

HALT TRAINING:

A couple of principles to start with:

- (1) Always have the dog leashed or on a check cord, and
- (2) Under no circumstances hurt/reprimand the dog when he's in the proper HALT position.
- (3) As with any complex behavior, we train the sequence backwards.

So, ultimately, we want the dog to stop, go down and stay down in the proper position until released. In training, we reel this sequence in backwards: first proper position, then staying there, then going down from a standing position, then going down while moving. Prerequisites for HALT 101 are SIT 101, HEEL 101, COME 600 and a generally mature disposition of the dog (> 6 months old, although I have seen people "play-train" HALT in 12 week old puppies - a great way to use the clicker!)

Step 1 (Proper Position):

To start, I usually have the dog sit at my left side. Put your left hand high on the neck or the base of the dog's head, and grab both front feet with your right. Say "HAAAAALT" and pull the front legs forward, while pushing down with your left hand. Once the elbows hit the ground, press the head down until the chin hits the ground. Keep the dog there until it stops struggling, then praise and release with a heel command. Take a few paces, then repeat. After about 10 minutes and 20 reps, the dog should readily yield to the pressure and stay on the ground while the handler keeps one hand on the back of the head and the other over the kidney area to prevent the dog from lifting its hindquarters. In this phase it is very important that the dog rest evenly on both haunches, i.e. it should not flop over on the side. Some dogs try that, and it must be corrected early on.

STEP 2: Staying down Once the dog yields willingly to the pressure (or starts anticipating it) and goes down into the HALT position, you loosen your touch, but be ready to apply pressure should the dog lift its head or move. Incrementally remove your hands, until you can stand over the dog, move around, step over the dog, tap the ground, etc, without the dog moving. Things to watch out for in this phase are the dog shifting its weight to one ham, moving the head to rest on one paw, etc. Immediately correct these! After only a couple of days, you have a dog that stays reliably in the HALT position.

STEP 3: Going down Once the dog stays reliably down, we train the going down from a sitting position. You can use a pinch collar if necessary, but a simple choke chain of flat leather collar will do just as well. Have dog sit on your left side, run a short leash from the collar under your foot and back up into your hand. You can now pull the dog down while commanding HAAAAALT! by either pulling on the lead, or later, when you want to speed it up by simply stepping on the leash, which will jerk the dog a bit and thus speed up his willingness to go down. Once the dog knows that it must immediately go down from a sitting position, try the same thing while the dog is standing. In this phase, the dog sometimes goes down in the front, while trying to keep the hindquarters up. A quick slap with the end of the leash on the rump will cure that. If you need to put pressure behind your command, make sure you are enthusiastically positive once the dog is in the proper position. I have had excellent success with a bit of liverwurst on a finger tip, which the dog gets to lick off while in the halt (a small dab of multi-vitamin paste NUTRICAL works well too, the dog can lick it directly from the tube without getting its chin off the ground and your fingers stay clean). The dog must be absolutely sure where the safety zone is and he must LOVE it! If you have an e-collar, you can now phase in the low stimulation by turning the collar upside down, so the probes sit on the back of the dog's neck, right behind the ears. Command HALT and start the stimulation until the dog is in the HALT position, then give him his treat, wait a couple of moments and release. At this step I usually overlay the Whistle command (single sharp blast on the trilling end of the tweeter) with the verbal "HAAAAALT" command by first blowing

the whistle then giving the verbal command. After a few repetitions, the dog has associated the trill with the verbal command and then you can leave the verbal command out. When the dog goes down fast and willingly upon the whistle blast, you're ready for

Step 4: going down while moving.

Now we walk the pooch at heel, and blow the whistle, immediately turning left in front of the dog and giving the VISUAL command. I use the raised hand for that, but I realize that that might conflict with the "BACK" signal for retrievers. I like a visual command, because it helps me train things like the VGP forest work. The reason why you abruptly jump in front of the dog when you make him HALT out of a walk is to STOP all forward movement. Now we get to one of those points when things can get sticky. We want the dog to lie down instantly upon command, but most dogs will try to run to our feet and lie down there! So how do you prevent that? I usually take quick steps backwards after the dog goes down, and then call him off (of course after some reasonable waiting time). Now you just have to try this in all kinds of variations, running, walking, even on a recall. Don't try the HALT on recall if the dog still has a tendency to creep up to you before going completely down. With the e-collar I have the best tool available to make it clear that it is in the dog's best interest to drop wherever it is. If the dog tries to run "through" the low level stimulation, I found this to be an excellent use for the "rising" stimulation on the Innotek collar. Some people want their dog to lie down exactly in the direction they were facing when they blew the whistle. I never understood the reason for that. I prefer my dogs to turn towards me and then go down. Later in the hunting field, when I let the dog keep its head up or even just sit down, I have the dog looking at me, ready for a hand signal etc. So I personally like the dog to whirl around and lie down facing me upon HALT. But that's my own bias.

STEP 5 now entails the consolidation of the learned HALT first with a dragging check chord, then free. Again the E-collar allows you to keep the dog from getting sloppy. If you do this correctly, you should have a dog that throws himself into the dirt upon command wherever it is and wagging its tail. The last step involves creating diversions, such as throwing a chip wing, a tame bunny next to the dog's nose, a quail on the dog's head, etc. >From then on I use the HALT as a training tool. If it is properly trained, you can stop the dog at any time exactly when you want it. For instance, I use HALT to break the training sequence in teaching steadiness. There, the dog learns that making a mistake (flushing the bird, or breaking) is followed by 3 min of HALT, and no success (retrieve). Smart dogs figure out real fast how they can avoid the blasted HALT, and bingo - your dog is steady. Other applications include HALT when the dog strays too far from the bloodtrack or drag, HALT when the dog has jumped out of the truck without being asked too, HALT for teaching the "ablegen" or down stay, etc. Coupled with the E-collar, HALT is the most versatile training tool.

Lastly, after the dog knows to reliably go down into the HALT and you have a seasoned HALT-pro, you can start relaxing the thing a bit. For my own hunting dogs (AFTER VGP) I am quite happy when they sit down on a HALT. It's often not possible for the dog to lie down (steep hillsides, water) or undesirable because you want the dog to see your hand signal to take a new direction etc. So for seasoned hunting dogs you can relax the HALT to wherever you feel comfortable. However, be forewarned that relaxing the HALT before the dog is absolutely, dead-sure 1000% reliable in a speedy deflation, can cause a severe set back and problems. It's easy to give some leeway later, but you cannot lighten your expectations after the dog learned that it is OK to be sloppy without confusing the dog. Just like a good drill sergeant, you need to first have perfection drilled before you can let things wear down to a working level.

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