Collars & Leads

If you have a very young puppy in the puppy class, you will probably want to begin training on whatever soft and comfortable collar you are currently using provided the puppy is not already a serious little powerhouse pulling machine. With many pups, as they mature, there may come a time when you will want to consider the use of another collar for awhile.

As you mull over which collar will be correct for your dog, keep in mind that EVERY collar is a tool and you must learn how to use tools correctly. Collars are the training tools we select to help us arrive at the place where collars are no longer necessary to control the dog and training collars, your dog’s school clothes, can be replaced with fancy designer duds! Also bear in mind that ANYTHING we put around a dog’s neck has the potential for harm. There are no perfect collars.

I was taught that when reason and emotion are locked in combat, emotion always wins. Collars can be quite an emotional subject for many reasons. What you will now read are simply facts. I ask you to set aside emotions and try to make a logical choice based on the reality of your dog’s behaviors and actions in and out of your home. Do keep in mind that many dogs only need to wear their training collars when away from home.

BUCKLE OR SNAP COLLARS: These are very popular collars with the general public as they are colorful and easily found. They are usually made of either flat or rolled material such as nylon, cotton or leather. They are perfect for a pup’s first collar and for bearing dog tags. (Although a microchip or tattoo is a better means of identification!) However, as training collars, they have serious drawbacks. On any dog, they will cause fur damage around the ruff if worn constantly and therefore, are a really bad choice for show dogs. Unless you buckle them so tight as to become almost inhumane, they are also easy for dogs to escape from if they panic or shy from something. When a dog strains forward into a buckle collar, all of the stress is applied to the sensitive throat and soft tissue damage can occur. Unless your dog is highly verbally sensitive (rarely requires physical restraint and is highly responsive to verbal cues in ANY situation), these collars should be avoided until your dog is fully trained on and off lead.

CHOOSE FOR SOFT, SENSITIVE DOGS WHO ARE RARELY DISTRACTED AND ARE ALMOST ALWAYS FOCUSED ON YOU.
AVOID FOR OUTGOING, ACTIVE, STRONG AND DISTRACTIBLE DOGS.

SLIP OR CHOKE COLLARS: These are another type of collar that the public is well aware of. They are also popular and often misused and abused. They come in chain, nylon and leather. We consider them to be THE MOST DANGEROUS AND DIFFICULT COLLAR TO USE. Studies from several different veterinary teaching schools have absolutely proven that spinal damage can occur as the result of using choke collars for training. We did not believe the early studies. It took having one of our own dogs suffer a spinal injury to make believers of us. Although they are popular because dogs cannot escape them and many trainers, myself included, advocated their use for many years, it is not the collar that makes a difference but the force of the correction applied with it that gets results.

BECAUSE OF THE HIGH INJURY RISK ASSOCIATED WITH CHOKE COLLARS, THEY ARE NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE AS SUITABLE COLLARS FOR TRAINING.

PRONG COLLARS: These collars certainly do look like medieval torture instruments. There was a time when I forbade them in my classes and would only use them in extreme situations. My views have changed dramatically as I have learned more about the effects of various collars on the necks of dogs. On the positive side, these collars are easy to use, require very little adjustment during training and I now know that chiropractically, they are the safest collar a dog can wear during training. They do the least damage to both soft tissue and the spine. For dogs with sensitive skin, tiny rubber tips can be applied. On the negative side, they can only be used during actual training sessions. They are not a collar that can be worn constantly.

Some time ago, I attended an instructor’s workshop wherein we humans became “dogs” for awhile. We were “trained” by other humans who put different types of collars on our arms for correction. We were all
wearing long sleeved shirts or sweatshirts. What we thought on Saturday when we did this exercise was vastly different on Sunday when we returned and shared our aches and pains! The places on our arms that had been surrounded by buckle collars had nasty and painful bruises on one side. The places encircled with choke collars were even more painful and bruised and the bruising went all around the arm. To our shock, the places where we had worn prong collars were not sore and there was no bruising. This was a pretty enlightening experience.

It is rare to see a dog have any kind of negative reaction to these collars. Dogs that do react badly, generally over react to almost any collar or physical stimuli. The common reaction from dogs that begin to pull is surprise and an immediate cessation of the pulling.

There is an art to using these collars as the handler has to learn that they do not require power but need subtle and soft management. They are fitted by adding or removing individual prongs. The collar must be neither too tight nor too loose. You want play in the collar but the side rings where the connecting chain attaches must never touch.

One of the good aspects of these collars is that dogs who lunge unexpectedly will self correct. This is extremely helpful to beginning training who have not yet learned to predict the intentions of the dog.

For those interested in getting a well made, well fitted prong collar, especially those who might need a MICRO PRONG for small dogs, a good resource is www.leerburg.com/prong. You can order from them or simply read more about them as you try to decide what to get. Please select the lightest weight prong that will fit your dog and not break. The collars that have quick release snaps generally are very confusing and difficult to put on the dog.

**CHOICE FOR POWERFUL, STRONG WILLED AND STRONG MINDED DOGS WHO PULL A LOT AND ARE EASILY Distracted.**

**AVOID FOR SENSITIVE, SOFT DOGS WHO ARE DEVASTATED BY ANY FORM OF PHYSICAL DISCOMFORT OR CORRECTION.**

**HEAD HALTERS:** There are several different brands of these like Halti’s ™ and Gentle Leader’s ™. One of my initial objections to them was that dogs could get out of them easily but the newer ones have safety straps that attach to another collar thus overcoming that safety failure. These devices have been growing in popularity and are more acceptable now than they used to be. Initially, people thought they were muzzles and would be fearful of approaching dogs wearing them. Because the lead attaches under the chin, pulling is almost impossible for the dog. They are not ideal for teaching all commands but can usually be used safely. There is no direct stress on the throat or spine but trainers must be mindful of sudden lunges from the dog which could cause the head to be snapped or whipped around too fast.

I have seen more dogs become upset at the introduction of wearing head halters than any other piece of training equipment. Several dogs I have observed have actually torn their faces up trying to remove the halters and when they are successful, they repeat the behavior over and over. It is usually best to slowly introduce the halter by making no attempt to put it on at first. Hold the muzzle loop up with one hand and hold a treat in the center with the other. Let the dog eat several treats this way and if he/she seems unperturbed, hold the treat slightly further back so the dog must stick its nose through the loop to get the treat. Next, begin gently slipping the loop over the muzzle as the dog eats and finally, buckle it. This may take several sessions a day for several days. With aggressive dogs, these devices can cause a nice attitude adjustment when they realize that they can no longer fully open their jaws to either bark or bite. Fit the halters snugly on aggressive dogs.

**CHOOSE FOR DOGS OF ALL KINDS WHO WILL ACCEPT WEARING THEM. ESPECIALLY GOOD FOR FORWARD AGGRESSIVE DOGS WHO OVERRIDE PHYSICAL DISCOMFORT WHEN AROUSED. MAY SOMETIMES BE USED IN COMBINATION WITH PRONG COLLARS.**

**AVOID FOR DOGS WHO GET HYSTERICAL OVER WEARING THEM UNLESS YOUR TRAINER THINKS THEY ARE THE BEST CHOICE AND WILL SET UP PRIVATE SESSIONS TO WORK THROUGH THE DOG’S OBJECTIONS.**

**PREMIERE COLLARS AND MARTINGALES:** These collars are hard to describe. They are like prong
collars in the way they pull up but without the prongs. Sort of a combination of choke and buckle collars. Very safe.

**CHOOSE FOR DOGS THAT ARE SENSITIVE BUT A BIT DISTRACTIBLE. AVOID FOR THE POWERFUL DOGS AND THE DOGS WHO ALREADY PULL A LOT.**

**ANTI PULL HARNESSES:** Fine for walking dogs when you don’t want to be bothered with training but not an acceptable training tool.

**HARNESSES:** Excellent if you want your dog to pull you. That is what they are made for. By all means get one and use it when you or others are not training and the dog is to be allowed to pull you. Do NOT try to stop a dog from pulling you while wearing its harness! Not an acceptable tool for general training.

**LEADS**

There are more kinds of leads/leashes than collars! In the interest of brevity, I will describe the types of leads that we recommend and types that we forbid.

In **ALL** of our classes, we forbid both chain leads and retractable leads. Both can cause severe injury to both dogs and humans.

Nylon leads are colorful and very strong but they are slippery and they burn. With the exception of very tiny toy breeds of dogs, they are a poor choice for training.. They are an absolutely incorrect choice for both powerful dogs and/or aggressive ones.

Cotton/canvas are an excellent and economical choice for training. They are not as strong as leather leads but they are easy to grip or step on and they are kind to the skin.

Leather leads are absolutely the best. A well made leather lead will last through many dogs and they are also strong and kind to the skin.

You will need two leads: a 6’ and a 15-20’ lead.

**SIX FOOT LEAD:** If you have a puppy, get a lead that will be suitable for the adult dog of your breed. Don’t worry too much about getting a puppy a big strong lead for the future. Remember, you are training your puppy! You won’t need a massive lead later on! When selecting a lead, obtain one that is the lightest weight you can find that you feel won’t break. You want it to feel soft and comfortable in your hand and your hand should be able to close around it easily without edges cutting into your palm. Avoid all of the massive, double thick, triple stitched leads that could probably be used in place of chains on tow trucks. Don’t be overwhelmed by the displays in pet shops. A basic 5/8” leather lead with a good snap hook will hold a full grown quarter horse! I beg you to avoid the ¾-1” leads that are so popular. You will regret getting one down the line. If your technique is correct and you select the right collar for training, there will be no need for a heavy duty, industrial strength leash. To be blunt, if you appear in class with a thick and wide lead, I will assume that you have no interest in learning technique and finesse. I will assume that you intend to train using a lot of force and power. I will just hope for you that you never hurt your back or in any way lose the strength you intend to use to train.

**15-20’ LEAD:** Since cows don’t normally grow this long, you won’t find leather leads that fit your needs. Get a cotton/nylon combination lead or a canvas/cotton lead. You can also make your own using some type of safe, soft rope and a nice snap hook.

Very few pet shops in the area will have all of the equipment you need. Many pet shop owners and employees have their own opinions and prejudices about equipment. Most of the large chain stores sell only what sells in great volume. Catalogs and online shopping are your best and cheapest sources for what you will need.
Please get your training equipment as soon as possible and let your dog become accustomed to wearing his collar before he comes to class.

These sources may help:

www.petedge.com – good general supplier
www.drsfostersmith.com – good general supplier
www.jjdog.com - specialize in training equipment
www.leerburg.com – good source for prong collars, especially micro prongs

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