyle routine is a combination of the dog’s and the handler’s performance. It is not enough that the dog performs well. The handler has his or her role to play too. The dog needs to learn not to be bothered or disturbed by the handler’s dancing and it needs to learn to cope with body language that sometimes goes against the spoken words and just listen to the verbal commands.

If you have taught the puppy to touch a target with a paw, as we talked about earlier, you can use that to teach it to work in different positions around the handler and at a distance from the handler.

Put the target on the ground in front of you and reward the dog for touching it. Slowly increase the distance. If the puppy starts to slow down or if it turns around to comes back before it reaches the target, you have increased too fast too soon and will have to go back a step.

When the dog does it well, you can make it more difficult, by putting the target behind you and ask it to touch it behind your back. That is harder because the puppy can’t see your face and determine from your expression if you are happy or not. You can also make it harder by sitting down, lying down, turning around on the spot or jump up and down whilst the dog runs out to touch the target. Remember – you have to increase the degree of difficulty one step at a time and if the puppy finds it too hard and does not succeed, you have to make it easier and give a big reward for getting it right. It is your responsibility that your training is successful!



Beat touching the target behind me whilst I sit down.

If you want to teach your dog to work independently of your position, another good exercise is to stand in front of the puppy and ask for a move – for example a bow. When the dog bows – big reward! Take one step further away from the puppy and ask for another bow. If the dog moves towards you to bow, stop the exercise and put it back. Try again. When the dog keeps the distance and gives the bow – big reward! Throw the reward (food or toy) to the dog or behind the

dog, so that the dog does not move forward towards you to get it.

Slowly increase the distance between you and the dog. If the dog comes forward, you will have to put it back and maybe you need to work closer to the dog for a bit longer. Also, if the dog slows down or is reluctant, that can mean that you increased the distance too soon.

When the dog is comfortable doing the move at a distance, you can make it harder by doing the same things as with the target exercise: sit down, lie down, turn around or jump up and down.



A bow on a distance with the handler sitting down.

When you teach a move then teach the puppy to perform it no matter what you do. If you teach the dog to circle you, you can extend the exercise and teach it to circle you when you sit down or lie down too.



Circling a handler, who is sitting in the grass



Circling a handler who is lying down and jumping the handler's legs on the way round.

A HTM dog (especially a freestyle dog) needs to feel confident crawling under the handler, over the handler, keeping paws on the handler and being everywhere around and close to the handler. It is a good idea to use the little cuddle breaks you have with your puppy during the day to train this. Sit on the floor and lure the puppy to crawl under your arms and legs, over your legs etc. You can use a piece of food or a toy to lure or just let the puppy chase your fingers. It will be good fun for both of you and it will make working close around you a natural thing for your puppy.



Over!



Under!



On top of!

The 8 HW positions

In Heelwork To Music there are 8 different heelwork positions and that is a lot for a puppy to keep track of! I only teach my puppies 2 positions – the one on the left side and on the right side of the handler facing the same direction as the handler. That's enough for a puppy and my experience tells me that when the dog is comfortable in those two positions and can keep them on the move and in different directions, it will be relatively easy to move them into the other positions when the dog is older and ready to extend the heelwork.

Keep it safe

You want your puppy to grow up to be a strong and healthy dog that can keep dancing for many years. Be careful with your training. You don't need long training sessions. At first 5 – 10 minutes will be enough and as your dog grows and matures, you can extend the time, but stop before the puppy gets tired. You have years of training ahead of you. You don't need to teach it all at once. Also think about which moves are appropriate for your puppy. You shouldn't teach jumps or hind leg work until the puppy is physically mature. Crawling should also be limited. There are lots of safe exercises and moves that you can teach your puppy, so don't rush those that put unnecessary strain on its body.

Happy Dancing!

As in all other puppy training – and dog training in general – it is absolutely essential that both dog and handler are enjoying the training. The dog needs to love what it is doing to get the right energy and power when performing. It has to be fun, so you need to have constant focus on motivation. Make sure you reward the puppy and make playing a big part of your training.



Playing is a big part of Karen and Erin's training

Wishing you all Happy Dancing!