



POWER ON

Introducing and Using the Electric Collar

BY RODNEY SPICER





■ **Left:** When testing your dog to determine his sensitivity to the electric collar, begin with the lowest level of stimulation and increase the level as needed until you note even a small response, such as the dog turning his head toward you.

Foundation training is the key to success when using the electric collar.

THE ELECTRIC COLLAR is one of the best dog-training tools available today; it also is one of the most misunderstood and underused training tools on the market. I have heard comments such as “They can’t control their dog so they use the electric collar,” “They don’t know how to train,” “He is just lazy,” and “My dog is too sensitive.”

In my opinion and experience, I have yet to see a dog that could not benefit from an electric collar. When properly introduced and used, this training tool can foster a better relationship between handler and dog by allowing the handler to be clear and consistent about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.

Technological Improvements

Over the past few years electric collars have gotten lighter and smaller, and handlers have many more options in the level of stimulation. When I first used electric collars in 1990, you had to take the collar off the dog and change the plugs to get a different level of stimulation. In addition, if you performed an exercise in which the dog was in high drive and you then gave the dog reinforcement stimulation while he was in low drive, the stimulation could be overwhelming and have a negative effect. The collars that are currently available don’t require you to change the plugs to change the stimulation level. Instead, you simply use a hand-held transmitter to dial the level of stimulation up or down.

Preparing Your Dog

To use electric collars effectively, you must understand some basic training techniques. Here’s how I introduce and use the collars.

First and most important, you must have a good relationship with the dog prior to training. When I get a new

dog, I regularly take him on walks, and during this time he is fed only from my hand rather than from a bowl. I want the dog to know that everything good in life comes through me. When he sees me coming, he is excited because he knows that something good is going to happen. During this time, I put the electric collar on the dog at the beginning of each day. The collar is not activated and will remain inactive until the dog is desensitized to wearing it. The electric collar should not be so tight that the dog has a hard time breathing, but it should be snug enough that the collar doesn’t move. I take the collar off the dog at the end of the day; it should not be left on more than twelve hours at a time.

The dog must be desensitized to the electric collar and accept wearing it like he would any other collar or harness. There is no time limit to this desensitization period — it could be several days or several weeks.

Another important thing to remember is that you cannot use the electric collar to teach the dog but only to reinforce what the dog has already learned. The dog must know how to comply with each specific command prior to training with an electric collar. After the dog has been conditioned to “sit,” “lie down,” “heel,” and “come” using positive motivation techniques consistently reinforced with a leash, I activate the electric collar and begin training.

Sensitivity Testing

To find the dog’s sensitivity level to the electric collar, I test it while we are on a walk. Electric collars have both a momentary and a continuous button for stimulation. While watching the dog, I push the momentary button on the lowest level of stimulation to test the dog’s sensitivity. If the level of stimulation is too strong, it may be overwhelming for the dog and leave a negative effect. If I get no response, I then go up a level of stimulation. I continue testing until I notice a physical change in the dog’s behavior. He may look at me, lay an ear back, or turn his head; each dog will show a slightly different response. While I am locating the dog’s sensitivity level, I give no verbal commands; I am simply observing the dog. If the dog becomes verbal, the level of stimulation is too high and needs to be lowered.

With my own dog, I did not notice a physical change in behavior at level one. At level two, he still did not respond. At level three, however, I noticed a slight change in behavior — the dog looked at me when I pushed the momentary button. That was the response I was looking for, so that I could begin reinforcement training using the electric collar.

The Training Routine

When using the electric collar, I always begin with obedience training rather than something like apprehension training because the dog is in a lower drive mode and has



■ **Above:** Off-leash, give electric collar stimulations with commands as needed to quicken compliance. **Right:** Play with your dog often during training to release stress.

PHOTOS: RODNEY SPICER



training notes

The following is a round up of important tips for the effective use of the electric collar.

- Teach the dog basic commands such as “sit,” “heel,” “come,” and “lie down” prior to using the electric collar.
- Desensitize the dog to the electric collar with the collar in the off position.
- Never give a command that you are unable to reinforce. Have the proper working equipment ready before you begin: collar, harness, and long lines.
- Choreograph all training and ensure that all trainers involved know how to react in specific what-if scenarios.
- Be clear about what you want, and be consistent in your actions.
- Give stimulations and corrections simultaneously with commands.
- Know how long the battery will last when the electric collar is charged.
- Remove the electric collar after a maximum of twelve hours to avoid skin irritation.
- Be aware that dogs can become “collar wise” if the electric collar is put on for only brief periods, during which stimulations are given, and then the collar is taken off. That also can teach avoidance when the collar is put on.
- Dogs can ignore or “work through” stimulations if you do not select the right level of stimulation and do not spend sufficient time on foundation training.
- When training with an electric collar, the handler should always go back to foundation training and use food/toy, physical leash corrections, and electric collar stimulations. The dog must know that the handler is not a spectator and that he is prepared at any time to use a leash correction and an electric collar stimulation.

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a higher sensitivity threshold. As I begin walking the dog in the heel position, I watch for the dog to become distracted. Once the dog is distracted, I immediately turn in the opposite direction and simultaneously give a leash correction, stimulation from the electric collar, and the “heel” command. The reason I give all three reinforcements at the same time is to make a connection among them plus the association that all corrections come from me, the handler. The leash allows me to control the dog to the correct position when stimulation is given. I continue the momentary stimulation until the dog is in the correct position; then I calmly give verbal praise for reassurance, letting the dog know he has done what I want him to.

I give stimulations simultaneously with verbal commands so that the dog will learn to be quicker than the command. However, I don’t want the dog to anticipate a command and be premature in performing an exercise — that’s why I begin with low levels of stimulation until I find the correct sensitivity level. If I started with high levels, it could create avoidance and a negative association. I want the dog to know that I, the handler, have the ability at any time and any place to give reinforcement stimulation.

Next I begin an obedience routine. If, at any time, I need to make a leash correction, I also give an electric collar stimulation and a verbal command. All stimulations are simultaneous with a command and reinforce the physical actions of the command. Never give a command and wait several seconds to see if the dog begins to obey before you give an electric collar correction. That teaches the dog that he must obey the command only after electric collar stimulation. The goal is for the dog to be moving on the command.

Once the dog understands that the electric collar stimulations are coming from me, I begin off-leash obedience training. Also, I may be able to lower the level of stimulation from three to two because the dog's threshold of sensitivity has been raised and he is now focused and awaiting my next command. The dog also understands that I have the ability to reinforce a command.

Off-leash, I do not give an electric collar stimulation with every command. I may give two stimulations in a row on command and then three commands with no stimulation. I want the dog to be quicker to comply with the commands and to know that I have the ability to reinforce a command at any time. I do not wait for the dog to make a mistake to give an electric collar stimulation; the training tone is set by me rather than by the dog. In off-leash obedience, I use the electric collar just as I would use the leash correction to reinforce a command.

The Handler-Dog Relationship

As previously discussed, it's important to have a good relationship with your dog. It's also important to play with the dog during training because training can be stressful and that stress must be released. Frequently I give the dog a "release" command, which means, "let's play." I may throw toys, use verbal praise, wrestle with the dog, or let him explore a new area while I watch. I am always building and maintaining the dog's drive, and the electric collar allows me to keep him in the correct position, as well as a to maintain a good relationship with him.

When I begin apprehension training, my method is the same as in obedience training except for the levels of stimulation from the electric collar. When the desire or drive is low, I use lower levels of stimulation. When the desire or drive is high, I need to meet that desire with a higher level of stimulation.

I have had great success using the electric collar. In my opinion, it is one of the clearest and most effective training tools for dog training. But when all is said and done, the electric collar is just an additional training tool. If your foundation training has not been clear and consistent, then the electric collar will not be effective. ■

For more information about using the electric collar, see Rodney Spicer's website, www.goldcoastk9.com.



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