

## **LET'S GO FOR A DRAG**

### **"Put That Dog On A Choke Chain -The One With The Widest Possible Links"?**

Yes, I have been in the position myself of putting on my coat and gloves, two dogs on the end of their leads, and then being dragged along the street. I would hear comments almost daily along the lines of "who's taking who for a walk?", or "goodness, no wonder your arms reach almost down to the ground!"

In the bad old days, when the training techniques I employed were based on coercion, the only answer was to put the dog on a choke chain (check chains as they are now called by some) and still be dragged at high speed along the lanes to the field! Did a chain make any difference? Only in my imagination! I just had more of a sense of power when a chain hung around my dog's neck.

The idea of a choke chain is that they should be used to create unpleasantness for the dog, i.e. you pull and this is going to hurt you, so don't pull. Some people really think that it is the noise of the choke chain that stops a dog from pulling, but in reality most dogs do not stop pulling even when the chain is applied. Many pull even harder and start to choke themselves. Others (very few indeed) *may* stop pulling, but this will be because of the method that has been applied - not the actual use of the chain. I will come back to the methodology a little later on.

The fact is that choke chains can and do cause immense damage to the dog, and in more ways than you would care to imagine. Flicka, one of my old dogs used to pull me off my feet on a regular basis. I put a choke chain on her, properly fitted and used it in the "proper way" which consists of a quick jerk and then a release. The result was that Flicka pulled harder and harder, but I couldn't understand why.

Having studied neurophysiology as part of my degree, I have now realised that she was pulling harder for two possible reasons, which were not unrelated. Firstly, she pulled to avoid the pain which was inflicted by the chain ... although the *theory is* that the dog stops pulling to avoid the pain. In practice however, Flicka was pulling harder to produce endorphins, a chemical which is released from the brain, and one that is identical to morphine. Endorphins allow an animal or human to get up and run after suffering a major trauma and not feeling any pain until sometime after the event. The likelihood is that Flicka was getting a high from her lead pulling, and having seen the expression of sheer joy and determination on her face at that time, I could imagine that this is precisely what was happening.

Flicka pulled so hard that she developed a bald patch in her neck where the chain had rubbed. It was at this time that a local vet introduced me to a Haiti head collar, which although helped immensely, still didn't solve the problem. In fact Flicka learnt to pull wearing the Haiti, so much so that she then began to develop bald patches around her face where the straps went. I tried different sized Haiti's, but unfortunately she still caused herself damaged. However, a few hairs missing from her face and nose was nowhere near as bad as the damage she suffered as a result of pulling on a choke chain.

By the time Flicka was 8 years old, she had developed a condition known as laryngeal paralysis, which left her with an inability to bark. Eventually she suffered breathing problems combined with fits of choking. Her spine and shoulders were also 'arthritic' ... but knowing what I do now, it was clear to see that the jerking affect of the chain had caused Flicka irreparable damage. By the age of 12 she died as a result of these conditions.

Most people (including many people who run training classes) do not realise that the physical structure of a dogs neck is virtually the same as our own. Also the spinal cord is an extension of the brain ... ! Excuse me; did Fran just say "an extension of the brain"? Yes, your eyes haven't deceived you; the spinal cord is an extension of the brain. All the important wires (nerves) controlling all of our movement and functioning organs, are carried down the spinal cord. These functions are not just walking, sitting and lying down etc, I am talking about life supporting functions such as breathing, stomach and bowel movements, kidneys, liver, throat.. .. you name it - everything which needs to be controlled from the top of the head downwards, the messages are conveyed via the spinal cord.

Can you imagine what the constricting actions of a choke chain can do to the insides of your dog? For these reasons, the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) and the UK Registry of Canine Behaviourists (UKRCB) both of which I am a member, have called for an all out ban on the use of choke chains. They are extremely dangerous and detrimental to your dogs' long term well being. Hence the story of Flicka.

So, you have a pulling dog, and I have had the experience of training my own pulling dog. Even my current pair, Lotte and Nalle pulled until I have taught them not to. So what do I teach in my classes, and what worked for my dogs?

### **Head Collars / Harnesses**

Teaching a dog to walk on a loose lead, in all situations, and for it to come to understand that this rule applies every day of the week was hard, very hard work. Therefore, instead of lead walking becoming a constant battle of wills as it was in the first few years of having Flicka, I invested in two training aids, one was a head collar and the other a harness. The type of head collar I used on Nalle was the Kumfi design. I used this because it was a very good fit for his shape and size of head. For Lotte I used a Haiti, which fitted her as though it was tailor made for her. Nalle really didn't like wearing his head collar, so sometimes I would use a harness instead. The harness that I chose for him was good in principal, but the narrow stop lines that went under his armpits started to cause friction burns, and the same also applied with the shoulder straps. These days I would use the Kumfi Stop/Go harness, although a few pounds more expensive, is well worth it for safety and effectiveness. If you are interested in purchasing any of the Kumfi range of training aids, I keep them in stock, or your can visit [www.kurnfi.com](http://www.kurnfi.com) or enquire at your local pet shop.

When head collars are first put on, it can look quite distressing for the dog, as they often struggle like mad to get it off. Some dogs can even go into a blind panic. However, with a bit of encouragement, and very occasionally with some dogs, (a very sharp word) you should be able to bring them out of this panic. They can then begin to relax whilst the head collar is on. I have known some dogs to struggle for anything up to twenty minutes, including a deaf white boxer. After his initial thrashing around, he eventually calmed down enough to play with his favourite ball whilst still wearing his headcollar, after which he walked away quite happily, with his proud owners feeling as though they had their dog on power steering!

Training aids should be used purely as aids if you wish to teach your dog to walk calmly. They are not a short cut to training your dog to behave. The only thing that really works is teaching your dog to walk nicely.

I used the training aids just to assist in getting the ball rolling as it were. First of all I chose an area that was to be Nalle's training ground. This was in a local park that was some ten minutes walk from home. I started out with Nalle attached to his head collar or harness. When I reached the local park, I removed the head collar, and then before allowing him to have his run around, I attached his lead to his normal collar. At this point I allowed the lead to go as slack as it would possibly go. As Nalle surged forwards, he quickly reached the end of the lead thus making it go tight. I then turned and stepped off in the opposite direction. Again as soon as the lead went tight, I turned and stepped in the opposite direction to where Nalle was trying to take me. During this time I said nothing to him. I didn't even look at him. I repeated this, over and over, until Nalle managed to keep the lead loose whilst I took two paces forward ... And then three and then four.. .. But however many paces I took, the rules were always the same .... If he made the lead too tight, I would immediately start walking the other way, with no warning whatsoever.

The commonest mistake most people make is that they immediately hold the lead as though they are hanging on for grim life. The lead is tight from the word go, and the dog automatically pulls against this taut lead. Get your leads flopping down as loose as they will go, if the dog makes it go tight, then either you don't go, or you change direction without any warning.

This is the method that makes it appear that choke chains work - if they are correctly applied. The chain is tightened and then loosened immediately .... it is the looseness, which works - and NOT the effect of the chain.

Once Nalle managed to walk a few steps on this loose lead, if he looked up at me, I offered him a food reward e.g. a small piece of cheese, which he really loved. I used clickers at this point. If he got it right and took a few steps with the lead still hanging loose, I clicked and then followed the click by putting my hand into my pocket and getting out a small piece of cheese as a reward. Nalle soon realised that the click was a prediction that the cheese was about to appear and he also started to realise that the click happened when he was walking on a slack lead, looking up at me. If Nalle didn't look up at me, but continued to walk with the lead completely loose, I didn't have to click him, or tell him he was a good boy, because the reward for him was that he was walking in the direction that he wanted to go.

The rule to follow is loose lead means go forwards. Tight lead equals stop and take action, e.g. walk the opposite way.

Walking on loose lead, (just a few steps to begin with) and looking up equals' reward. Walking on loose lead, but with head pointing forwards, or dropped to the ground, no reward from human, the reward will come from the dog itself.

If Nalle wasn't in the mood to look up at me, I just allowed him to start learning from his own mistakes. Loose lead and walking means you continue to move towards, you (Nalle) pull and make that lead go tight equals me (mummy) stopping without warning or turning around.

Another mistake I notice on a regular basis is what happens when the dog stops to sniff an interesting clump of grass. The human stops too, and waits for the dog. The dog then moves on to the next clump of grass and again the human duly obliges by standing still. If your dog stops, then continue on. If the dog pulls to the left, then you move to the right, and so on. In other words, do the opposite to what the dog is doing.

When Nalle had done a good few yards of walking on a loose lead, I allowed him off for a run around. After which we did a bit more. At the end of our training session and his free time, I then put the head collar back on him and took him home.

Bit by bit, and I mean precisely that, I managed to increase the distance of his walking on a loose lead, and gradually 'weaned' him off wearing head collars and harnesses. Now Nalle knows that when he pulls I will stop and refuse to walk further forwards, or will tum around without warning and start walking the opposite way. He then calms down and continues along the way on a loose lead.

I have not used a head collar or a harness on Nalle for almost four years. He is now just coming up to five.

Lotte was another kettle of fish. I was lucky if I could make it one step before she started to pull, but I persisted, and persisted - even to the point that I thought "this ain't ever going to work!" I persistently continued over a period of months, and eventually, not only did we make it to the end of the street on a completely loose lead, but also we made it across the road and onward into the park. Now Lotte walks everywhere beautifully. The only time I must admit the lead will go tight, is when she sees sheep in the field, or she sees the agility equipment laid out ready, but even then, I will not let her get away with it. Even if it takes us an extra ten minutes to get to the agility equipment, that's how long it takes. If she was exceptionally naughty and refused to walk with the lead loose, I would probably tum around and take her back home. Fortunately, when Lotte realises that she is not getting what she wants in the way she wants, she usually settles down and then walks with the lead loose.

One final point to push home is the idea of loose lead. Who holds the lead loose - I do. Who makes it go tight - the dog does. If the dog makes it go tight, do I go where the dog is pulling me') No.

Training the dog is as much about training the human not to tighten the lead by the way they are holding it, or just allowing the dog to get away with it. If you have conditioned your dog to accepting a head collar, or wearing a Stop/Pull harness, then put the training aid back on when you have become too tired, or you are walking along talking to someone else so that your attention is divided. Eventually just like when learning to drive a car, you will be able to walk the dog too whilst holding a conversation!

These methods of teaching work.

For severe pullers, there are other methods which I cannot go into here, but which involve teaching the dog to walk at your side without a lead attached initially. This should only be attempted in a safe and secure environment.