

THINKING ABOUT THE E-COLLAR

A Discussion with Maurice Lindley

By
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INTRODUCTION

It may sound simple, but how you think about the e-collar determines how you use it. If you think the e-collar is a tool for punishing a dog, you use it to punish. If you think it is a communications tool, you use it to communicate. Over the past few years, Maurice Lindley has encouraged me to think about the e-collar as a communications tool to give *cues* to the dog. Cues are non-verbal commands, and more specifically, e-collar cues are low levels of stimulation. If the dog does not respond to an e-collar cue, higher levels of stimulation are given as a correction. Changing an old way of thinking is hard to do, but fortunately, the dogs caught on faster than I did and showed me this new approach made sense to them. The more I used the e-collar to give cues, the easier it was to see the e-collar from the dog's perspective, and it became clear that dogs had been thinking this way all along.

Maurice teaches a dog two basic cues. One cue asks the dog to bend and go with him, and the other cue asks the dog to stop and stand still. He begins with the pinch-collar and check-cord, and once the dog is responding to pinch-collar cues, Maurice overlays the e-collar to teach e-collar cues. Eventually, he can ask the dog to bend and go with him or stop and stand still with the pinch-collar or the e-collar. The e-collar described below is a Tri-Tronics Pro 500. Maurice suggests reading this article slowly and then rereading it several more times before putting the information to use.

DISCUSSION

In late August, Maurice invited me to South Carolina to work dogs and talk about the e-collar. It was morning as I pulled into the driveway and passed the house and kennels. Maurice's truck and dog trailer were under the massive oak tree in the training field. I parked and got Chalk, a one-year-old Brittany, out of the car. Happy to stretch his legs, I put him on one of the stake-out chains in the shade and gave him a bowl of water. It was already getting hot. Maurice was in the field working a dog, and it was not long before he joined me. Always gracious, we visited briefly before he was ready to work another dog. He got a one-and-a-half-year-old pointer that had been in training for two months out of the dog trailer. He put a pinch-collar and e-collar on the dog and walked him on the check-cord to the field. I followed a short distance behind. As the dog was working in front of him, Maurice *nicked* the dog on 2 low. A nick is momentary stimulation that is preset by the manufacturer. The dog stopped and stood still. Maurice walked past the dog, back to the dog, stroked him, and they continued on. Next, he dropped the check-cord, and as the dog was dragging it, he nicked him again and the dog stopped. He stroked the dog, then turned towards me and said, "I had to nick him a couple of times, but the dog is showing me he understands the nick is a cue to stop and stand still."

Maurice went on to explain how he taught the e-collar cue, "Once I've introduced the e-collar and the dog understands the pinch-collar tug is a cue to stop, I give the dog a slight tug I hope he ignores, and as quick as he ignores it, I nick him with the e-collar. If he doesn't stop, I'll stop him with another tug. Over the next couple of weeks, I'll work on it a bit more. If he doesn't stop with the pinch-collar cue, I might nick him one, two, maybe three times in a row. Maybe he stops on the third nick. I want to nag him a bit with the e-collar at this stage and use repetitive training to build an e-collar cue into the dog that means stop and stand still." Maurice continued to work the pointer and brought him crosswind to a clump of broom sedge where a pigeon was

planted. After working the dog on the bird, Maurice headed back to the oak tree and put him in the trailer.

We sat down in a couple of chairs, and I asked Maurice if he would mind backing up and describe how he introduced the e-collar. He explained, “When I introduce the e-collar, I want to get the dog accustomed to the sensation of stimulation. I begin by finding the dog’s working level. The dog is wearing the pinch-collar and e-collar and standing next to me. I use continuous stimulation and *tap* the low button real quick one time on level 1. A tap is continuous stimulation and lasts as long as I hold down the button. Most dogs don’t react, although they may feel it.” He described how he carefully watched the dog for any slight reaction to the tap such as blinking his eyes, looking around, shaking his head, or his neck muscles vibrate. If he did not see a reaction, he moved up to level 2 low. Most pointing dogs showed a reaction at this level. Once he found the dog’s working level, he was ready to introduce the e-collar. “I like to introduce the e-collar at the same time I use the pinch-collar to ask the dog to go with me. I tap the button at the same time I cue him with the pinch-collar to bend and go with me. I don’t tap him every time, maybe three times in a workout. Once the dog understands the e-collar cue, I can drop the check-cord and use the e-collar by itself.”

In the last few years, Maurice has been experimenting with momentary and continuous stimulation to make e-collar cues clearer to the dog. He uses a tap to find the dog’s working level and as a cue to bend and go with him. He uses the nick as a cue to stop and stand still. He showed me how to use the continuous button. “I don’t hold down the button when I use continuous. It’s a quick tap, tap, tap. I use a lower level for continuous stimulation because the tap lasts as long as I hold down the button. Even a quick tap is going to feel hotter to the dog than the preset nick. The tap is always a longer duration because I can’t tap that fast. For example, a dog that works on a level 4 low nick reacts about the same to a level 2 low tap. I’ll

use repetitive training to build an e-collar cue into the dog so when he feels the nick, he stops and stands still, and when he feels the tap, he bends and goes with me.”

Maurice got a six-month old Brittany pup off the trailer to show me how he was introducing the e-collar to a young dog. He explained she was full of herself and getting harder to pick up so he had stopped running her and was introducing the e-collar. “She doesn’t need me anymore,” he said grinning, “I’m teaching her to bend and go with me with the pinch-collar and e-collar. Once I get everything built into her, she will start watching which direction I turn and try to stay in front. If she doesn’t, I can tap her with the e-collar when she is at a distance, and she’ll look up and bend and go with me. She’ll understand what I’m asking her to do.” He went on to explain she had already been wearing the e-collar and how important it was to get a dog accustomed to wearing it before using it. He walked her to the field on the check-cord, and once she was hunting in front of him, he used a pinch-collar tug to cue her to bend and go with him. About every third time, he combined the tug with an e-collar tap. After about ten minutes, he let her run at a pigeon and ended on a happy note. He put her up, and we took a break for lunch.

Relaxing after lunch, Maurice briefly left and returned with a cardboard box full of Tri-Tronics e-collars he had owned since the mid-seventies. Laying out the collection on the table, he held up his first e-collar, a Tri-Tronics A70. It looked like something from a science fiction movie with long antennas coming off both the transmitter and receiver. He pointed to the single button on the transmitter and said, “This button is really hot. To be honest, I didn’t use it much. Training was more manual back then, and the e-collar was used like a whip for punishment. It wasn’t until variable intensity collars came out that the e-collar became more useful, and I was able to match the level of stimulation to just about any dog in training including younger dogs and softer dogs. Back then, it took a real tough dog to withstand one of these older e-collars.”

I looked at the amazing collection and asked why they were all Tri-Tronics units. He said he felt more comfortable using Tri-Tronics and explained the electrical pulse felt different from manufacturer to manufacturer. Intensity levels varied too so it made sense to become familiar with one brand and stick with it. “Most people think you press the button on any e-collar and it feels the same to the dog, but you have to experiment with different e-collars and try them on yourself to feel how differently they work. And you need to read the instruction manual. I see people buy an e-collar, and they don’t know if it uses momentary or continuous stimulation. You have to be familiar with the manual and experiment with the e-collar on the palm of your hand. I test the e-collar on myself every time I train. I want to make sure it’s working properly. I’ll hit the low button, then the medium button. If it feels alright, I know it’s alright to put on the dog.” I asked which e-collar he recommended to clients, and he said the Tri-Tronics 200 or 500. “The Tri-Tronics 200 has momentary stimulation with a continuous button and is a good e-collar for a person to learn with. The preset nick is so fast it doesn’t overwhelm the dog. The Tri-Tronics 500 has a toggle switch to move from momentary to continuous stimulation which I like better, but it is more expensive.”

Maurice put the collection back in the box, and we headed to the oak tree. He planted a couple of pigeons and got a two-year old English setter off the trailer. She had been in training for a couple of months and understood both e-collar cues. Maurice had started taking away some of the chase using the nick as a cue to stop. He held on to the check-cord as he brought her crosswind to the first bird. She pointed, and when it flew, he dropped the check-cord and let her chase. He waited for her to get about 30 feet past where the bird flushed, and then nicked her. She did not show a reaction and continued to chase. He brought her into the second bird, and when it flew, she chased again, but this time she slowed down and then stopped. “I’m still in the teaching phase with her and working on taking away some of the chase. I’m going to nag her a

little bit with the e-collar so I don't scare her around birds. On the first bird, I nicked her three or four times, but she kept going. On the next bird, I went up one level, and I could see her start to slow down with each nick. She slowed down, then boom, she stopped. I call it a rolling stop. A rolling stop is what I want to see at this stage. I don't want to see a real hard stop, a squeal, or have her come back to me. I want to get her to where I can nick, nick, nick, and she slows, slows and stops. Once she is giving me broke dog work, then, if she willfully knocks a bird and takes off chasing when it flushes, I'm going to get after her a little bit more. It will be a correction, and because it's hotter, I won't have to do it as many times."

Maurice put out a couple more pigeons and took a German shorthair pointer off the trailer that had been in training for most of the summer. The dog was almost finished on pigeons and dragging the check-cord. Maurice brought him into the first bird, and when the dog hit scent, he froze. Maurice walked in front, flushed, and fired. The dog stood, but he was more amped up. On the second bird, he pointed and began to creep. Maurice launched the bird, and the dog chased hard. Maurice waited for him to get well past where the bird flushed before stopping him with the e-collar. He walked to the dog, stroked him, and motioned me to come over. "When I get through all the training steps, and the dog is giving me broke work, I've earned the right to correct him. Now, I've got to watch his intent. If his intent is to get up there and knock the bird, then I'm going to stop him a little harder with the e-collar. I'll cue him at lower levels to nag him into stopping, but after he understands the cue, I've earned the right to correct him. I'm not talking about eating him up with the e-collar, but I am talking about using the e-collar at a high enough level that he doesn't want to do that again on the next bird. It changes the behavior. The dog is thinking, 'I'll stand here and let Mo flush the next bird. That last one didn't work out too good.' As the dog becomes calmer, I'll be able to use less e-collar to get what I want. I'll be able to back off the higher level and go back to his normal working level."

We walked back to the oak tree, and Maurice put the dog in the trailer. We sat down and talked more about how an e-collar correction was different than an e-collar cue. Maurice explained that intensity separated a correction from a cue. Because the shorthair was considered trained, Maurice used a hotter nick so he did not have to nag the dog. I asked him what level he used to stop the dog. “He normally works on level 2 low, but when he intentionally knocked that bird, I went to level 4 low. That nick is going to have some sting to it, and I want him to know it’s a correction. The dog feels it more and it hurts a little bit, but it doesn’t scare him because the foundation work is solid. He knows what I’m asking him to do.”

It was getting late, and Maurice asked if I wanted to work Chalk. He planted a pigeon while I got Chalk ready. We walked to the field, and I held on to the check-cord as Chalk worked in front of me. He knew the e-collar cue for stop and stand still, and I was curious if he would listen in a new place. I nicked him on level 2 low, and he stopped. Maurice suggested next time I drop the check-cord before cuing him to stop. I got him going again, dropped the check-cord, and nicked him on level 2 low. This time Chalk ignored it so I nicked him a couple more times. He did not stop. Maurice came over and said to try it again, but this time go from level 2 low to level 4 low. He explained the new training environment increased Chalk’s level of distraction, and I needed to match his distraction level to the intensity level of the e-collar. Once Chalk was working in front of me again, I dropped the check-cord and cued him with a level 2 low nick. When he did not react, I went to level 4 low and corrected him. He stopped on the second nick. “You want to stay as low as possible, but you’ve got enough training in Chalk that he is ready for this stage of work. If you stay at level 2 low, you’re nagging him. If you go from level 2 low to level 4 low, you’re correcting him just like I did with the shorthair. Now, I don’t go from level 2 low to level 2 medium. Think about it. If I go to medium, the duration of stimulation is longer. I’d rather stay with the low button and go to a higher intensity level than stay at the same level

and go to the medium or high button that's a longer duration. The low button is on and off so quick, it breaks the dog's concentration, breaks his focus, and is less likely to scare him."

Maurice suggested I work Chalk on the pigeon and put him up. Back at the oak tree, Chalk drank some water and I put him in the car. It was getting late and time for me to leave. I had one last question and asked Maurice what he thought the e-collar did best. "Timing," he answered without hesitating, "timing of the cue or correction. The e-collar makes communicating with the dog a lot clearer. In the days before e-collars, if a dog knocked a bird and knew better, I had to run him down. By the time I caught him, he'd forgotten what he did wrong. With the e-collar, if a dog knocks a bird, my timing is going to be right, even when he's at a distance. I'm already anticipating what he may do. My finger is on the button, and my eyes are on the dog. I don't have to think about it. I just react." A simple yet profound answer from a trainer who has trained over 1000 dogs in the last thirty years. On that note, I said good-bye and headed home to Virginia. It had been a long day and I was tired, the good kind of tired that comes from learning and doing. As I drove towards the Interstate, my mind drifted.

The trainer brings the dog into the field on a check-cord. The dog gets to work, and as he is hunting in front of the trainer, the trainer lightly nicks him with the e-collar, and the dog stops and stands still. The trainer goes to him, strokes him, and they move on. The dog resumes hunting, and something catches his interest. He turns and begins to slow down. He is more focused now, his movements more deliberate. The trainer drops the check-cord, and the dog begins to cat walk carefully placing one foot in front of the other, head held high, inhaling and processing the scent until he freezes immobile as a statue. The trainer pauses letting the dog absorb the moment, then walks in, kicks up the bird and fires. The dog remains motionless except for the head, which turns as his eyes mark the bird. The trainer strokes the dog and takes him on. The dog is dragging the

check-cord now and the pace quickens. "Here," the trainer says as he turns in a new direction. The dog does not respond so the trainer lightly taps the dog with the e-collar. The dog glances up and bends to go with him. The dog understands.