



# TRAINING WITH THE PRONG COLLAR

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**A clear-eyed look at this controversial training equipment.**

**By Suzanne Clothier**

*July 2009 I had considered removing this article from my website. I no longer use prong collars; can't remember last time I put one on a dog. But I might, if it were the right choice. Though I get accused of using prong collars by many, anyone who has actually attended any of my workshops & seminars has seen me typically strip dogs of all but a buckle or martingale collar, not add prong collars or even any equipment to a dog. My work is about a cooperative relationship with the dog's mind, not controlling his body or using physical corrections.*

*I've kept this article here because if folks are going to persist in physical corrections and restraining their dogs' bodies, I'd prefer that they use the prong collar (or any other piece of equipment) as knowledgeably and humanely as possible. So, despite its age – written way back in 1988 when I still used corrections, as most trainers did – this article will remain to provide information to those who will use this tool for whatever reasons. Where necessary, a prong collar can serve as an interim device on the way to a buckle or martingale collar as the sole piece of equipment.*

*I passionately urge handlers to find a way to work with their dog's mind, to build a joyful & cooperative relationship that does not rely on equipment, corrections, restraint and negative reinforcement.*

*One more time: I do not use or recommend prong collars. I challenge those who do to find more sophisticated ways to train without force.*

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**Note: This article originally appeared in the AKC Gazette, August 1988. Additional notes from the author appear after the original text.**

In 1942, Hans Tossutti wrote, in his book Companion Dog Training: "Another piece of equipment against which I warn is the plain choke collar. In order to obtain results with a collar of this type, the guide must pull on the choke to the point of strangling the dog until he loses his breath. I have seen dogs with necks strained and seriously injured from being trained with choke collars simply because of the strength that can be exerted when the guide brings the dog up short with a quick, hard jerk. But never have I observed the dog with the tiniest red mark on his neck from wearing the ordinary training collar."

The "ordinary training collar" Tossutti writes about is the prong collar, an interlocking chain of blunt, metal prongs connected by a loop of small link chain. This collar, when tightened, evenly applies pressure around the dog's neck. Tossutti viewed the prong collar as "a well-thought-out, cruelty-preventing device which at the same time assists in systematic training," but felt that the choke collar, "though

quite innocuous in appearance, is an instrument of torture in the hands of the beginner because of its unlimited choke."

Hans Tossutti, one of America's first obedience trainers, would be astonished to know that today, the choke collar is used (and abused) extensively, while his "ordinary training collar," the prong collar, is a controversial piece of training equipment that is misunderstood.

To understand how the prong collar (or any collar) works as a stimulus, you must first understand how the dog learns. Briefly, the dog learns when the advantages and disadvantages of his actions are spelled out in black and white. When the choice between advantage and disadvantage is clearly defined, the dog is able to make his decision without stress or confusion. Training difficulties arise when the trainer has not made clear to the dog where his advantage lies. It is the trainer's responsibility to see that the stimulus, be it inductive or compulsive, is sufficient for the dog to clearly perceive his advantage, which is to respond to the handler's wishes.

It is also the trainer's responsibility to know when to escalate the stimulus, and when to choose a new one if desired results are not achieved. To continue with stimuli that do not motivate the dog results in confusion, frustration, and nagging on the handler's part, all of which are destructive to the dog's attitude. If the trainer is aware of the prong collar as an appropriate alternative, this situation can be avoided.

## Variations in Canine Sensitivity

All dogs perceive physical stimuli differently. Some dogs are physically sensitive, some are not. Distractions or all-consuming activities also can alter that sensitivity. Consider the dog in a normal relaxed state versus the same dog confronted with a female in season, or involved in a dog fight. Obviously, the stimulus required to elicit the desired response when he is relaxed is not the same as the stimulus required to achieve the same response faced with a female in season, or a fight.

Breed characteristics play an important role in terms of physical sensitivity. Many breeds were selectively bred to be physically insensitive. Sporting dogs and terriers are notably insensitive, and while this may present a problem for the average owner in training, it is the characteristic that enables these same dogs to perform well at the tasks for which they were bred. A Lab who disliked icy water or rough brush, or a terrier who was easily deterred by his prey's defensive bites could never do its job. Even breeds whose performance does not require physical insensitivity have their share of individuals who are not sensitive to physical stimuli.

A good trainer is aware of the breed characteristics, but as-

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assumptions are never made that all dogs of a particular breed will require a prong collar, since other factors such as mental sensitivity or willingness to please, aptitude for the task, and the training environment such as methods, handler capabilities, distractions, all contribute to the dog's response. What is appropriate for one dog is not necessarily right for another. The skilled trainer is conscious of the internal and external forces that affect the dog's response to stimuli, and can make an informed choice as to method, equipment and motivation necessary for each individual.

### A Choice in The Matter

The prong collar, or any other properly applied stimulus, allows the dog a clear choice. All collars work by creating unpleasantness for the dog--the collar tightens, which the dog dislikes, and therefore he is motivated to act in such a fashion that the collar does not tighten. Depending on the dog, unpleasantness (the collar tightening) sufficient to motivate him may be nothing more than the pressure of a flat buckle collar. Just as some people react dramatically when they stub their toe, and others with just a whimper, dogs, too, display a wide range of tolerance to physical stimuli.

A useful analogy is that of a hearing aid. For a person with normal hearing, a softly spoken request is enough to elicit a response. Impaired hearing requires a louder tone, and some people cannot hear well at all without a hearing aid. To continue to speak to a person who is not wearing his hearing aid is a frustrating experience for both, and to become exasperated with that person for not responding would be the height of insensitivity to the needs of that individual.

Andy was a Golden Retriever who literally pulled his struggling owner into the training building. A properly fitted training collar helped his owner gain some control, but as the weeks went on, it was obvious that Andy, despite real effort by his owner, was not getting the same message from leash corrections that the other dogs in the class were. By the fourth week, she was willing to try working Andy on the prong collar. For the first time in his life, Andy received a correction that gave him a clear choice between the advantages and disadvantages of following his handler's directions. After two corrections, Andy settled down into heel position and moved with his handler, the leash slack between them. With a huge smile on her face as she halted with a now quiet Andy at her side, Kaye proclaimed, "It's power steering!"

Andy's owner had brought him to class in desperation, saying that if Andy could not learn to behave, he would have to be given away. As a result of the proper application of the prong collar, Andy not only graduated as the star of his class, but went on to further levels in training. The owner found she enjoyed working with him when, as she put it, he could "hear" what she wanted. The well-behaved dog could now enjoy family gatherings, parties, and outings instead of being locked in the garage. Andy and his owner are typical of a great percentage of

obedience class students. Sadly, many clubs and training classes, in banning the use of the prong collar, may be dooming some of their students to failure and some of the dogs to a one way trip to the pound by not recognizing the need for alternative equipment. Students become frustrated when their dog is unable to respond, and lacking any knowledge of alternate equipment, assume their dog or they themselves are stupid. Often, they quit in disgust. Rather than accept such failures, trainers and instructors have an obligation to try working with the prong collar or any other method that will help the student succeed. The drop-out rate in classes that do utilize the prong collar is often confined to those students who are unable or unwilling to put in the necessary time working with the dog at home.

In addition to the physically insensitive dog, other situations may call for the use of this collar. A small, elderly or weak person with a very large dog often cannot gain physical control of the dog--they are simply unable to "out-muscle" the dog, especially when the dog is fully aware of his superior strength. Far less pressure and strength are needed with the prong collar, and it goes a long way in relieving the problems created by such an imbalance of owner strength to dog strength.

In the case of very small or toy breeds, the ratio of owner strength to dog strength is slanted too heavily in favor of the owner. With the standard training "choke" collar it is possible to damage the delicate neck of the dog, since this type of collar exerts most of its pressure at one point on the neck when a correction is given. Such unintentional damage is less likely with the prong collar, which by its design distributes the pressure evenly around the dog's neck. It is also self limiting, i.e., it cannot continue to tighten once it has reached its maximum constriction. A "choke" collar has no such limitations, and can literally choke a dog.

### Allowing a Dog To Succeed

The dog is first and foremost an olfactory creature--he "sees" his world in terms of odors and smells. Next in priority is the visual sense. Being a predator, the dog is visually sensitive to movement. In some dogs, a high level of visual sensitivity can create a new training problem--the dog is constantly responding to the visual stimuli of arm or hand movements, which in heel position are around his head. This response to visual cues takes precedence over the physical stimulus of the collar, making it difficult for the dog to respond since his brain gives the visual stimuli priority. The solution is to eliminate as much as possible all movement around the dog's head, allowing him to focus instead on the physical stimuli. The prong collar is of great value with this type of dog since, properly fitted, a quiet flexing of the wrist can achieve the desired response without unnecessary visual stimulation.

A popular misconception is that the use of the collar creates poor attitude or unhappy workers. These problems, of course, can be and are created through the use of any training equipment, and we are all sadly aware of these



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abuses. The prong collar, like any other training equipment properly applied, by clearly showing the dog his choices, will result in a happy dog who is willing to work. Nothing makes a dog happier than knowing in clear terms exactly what he can do to please. Andy, for example, was transformed from a confused, unhappy dog, who was often yelled at for not "listening", into a tail-wagging, smiling dog who knew exactly how to make his owner happy. The prong collar eliminated his confusion, and helped the communications between Andy and his owner.

The dog who is not shown clear choices through the use of proper stimuli is a confused and unhappy dog. Depending on his personality, he either reacts by becoming withdrawn, or increasingly wild and out of control. Andy was a dog who reacted to his confusion by becoming wild. Application of the prong collar relieved his confusion, calmed him down and made him receptive to direction and training. After a few minutes of work with the collar, his body posture and facial expression showed a dramatic change. He was relaxed and quiet.

Andy's is not an isolated case, but the response of a majority of dogs. One noted trainer refers to the prong collar as a "religious collar," due to its ability to "make an instant convert of the dog."

A competition student and his dog offer another example in the use of the prong collar. The dog had completed her CD, and she and the owner came for CDX training. Training was progressing, but heeling began to slide downhill; the memory association between the command "Heel" and the action of heeling was weakening. The usual training collar had little effect, and the owner began nagging the dog in frustration and the dog responded by lagging even further. After much discussion and horrified vows to "quit training rather than use that collar," the owner agreed to a trial with the prong collar.

The dog responded with the enthusiasm and precision that had been missing. The astounded owner worked the dog and was thrilled to discover not only a happy, attentive dog at the end of the leash, but the disappearance of his own frustration and disappointment. The collar, by strengthening the memory association between command and action, provided the motivation for an enthusiastic performance. The dog went on to achieve her CDX, and is currently working on the UD requirements.

Dogs are a lot like people. If a person has sufficient motivation, he does his job well; not enough motivation, and the job is done poorly or not at all. Like people, dogs may go along happily for a time with one level of motivation, and then, "demand a raise". A skillful trainer makes sure that, through the use of a variety of methods and training equipment, the dog receives the motivation he needs.

The prong collar is not a piece of equipment only an "expert" can use. Many dropouts from other training classes have graduated proudly, thanks to intelligent application of this collar. These students were not exceptional, just average people with average dogs who were grateful for con-

trol of their dogs' behavior, and more important, the new relationship they had with their dogs. They needed no more expertise to successfully train dogs than did the other class members whose dogs responded to a standard training collar. Their dogs' needs were just different.

There are dogs who will never need a prong collar. There are dogs who will need one for their very best performance or only in certain situations where excitement raises the threshold of physical sensitivity. Others are doomed to fail without a prong collar, owing to breed characteristics, owner capabilities, or any number of other influences. In all these cases, to ignore the prong collar as a useful alternative to standard training collars may well be likened to teaching a pig to sing. It frustrates you, and annoys the pig.

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### ADDITIONAL NOTES

*If a handler must use a restraining device to control their dog, then I feel the prong collar offers considerably less problems and potential for injury than the increasingly popular head halters. Though halters can be effective in certain cases, I feel many trainers have not carefully thought through or considered the problems with these popular tools. (See my article, The Problem with Head Halters)*

*When properly fitted, the prong collar should be at roughly the mid-way point on the dog's neck, with the chain portion flat, not sagging. Beware those who recommend fitting a prong collar (or any collar) up high, near the dog's ears - their intention is to cause pain by putting the collar in this nerve rich, muscle poor area of great sensitivity. Never fit a prong collar so loose that it can slip over the dog's head.*

*My initial set up is ALWAYS with the leash hooked to both rings, so that there is NO tightening action whatsoever. For most dogs, this is all they ever need. The collar's effect may be further altered by: enclosing the entire collar in latex sheeting (available in any horse supply store), covered in material or slipped through a hair band, wrapped in silk (excellent for finely textured hair coats). Altering the number of prongs facing inward toward the dog also changes the collar's effect; for some dogs, I have used the prong collar inside out.*

*NEVER let the dog "self-correct" by hitting the end of the lead. Engage the dog verbally & physically, asking for simple tasks like walking with you. Give subtle, fluttering signals - often a mere flexing of the fingers is sufficient. Praise the dog for responding. If the dog bolts away from you and tries to pull, do NOT pull back or sharply check him. Go with him, offering repeated gentle tugs until you have him back under control. Then pay more attention so that doesn't happen again.*

*For some dogs, in situations of high arousal, owners may need to switch to a single ring in order to engage the limited tightening action. Do NOT automatically hook the leash to just one ring - this may be far more stimulation than the dog needs. An aggressive response can be provoked by such excess stimulation (whether with the prong collar or any other stimuli); however, prong collars do NOT make dogs aggressive. Many dogs need the extra input of the prong collar only in*



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certain situations (such as group heeling in a class or out walking in public) but are quieter & able to respond to a buckle or limited slip collar at other times (while practicing stays or hand signals, or in familiar, quiet surroundings). In my classes, owners were instructed to have both collars on the dog, and switch between them as needed and as indicated by the dog's behavior & responses.

Always keep a buckle collar on the dog who is wearing a prong collar, and where possible, keep a fail-safe strap or tab running from the leash to the buckle collar, by passing the prong. Dogs can and do break, pop open or simply cause the prong collar to open & fall off unexpectedly. Should that happen, the fail-safe strap is still connecting leash to buckle collar!

Dogs who wear prong collars do not have to wear them forever, no more than a dog who wears any collar has to wear that forever. The need for leads and collars begins to disappear as training progresses. If the training is thorough and followed through to off leash control, the prong collar becomes just another intermediate step in the training process. It is up to the handler to continue training to the point where equipment is necessary only to obey leash laws and protect the dog.

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