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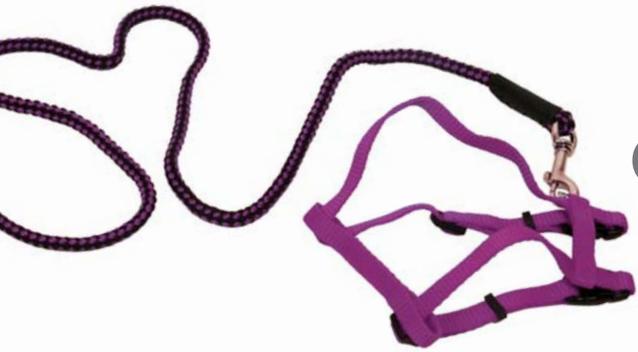
Training tools

- part 1

COLLARS & HARNESSSES

-the *good*, the *bad* and the *ugly*.

By Paul Owens



It used to be that all anyone ever used for training dogs was a six-foot leash and a choke chain. How times have changed – and for the better. In this two-part article, we'll explore the collars, harnesses, leashes and tethers on today's market, and the pros and cons of each. In Part 1, we'll focus on collars and harnesses.

As a professional reward-based trainer, I believe whatever tools you choose should be used humanely, with your first thought being what is best and most comfortable for the dog.

COLLARS

Collars should not be used for training a dog to walk nicely on a leash. Yet, they are nevertheless often utilized for training purposes. They can be made of nylon, plastic, cotton, rubber, leather and metal, and come in a range of types – rolled, flat, Martingale, buckle and snap. Here we'll review the pros and cons of the most familiar and often used collars.

Choke chains and prong collars

Also referred to as “slip” collars, chain training collars and check chains have been around for over 50 years. They were originally made popular by British dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse in the 1960s. The choke collar is placed just behind the dog's ears and constricts or tightens when the trainer pulls on the leash.

A prong collar, also known as a pinch collar, is made of a series of metal spikes, prongs, or wedge-shaped points that pinch the loose skin of the dog's neck when the trainer pulls on the leash.

Both choke and prong collars are primarily used to control a dog's pulling and lunging and to get him to heel. The trainer usually employs a series of short jerks on the leash, also called “pops”, as punishment to get the desired result. Ultimately, the dog learns to avoid the aversive tightening of the collar around

his neck by walking near the trainer's side.

Pros: None! It is certainly possible to force a dog to stop jumping or lunging, and to teach a behavior such as heeling, by using a choke or prong collar. However, our understanding of how dogs learn has come a long way in the past 20 years, and the training field has evolved, resulting in safer, easier, and more reliable reward-based methods. Using a choke or prong collar to force a behavior is no way to educate a family member and friend.

Cons: Can cause whiplash and injuries to the trachea and esophagus; these can lead to asphyxiation (such as when a dog is hung or “helicoptered”). Other injuries may include spinal cord trauma; injuries to blood vessels in the eyes; neck sprains; bruising and damage to the skin and tissues in the neck; and/or behavioral problems such as pain-influenced aggression, which may lead to severe bites.

Martingale collars

Also known as limited slip collars or greyhound collars, Martingale collars are flat, usually cotton collars with a loop that goes over the dog's head, and another attached loop, that when pulled, tightens the loop around the dog's head.

Pros: When fitted properly, it doesn't choke the dog, yet makes it virtually impossible for him to slip or back out of it.

Cons: Loose loops. People often do not fit the collar correctly. The dog's



A Martingale collar needs to be fitted right to be safe and effective.

paws or jaw can sometimes get caught in the dangling loop. It must be stressed that this collar is only safe when properly fitted.

Unfortunately, some people believe the Martingale collar is designed to keep a dog from pulling. It is not.

Lastly, for safety's sake, it is very important to remove any collar, especially a Martingale, when dogs are playing with one another or are put in kennels. In those situations a breakaway collar is recommended.

Electronic collars

Also referred to as remote training collars or shock collars, electronic collars are designed to deliver an electrical charge in order to communicate what the trainer wants the dog to do or stop doing. Electronic collars can be used in three ways:

- 1 **Marker:** A signal to the dog that a behavior is correct and a treat is on the way. In this mode, the collar is set at the lowest vibrational intensity possible. Classical conditioning is used first to pair the tactile electrical sensation with a highly valued treat. Some blind and deaf dogs are trained in this way.
- 2 **Cue to elicit a behavior:** A signal to the dog to perform a particular behavior, such as turn left, turn right, lie down, come, etc. Again, the collar is set at the lowest vibrational intensity possible.
- 3 **Cue to stop a behavior:** This is the option most people are familiar with when it comes to electronic collars. If a dog is doing something the trainer doesn't want, like jumping, barking or lunging, an electric current is delivered to him through two contact points located on the collar. In this mode, the collar is set at a level with enough intensity to force the dog to comply, because of the discomfort or pain it causes.

Pros: In the experienced hands of a reward-based trainer, an electronic collar can be an effective tool in remote training, as well as for some, but not all, blind and deaf dogs.

Cons: If all electronic collars in existence had a maximum setting of "feather's touch", without any option for additional intensity, they could, with strict instructions and careful monitoring, be a useful tool for many, though not all, dogs. Unfortunately this is not the case. There are several other reasons electronic collars are not recommended:

- a) **The trainer's skills.** In the hands of anyone but the most skilled individual, who uses precise timing, consistency and awareness of the dog's physical and emotional capabilities, mistakes and abuse are almost guaranteed with electronic collars – and that becomes a "catch 22" situation. In order to achieve an effective level of expertise, the trainer has to experiment and practice with the collar, which means the dog is going to suffer while the trainer hones his or her skills.

Continued on page 40.

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- b) *Aversive training methods.* If too much force or intensity is used, the dog may shut down completely and the relationship with the trainer or other humans or animals is irreparably harmed. This is especially true if shock collars are used on already stressed, fearful and reactive dogs. If too little force is used, the dog simply learns to ignore the signals. In addition, people are tempted to “speed the process along” by cranking up the intensity. If a trainer thinks a little correction works, it is easy to slip into the mindset that “a little more might work better” and the intensity of the corrections increases.
- c) *The individual dog.* The amount of pain a dog feels depends on several factors: his touch sensitivity, the thickness of hair between the collar and his skin, his temperament and past training history, and so on. Putting a shock collar around your own neck cannot compare to what an individual dog will feel. Even if you tried this, the emotional impact would be quite different if control of the collar was given to another person and you never knew when a correction was coming.
- d) *Unintentional corrections.* Dogs can sometimes experience a shock completely unrelated to the trainer’s intentions. Occasionally, an outside radio frequency, such a remote-controlled child’s toy or an automatic garage opener, can set off an electronic collar.
- e) *Ethical consideration.* If a behavior can be elicited or controlled without causing pain or discomfort, why would anyone consciously do otherwise?

In summary

Stay away from choke and prong collars. Avoid electronic collars unless you and your dog are under the direct supervision of a professional trainer who is rooted in reward-based training. Wider collars are more comfortable for dogs, whether you choose a buckle, snap collar or Martingale collar. Whichever one you choose, it should be regularly checked for proper fit.

HARNESSES

To preface, I believe that a leash should be attached to a properly fitted harness rather than a collar when walking a dog. While

“no-pull” harnesses should not be used as a substitute for training your dog to walk without pulling or lunging, they can be very helpful until a dog is an accomplished “nice walker”.

Nose harnesses

Also referred to as a head halter, the nose harness is one of the most common anti-pulling harnesses on the market. It works on the principle of “where the head goes, the body follows”. A nose harness works as a form of negative reinforcement: gentle pressure is applied on the dog’s nose whenever he pulls, and is immediately released when he stops pulling. Some head halter brand names include Gentle Leader, Promise Collar, Comfort Trainer, Canny Collar, and Halti.

Pros: Used properly, the nose harness/head halter doesn’t cause pain and can be an effective, humane anti-pulling tool.

Cons: Nose harnesses won’t work for some dogs because of their physiology – e.g., they should be avoided in brachycephalic dogs like pugs and French bulldogs because the straps ride up into the eye area. Also, many dogs do not like contraptions around their muzzles (however, after a few days of counter-conditioning, these dogs can usually wear the halter without difficulty).

Using a nose harness can cause the potential for spinal injury. If a dog suddenly lunges and comes up short at the end of the leash, his head can be jerked violently sideways. And in spite of written cautions, some people use leash corrections on a dog wearing nose harnesses. Leash corrections are never recommended in training and are especially dangerous if a dog is wearing a nose harness. Quick jerks on the leash can easily injure a dog’s neck and spine.

Finally, many dogs revert to pulling once the nose harness is removed.

Front attachment harnesses

As the name implies, the front attachment harness has a connection ring situated on the dog’s chest. Some models also include a ring on

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Used properly, a nose harness can be both effective and humane.

the straps that meet over the dog's back. When the leash is attached to the chest ring and the dog pulls, he or she is guided back toward the walker.

This type of harness is another of the most commonly used anti-pulling



The front attachment harness is a good choice if you jog with your dog.

harnesses on the market. I recommend that if you are going to jog with your dog, a front attachment harness is the tool to use until he is taught to no longer pull or lunge. Brand names include Freedom, Easy Walk, Sensation, and Walk-in-Sync.

Pros: When fitted correctly, a front attachment harness can be a very effective anti-pulling tool.

Cons: No one harness works best for every dog, due to different body shapes and designs. With some dogs, a particular harness's connecting snap might end up right under his "arm pits", which is very uncomfortable for him. In general, wider straps are more comfortable than thinner ones.

Over time, a strong puller can work the harness a little loose, so it should be checked before every walk. I also recommend attaching a carabineer to both collars and harnesses, for added safety; as well, the clip will hold the front strap in place, keeping it effective.

ThunderLeash

The ThunderLeash can be used as a plain leash or harness. As an anti-pulling harness, it is designed with a metal "harness slot" that rests between two buckles. The leash wraps around your dog and is threaded



A breakaway collar is recommended for when your dog is playing or in a kennel.

through the metal slot. It is then attached to his collar. When the dog pulls, a mild pressure is applied around his midsection, reducing his desire to pull.

Pros: Humane and easy to put on. Works very well with some dogs.

Cons: Not a lot of sizes to choose from. This is pertinent because people with smaller dogs have had problems with the hefty buckles not staying in place.

In summary

Anti-pulling harnesses are effective safety tools for walks, but no one harness works for every dog. Size, strength and body shape all factor in. A professional trainer is always recommended, not only to help you decide which harness to use, but to teach you how to get your dog to walk nicely on a leash so an anti-pulling harness isn't even necessary.

An anti-pulling harness can teach a dog not to pull when he is wearing it, but he often reverts to pulling when it is removed. Once again, I recommend working with a professional, positive trainer.

All harnesses are only as good as their fit. Make sure whatever product you use is fitted correctly. And as suggested earlier, it's not a bad idea to correctly add another connecting clip or carabineer for extra safety. 

In Part 2 of this article (Dec 2014/Jan 2015), we'll look at leashes and tethers and their roles in training and safety.

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