

# Heeling 101

TRAINING YOUR DOG FOR COMPETITION OBEDIENCE

By Janice Gunn



When I give seminars I always do heeling demonstrations with my dogs. I delight in the focus, desire, enthusiasm, and 100% dedication that my dogs give me when heeling. My dogs not only do this in a training environment, but I get the same focus and dedication when they are in the competition obedience ring. The dogs I compete with consistently score in 198 and up range. How? I teach “Heads up” heeling to my dogs, and I will lay out the foundation of the “Heads up” heeling program in this article.

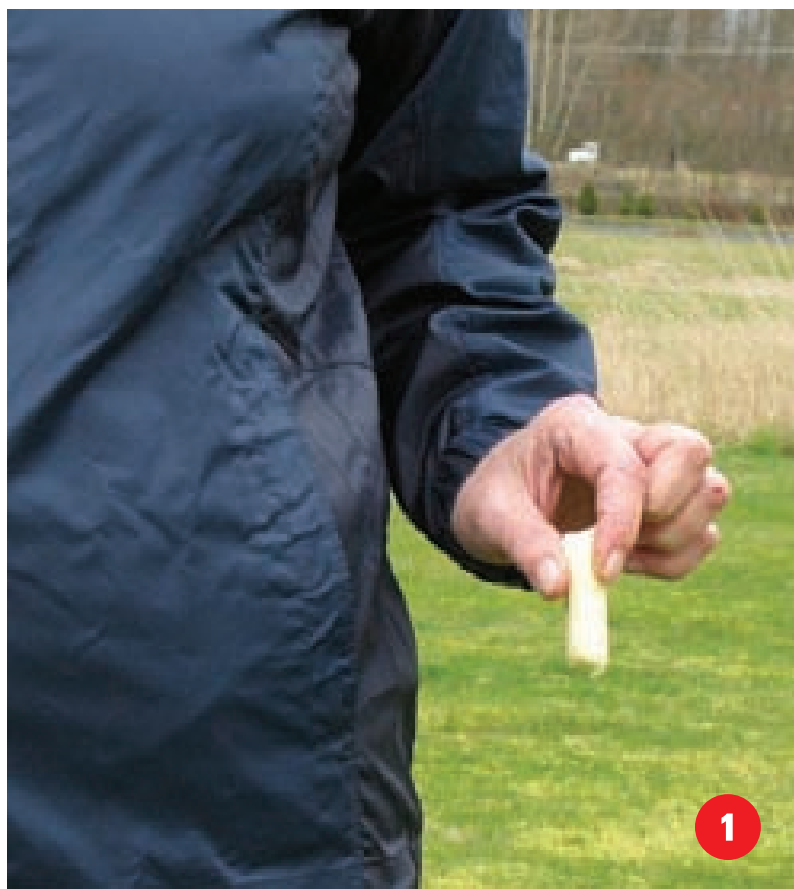
At my seminars I usually have a participant ask me, why is “Heads up” heeling a requirement for your dogs? The answer is that it gives my dog somewhere to focus. By training them using the heads up heeling method they easily pick up on

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my subtle cues of when a change of pace, halt or turn is coming. But more importantly, by giving my dog a very clear focal point, it gives them a reason to want to heel. It provides a constant point of reference; they know exactly where they are supposed to be at all times; this surety of position removes any uncertainty and gives them the confidence to excel. Training with this method makes heeling fun and exciting for my dogs. When I watch dogs heeling that have never been taught a clear focal point, I frequently see a number of problems: Dogs that don't appear to be enjoying the ring experience, dogs that miss many or all of the turns and halt cues given by the handler, lagging, forging and all because they truly don't understand what heel position is.

Photography By: Bradley Esau <http://bradleyesau.smugmug.com/>





**As with most training systems there is more than one way to teach an exercise. I will explain to you the program that I use and why I like it. This particular method was taught to me about 20 years ago by my mentor AnneMarie Silverton. I learned the method from start to finish on my first competition Golden, Indy (SHORELAND'S INDY TWO-HUNDRED Can. OTCH, UDT, MH, WCX, CGC, TT, OHF Am. OTCH. UDT, MH, WCX, OHF – multiple perfect 200 scores) and I have never strayed from it since.**

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The goal of this method is to teach a focal point. The focal point is the outside of your left arm, where your armband is. This insures that your dog's head and body remain straight and thru this, when your dog comes into a halt, he has a much better chance of a straight sit, because his body is in-line. I do not have food in my mouth when heeling, nor do I encourage or have any eye contact with my dog when they are in heel position. When I see dogs heeling with handlers that use too much eye contact or that have food in their mouth, I see dogs having to forge out of heel position to look at the handlers face. Not only does the dog forge, but his rear goes out as his head cranks around trying to see his handler's eyes or face. I also see the dog crowding and bumping his handler, all things that cost us pre-

cious points in the obedience ring. I am going to lay out the heeling program for you step by step. Your progression thru each stage largely depends on how often you train. My rule of thumb for progression is this, once your dog can heel happily with 100% attention, and in distracting locations (ie Supermarket parking lots, training centers, etc) then you should feel confident to move onto the next stage.

Long gone are the days of jerk and pull to get your dog to heel. In today's world we have better methods to teach a dog to heel, but the most important tool, is building your relationship with your dog during this training. Food is a wonderful training tool, but it will not build a relationship with your dog. If you rely on food alone it rarely carries over well into a good ring performance. You must build a relationship with your dog by interacting with him physically, emotionally, verbally and have frequent fun play sessions during your training. The success of any training method depends on developing a bond with your dog.

### How To Teach Heeling For The Medium To Large Breeds

#### Step One

Starting your puppy right. In the photo for this step you will see how I hold the food. I hold it with TWO fingers only and the rest of my fingers are not showing. When training puppies, I use long strips of food so that I can reward my puppies behaviour, then re-focus and carry on with the training. This ensures there is no lack of engagement from my puppy while I fish into my pocket getting the next treat. When I reward I bring my fingers down to the end of the strip, let the pup take a bite off, eat his treat, which only takes a nano-second, then I carry on. I do not want my pup nibbling on the food while heeling and I do not ask him to eat his treat and keep heeling. I simply stop, reward, re-focus and then continue.

**Picture #1** As you can see the treat is highly visible. I never, ever, hold the treat enclosed in my hand so the puppy cannot see it. When you do this you lose the intensity of the focal point and you teach your pup to watch your hand and not the focal point. When I am training students at this stage, I am constantly saying to them, do NOT hide your focal point! They tend to do this because they don't want their puppy jumping up and stealing the food. What I do is teach my puppy "mine" and "okay get it". I simply drop the leash and step on it, then I place a strip of food

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over the puppies head and say "mine". When the puppy jumps up for the treat, he self-corrects himself with the lead. When he stops jumping and just remains in a sit, I say "YES, okay get it" and reward by bringing the treat down to him. Soon your puppy will learn that jumping up and demanding the treat, is not what gets him the reward. You cannot miss this step! As you progress through this system, it will become easier for your dog to steal the food, so you must teach him right from the beginning that the treat is not available until you say "okay get it". I keep my puppy on a 3-4 foot leash when heeling and if the jumping up and attempt to steal the treat gets chronic, then I give very gentle pops down on the collar and remind them "mine".

#### Step Two

Now I place the treat onto the stick. I no longer hold the treat in my hand as my hand is not the focal point! Notice that I hold the stick near the top, so that the pup is looking at the treat on the end of the stick and not my hand. It is now easier for your pup to steal the food as you are not controlling it with your hand. Teach your pup not to jump up and steal the treat! When you reward, stop your motion, say "okay get it" and either bring the treat on the stick down to the dog or let them jump up and get it. **Picture #2**

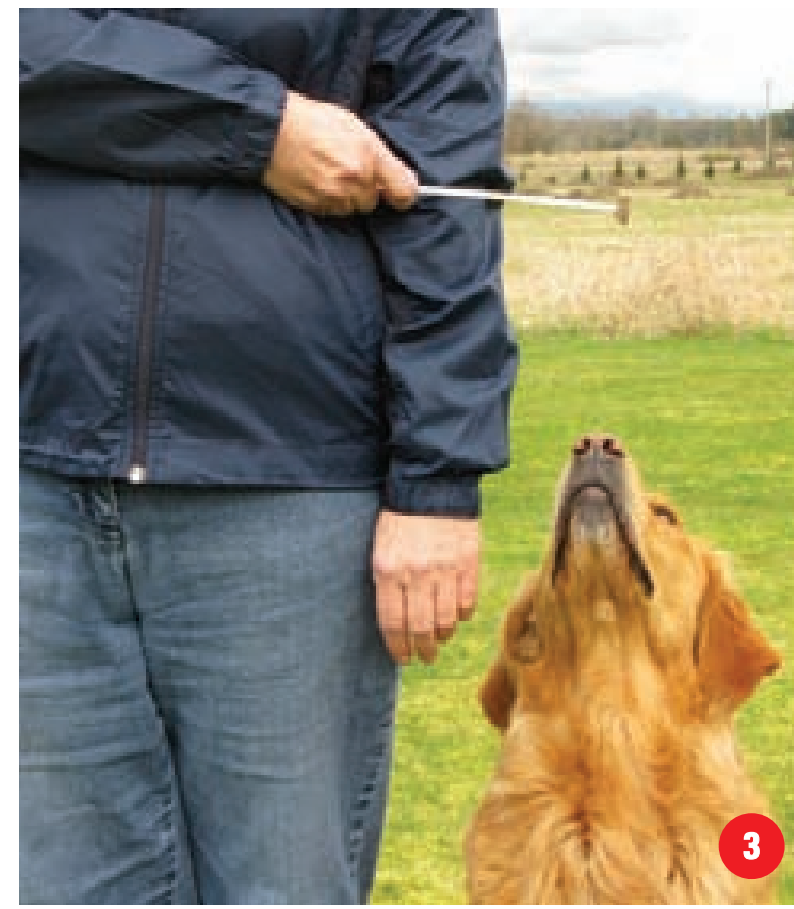
#### Step Three

The stick is held across your body, which is the start of the focal point becoming situated near the armband. Make sure you keep your right arm held tight to your body so that you don't "wander" forward with the stick and make your dog forge. Rule of thumb when holding the treat is to position it is just slightly in front of the seam of your pants. At this stage of heeling I keep my left arm held straight down. The dog in the picture is not on a lead, but your puppy should be thru the entire heeling system. Once your pup is well versed on the system and muscle memory has taken hold, it doesn't matter where your arm is held, the focal point of the armband is now ingrained and that is where they look. **Picture #3**

#### Step Four

In this next step, the stick is specially threaded on one end so that it can screw into the plastic holder. I then place this onto a belt so that my hands are now completely removed from the picture. I continue to reward his effort by allowing the dog to get his treat from the focal point when I stop my motion and say "okay get it". Always remember to stop and reward, let the dog eat his treat, re-load the treat, and re-focus your dog back to

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his focal point before you continue on. DO NOT reward, continue walking, and start fishing for a treat. This will create a very grey area for your dog. He will not understand why sometimes he must hold his head up, yet other times he can heel and be unfocused while he is trying to eat his treat, and you are attempting to get another treat placed back onto the stick. **Picture #4**

**The food is now placed inside the armband and is no longer visible to the dog.**

**Step Five**

Fading the food further away, I now wear the armband and the stick is cut down and the holder is placed into the Velcro strip that is sewn onto the inside of the armband. I reward in the same fashion as stated in step four.

You can reward all steps that way. **Picture #5**

**Step Six**

The next step is to place the treat onto the binder clip so it is becoming less visible to the dog. Sometimes I will reward my dog, but then do not re-load the treat, instead I re-focus him to the

focal point by touching where I want him to look with my index finger of my right hand, once he is looking where you want, move your right hand back to your side and continue heeling. Your dog is now starting to heel in small segments without any visible food. **Picture #6**

**Step Seven**

The food is now placed inside the armband and is no longer visible to the dog. I am able to reward from the exact location I want my dog to stay focused on. Notice that the dog's head is straight up and down without being cranked inwards, which creates forging and a crooked body. This is the final step of the heeling system. **Picture #7**

**How to teach heeling to the Smaller Dog**

**Step One**

This photo (picture 8) shows how I teach the small dogs to heel. They are taught using the stick, the same way we used the stick in step one



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**The dog's focal point, (no matter what the size of dog) is going to be where the dog gets his food rewards from.**

for the medium to larger breed. However with the small dog the stick slowly gets shorter and shorter until eventually focal point will become the bottom of your hand. **Picture #8**

**Step Two**

This picture shows a Scottie that was taught first with the stick. In this next step, we then took a Velcro strap with a zip strip and placed it onto the handler's middle finger. The focal point will then become a ring, and dog can be rewarded with treats tucked in behind the ring. **Picture #9**

**Step Three**

This Cavalier was started as a puppy with food on the stick. Then, we moved to a wristband. A Velcro strip with a zip strip attached. The focal point will then become a watch, with treats tucked behind the watch for rewarding. **Picture #10**

Bottom line is, the dog's focal point, (no matter what the size of dog) is going to be where the



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dog gets his food rewards from. This means reward the dog from his focal point! Students get lazy, and instead of allowing the dog to reward from the focal point, and then reload the treat, they stick their hand in their pocket or pull a piece of cheese out of their mouth and reward the dog. DO NOT do this! Dogs will gravitate to and look at where they are getting rewarded from. If you reward from your right pocket, then they will try to forge and look at your pocket. **Picture #11** Your dog needs to be able to work without visible food rewards and needs to be proofed and exposed to many different environments before going into the ring for competition. Throughout my dog's entire career, I continue to reinforce his focal point and give random food rewards.

Once my dog is fully trained, I can heel with my hands on the top of my head and it doesn't matter, they don't lose their focal point. My dogs have not been taught to watch my hands, so they do not follow my hands when I move them. Of course you cannot take food into the ring with you, but if you have built an intense focal point, had play break rewards during training, used your voice with fun and encouraging emotions, not "drilled" your dog on heeling, but made it fun and unpredictable, these are the ingredients for a happy, focused and dedicated heeling dog. In the beginning stages, realize that cookie "viewing" is not reinforcing! Once you get a one step with attention, then take two steps and so on. A very common fault of handlers is wanting their dogs to heel for too long without reinforcing (rewarding) the heeling. You should always be training your dog and not testing him to see how far he will go before he loses attention. Always work on relationship building and never just rely on the food alone to train your dog. By using the Heads up heeling method and making your training sessions rich, interactive and fun learning experiences you will develop a dog that will excel in the competition ring. If you are working with an older dog that has already been taught how to heel without attention, it is never too late to re-train for a better position and heeling attitude. **DS**

**Janice Gunn** has been involved with training dogs for the past 40 years. She leads competition obedience seminars thru-out the US and Canada and has produced two successful DVD's on obedience training. She has earned 6 OTCH titles and multiple 200 scores with five different dogs. Her own dogs multi task in Retriever field trials and have earned OTCH, MH and FC/AFC titles. These are the highest obtainable levels in both obedience and field. Janice & her husband John own TNT Kennels & Training Center in Abbotsford, BC. [www.tntkennels.com](http://www.tntkennels.com)

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