

OBEDIENCE AND THE BASSET HOUND

The Basset Hound has a reputation of not being an intelligent breed. A lack of trainability is one of the often-used explanations as to why there are so few Basset Hounds currently competing in obedience trials. This mind set, however, is absolutely false. The truth is that Bassets are very intelligent. In fact, they have taught themselves many “tricks” to help them get their way. One well-planned snuggle, a flop on their back asking for a belly rub, or (their ultimate weapon) one sad look from their big brown eyes, and their owners melt away and stop insisting that they do a task that they find of no value. Of course as humans, we don't want to admit that our Bassets can train us better than we can train them, hence their reputation. Despite what you may have believed up to this point, Basset Hounds have had quite a respectful and full history covering over thirty-five years in the realm of obedience.

What is Obedience?

Obedience is simply a dog following directions or commands from a handler. To test this ability, AKC has devised competitive events called “trials” where a handler and dog are judged on their performance. There are three levels: Novice, Open, and Utility. Novice is the beginning level. It can be best equated with grammar schools. Dogs are tested on their ability to individually perform the basic obedience skills of the heel on and off lead, stand for examination, and the recall. There is also a group exercise that includes a 1 minute long sit and 3 minute long down, with handlers across the ring. Open competition is the equivalent of high school. The exercises are more complex. The dog is required to heel off lead, drop on recall, retrieve on flat, retrieve over a high jump, and perform the broad jump. The group exercises for this level include a 3 minute long sit and a 5-minute long down, with handlers out of sight. Although there are no group exercises, Utility is still considered the most difficult level. Dogs are judged on a signal exercise (using no verbal commands), scent discrimination, directed retrieve, moving stand for examination, and directed jumping. Utility is very much like “doggy college”. As with people, this complex degree is not attainable for every dog.

Competitive teams of dog and handler are scored on a point system. Each exercise has a certain point value allotted to it, and all the exercises at each level add up to 200 points. Points are lost through errors made by either dog or handler during the exercises. The severity of the deduction depends on the type of error committed. For instance, a crooked sit may be only a 1/2-point deduction, where as a double command by the handler, or lack of response by the dog would lose all the points of that exercise.

Although a perfect score is 200, a qualifying score is 170 with at least half of the points available earned in each exercise. Dogs that successfully receive a passing score achieve what is called a “leg”. By achieving three “legs” under three different judges, the dog qualifies for its obedience title. At the Novice level, the title is called “Companion Dog” or “CD”. For Open, the title is called “Companion Dog Excellent” or “CDX”. In the Utility level, the dog receives a “Utility Dog” title or “UD”. Title initials are permanently added to the end of the dog's name, and are made part of the official AKC record. The more advanced title will supersede the preceding title. Above Utility, there are still two obedience titles that can be achieved. The “UDX” title is awarded to dogs

that achieve ten additional passing scores in both Open B and Utility B classes at the same show. AKC has only recently established the “UDX” title. Although there are several Bassets that are well on their way, at this writing, there are no Basset Hounds that have achieved this title.

The ultimate obedience title is that of “OTCH”, or “Obedience Trial Champion”. This is also the only AKC obedience title that is added as a prefix to the dog’s name. “OTCH” points are awarded to only the first and second place dogs in Open B and Utility B, and are based on how many dogs are competing in each category. There is a minimum number of dogs required to compete before points are even awarded. To win this title, the dog must already have a “UD” degree, and earn a total of 100 “OTCH” points. The dog must also receive a minimum of three first placements, and at least one first place in both Open B and Utility competition.

History:

When looking at the history of Basset Hounds in obedience, one has to be aware of a major change regarding competition that came about the mid 1960’s. Prior to this time, Basset Hounds, along with most other breeds, were required to jump one and one half times their height at the withers over the high jump, and twice that distance over the broad jump. Although there were some notable exceptions, due to the low-slung and heavy construction of our breed, many Basset Hound enthusiasts refused to take a chance of their dogs injuring themselves, and opted not to compete beyond the novice class.

Lulu’s Red became the first basset hound to achieve a “Companion Dog”, or “CD” degree in 1959. Lulu’s Patches soon followed him. These two litter brothers were the first two Basset Hounds owned by Marge and Walter Brandt. The Brandt’s would eventually be well known for their conformation dogs under their kennel name “Abbot Run Valley”. Patches became the first Basset to achieve a “CDX” or Companion Dog Excellent title; and in addition, he became a bench show champion.

In 1960, Buzz Taylor purchased his first Basset Hound from the Bridlespur Hunt Club. Bridlespur Nudger UD became the number one rated obedience Basset for seven years. For five of those years, the #2 Basset in obedience was Santana Briget UD, also owned by Mr. Taylor. Bred together, they produced three obedience title winners including Buzz Taylor’s Hopalong UDT, and Buzz Taylor’s Autumn UDT. Both of these hounds would eventually win High In Trial awards at the Basset Hound Club of America National Specialty. Autumn even placed 7th in the Super Dog Class at the first Chicago Gaines Classic (an invitational competition for the top obedience dogs in the country). To date, Autumn is the only Basset Hound to have ever placed in the Super Dog Class at a Gaines Classic. The most famous Basset Hound in the obedience world was OTCH Buzz Taylor’s Goober UD. A grandson of Nudger and Briget, and son of Autumn, he was the first, and to date, only Basset to achieve the coveted title of Obedience Title Champion from the AKC.

In 1963, there was a grass roots effort spearheaded by Benjamin Harris of California to revise jump height requirements for the breed. Through his persistence, a committee was formed by BHCA in 1964. Mr. Harris was appointed chairman, and the committee began to look into many obedience exhibitors’ concerns. Through years of hard work, research, and diligence, the goal of lower jump heights was finally achieved. AKC amended the

official obedience regulations in June of 1969 to what they are today. Basset Hounds are currently required to jump the nearest multiple of 2 inches to the height of the dog at the withers over the high jump, and twice that distance over the broad jump.

The 1960's were quite the "golden era" of Bassets in obedience. There was an increased interest in obedience with Basset Hound owners across the country. The banner year was 1966 where, prior to the reduction of jump heights, 13 bassets earned their "UD" degrees. In 1968, BHCA expanded their national specialty to include an Obedience Trial. In the first five trials, from 1968 to 1972, the highest scoring dog at the National's trial was Bridlespur Nudger UD.

Other pioneers of obedience include Joan Thurlow of California, Billy and Lena Wray from Florida and Marge Cook of Texas. There are many other truly dedicated people from around the country who have contributed in obedience throughout the past, and/or are currently competing now. Reluctantly, available space in this chapter precludes their listing.

How To Get Started:

I am often asked how early one should start training their Basset. My answer is always the same; you already started when you first brought him home! Your basset is learning things from you whether you want him to or not. Thus the positive and negative experiences you instill in your new puppy can influence him for life. If there is one golden rule about Bassets, it is that their brain is directly connected to their stomach. Cookie training works well on both puppies and adults. In addition, there should be no formal training sessions, and no strict corrections, for young puppies, as they do not have an adequate attention span to tolerate this. Even with older dogs, it is best to sprinkle several training sessions throughout the day. This will make your Basset eager to perform these tasks for you, and it will instill a good working attitude throughout his life.

There are many fine books available that are totally devoted to teaching obedience. Obviously, they are able to give you much more detailed instruction on you to train you dog than just this one chapter. For the person truly interested in becoming involved in obedience, it is strongly recommended that you sign up for training classes. This will give you one-on-one help with a trainer who can answer your questions, as well as present you and your dog with many distractions. Classes will also provide a neutral training environment with a group of strange dogs.

Equipment that you will need is relatively inexpensive and available at any pet supply outlet. I recommend a small link chain slip collar, often refereed to as a choke chain, and a six foot leather or nylon lead. I prefer a chain collar, as your dog will soon learn to respond to the noise of the chain when corrections are made. The collar should not have more than two inches of excess links when tightened around your dog's neck. This way, when you reach down close to your dog's collar to make a correction, you will be holding the lead close to the snap instead of the chain. Remember; never leave this collar on the dog when you are not working him. Slip collars, both chain and nylon, are dangerous as the rings can catch under a fence or between the cracks of a deck and could strangle your dog in a matter of minutes.

To put the collar on properly hold it out in front of you. The lead should be attached to one end. Slip the chain through the other end of the ring. The lead end of the collar

should be held in your left hand, and the circle part of the collar should be in your right hand. It should form a horizontal “P” with the loop hanging down. Slip the collar over the dog’s head. The part of the chain attached to the lead must go over the top of your dog’s neck when he is sitting on your left side. This way, the chain will release easily after it is jerked tight.

There is, of course, some simple training that you can do at home. Teaching your Basset obedience, or house manners, will only make him easier to live with. Here are a few commands that you can teach your dog in a relatively short time.

Sit: This exercise starts with your Basset standing in front of you. Hold a cookie in your right hand above your dog’s head (you will eventually use your right hand for the sit signal). Tell your dog to “Sit” as you move the cookie away from you and towards his back. Gravity being what it is, your dog will have to sit to keep his keen little eyes on that cookie. Obviously, with a positive reaction, he gets the cookie (or piece thereof). If your dog jumps up in an attempt to grab the cookie, say “No” and take the cookie away. Wait a few seconds until he calms down and is watching you and then start over again.

Another method starts with your dog on your left side. Tell him to sit and pull up on his lead with your right hand. With your left hand, reach down your dog’s back, just in front of his hipbones. Squeeze inward with your thumb and middle finger, as you gently apply downward pressure. You are pushing in on nerve pressure points, and the dog will generally sit quickly.

When your dog will sit on command, you can move on to the “Stay”. Have your dog sit on your left side. Tell him “Stay”, and give him a hand signal by placing your right palm in front of your dog’s nose. Step out in front of your dog using your right foot. If your dog gets up, correct him by giving short jerks upward on the lead with your right hand directly above his head, and telling him to “sit”. When your dog is secure with you standing right in front of him, start backing away until you are at the end of your lead. When you return to your dog, move directly back to your original position. Eventually you will walk completely around behind him so that you again end up with him on your left side. If your dog gets up or swings around as you are moving around him, correct him from where you are, and make sure that he is put back into his original sitting position. Of course, when you are done with this exercise, don’t forget to give him plenty of praise.

Heel: Start with your Basset sitting on your left side. Give the command “Heel” and take off walking with your left foot. Walk briskly, and keep encouraging your dog to stay in position, aligned with your left leg. When you stop, have your dog sit, again aligned with your left leg. If your dog wanders out of position, give him several sharp jerks on the lead while repeating the heel command until he returns to your left side. If he loses interest and/or starts to sniff the ground, give him a correction with the lead, or change direction. You can turn to your right or your left, or even totally about (remember to turn to your right so your dog goes around you). Keep a brisk pace and give your dog consistent praise to keep up his interest and his attention.

Down: Basset owners have a distinct disadvantage with this exercise due to our dogs stubby little legs; but what the heck, what’s another challenge! Start with your Basset sitting at your left side. Tell him “Down”. At the same time, grab the top of the lead closest to the collar with your right hand, and give it a sharp pop downward. If there is no

response from the dog, take hold of his right front leg at the elbow with your right hand and slide it forward. With your left hand, put pressure on his shoulders and gently push him off balance to his right. If necessary, use your left arm and elbow against the side of his body to help guide him down. When he is lying down (preferably on his right hip), he gets a cookie. The down is a very defenseless position. Depending on your dog's confidence level, this exercise may take a bit more perseverance.

Come: Before you teach the "Come", your dog should already be solid on the sit and stay. There are actually two parts to this exercise: The come, and the finish. Start with your dog sitting on your left side. Tell him "Stay"; walk out to the end of the lead, and turn to face him. Tell you dog "Come" and reel in the lead towards you. Your dog should end up sitting straight in front of you. If necessary, you can take several steps backward to help encourage him to come to you, or correct a crooked sit. The end of this exercise is called the finish. With your dog sitting in front of you, tell him "Heel". Your dog should get up and swing his body to your left. He needs to end up sitting in heel position (aligned with your left leg). Some people teach their dogs to walk completely around behind them to end up on their left. This is acceptable also. In fact, it is very useful to teach your dog both ways to finish. Just remember to use a different command for the other version like "Flip" or "Swing". This way the dog will not get confused.

Other Commands Your Basset Should Learn:

There are two other commands that I always try to teach all of my dogs. These are "Here" and "Heap". The "Here" command means simply to "get over here" (the command word used is the option of the trainer). It should be anything but "Come" as this will eventually mean a formal exercise ending with a straight sit in front of the handler. The "Here" should be taught when your dog is on lead. When he becomes interested in something other than you, tell him "Here" and give him a gentle pop with the lead. When he comes to you, give him lots of praise and a cookie. Continue to repeat the exercise until the pop of the lead is no longer needed.

The "Heap" command is very similar to the down, and taught the same way; but the position is less restrictive. To your dog, it should mean to stay in a lying position, although he can still sniff, shift, roll, lie on his back, or fall asleep. Again, the command word is optional. Believe me, you will really appreciate your Basset knowing this exercise when company comes over, or when you are out with your dog and don't want him in your lap.

What is Agility?

The newest performance sport to hit the dog world is agility. Basically, it is a competition where dogs are run through a course full of obstacles. There are several organizations that run trials and give out titles following their own rules. For the sake of consistency, I will only be talking about Agility as the American Kennel Club conducts it.

Through AKC, there are three levels of competitive Agility: Novice, Open, and Excellent. The novice course has the fewest obstacles, a total of 12 to 13 with 10 mandatory obstacles, and no weave poles. The Open class will have 15 to 17 obstacles with 11 mandatory obstacles, and is designed with more complexity and added difficulty. The Excellent courses have 18 to 20 obstacles and are designed with the most difficulty. Each level is separated into five divisions dictated by the required jump heights. Dogs 10

inches and under at the withers are in the 8 Inch division. Dogs 14 inches and under at the withers (which covers most Basset Hounds) are in the 12-inch division. The 16 inch division is for dogs who are 18 inches and under at the withers. Dogs 22 inches and under will compete in the 20 inch division. And finally, any dogs over 22 inches at the withers will compete in the 24-inch division.

There are sixteen types of obstacles that can be used on a course. These include a Dog Walk, Seesaw, A-Frame, Pause Table, Open Tunnel, Closed Tunnel, Single Bar Jumps, Other Single Jumps, Panel Jump, Double Oxer Jump, Triple Bar Jump, Tire (Circle) Jump, Window Jump, Broad Jump, and Weave Pools. The Dog Walk, Seesaw, and A-Frame are considered contact obstacles. Contact zones are designated areas at both ends of the obstacle, and are painted a different color. The dog is required to touch the contact zones on these obstacles to receive a qualifying run. The pause table is usually set in the middle of the course. The dog is required to jump on and lie down or sit (at the discretion of the judge) for five seconds.

The runs are timed, and there is a maximum time limit allotted for the dog to run the course. Like obedience, the dog/handler teams start out with a perfect score. In Agility, a perfect score is 100 points. Deductions are marked if the dog goes off course, balks at an obstacle, or takes an excessive amount of time to run the course. The dog/handler team is considered to be eliminated if the handler runs the wrong course or touches an obstacle or the dog; if the dog or handler knocks down any obstacle or jump; if the dog refuses the same obstacle more than the maximum limit in the class, misses a contact point, performs three wrong courses in any class, or jumps off the Seesaw prior to reaching the end of the board. Faults so severe that they require mandatory excusal include the dog leaving the course area and discontinuing working, excessive handling and harsh commands or corrections, dogs fouling the ring at any time during the run, failure to perform a contact obstacle, or taking more than the maximum time limit to run the course.

A qualifying score is considered a minimum of 85 points within the time limit. Each qualifying score is awarded a "leg", and three "legs" qualifies the dog for the title. "NA", or "Novice Agility" is the first title awarded to dogs on the beginning level. "OA", or Open Agility, and "AX" or "Agility Excellent" are the next two advanced titles. The "MX", or "Master Agility Excellent" title is earned after the dog has acquired the Agility Excellent title and has earned qualifying scores in the Agility Excellent class at ten additional trials. As in obedience, the titles will be added to the end of the dog's name, and the highest title earned will supersede the preceding title.

The judge using a variety of the mandatory and additional obstacles designs each course. Contestants do not know what the course will look like, or what obstacles will be used on the course until the day of the trial. There is a warm-up period prior to the runs when handlers entered in that class can walk through the course and map out their strategy. In the Novice class, the dogs may be taken on the course, at a designated time prior to the start of the class, and allowed to go over the contact equipment to become familiar with it.

How To Start:

Food! Again, the great motivator is the key to this fun and entertaining sport. Before you start, it is imperative that you are sure that your dog is physically able to run the course.

Since there is a lot of jumping, it is important that your dog has a sound front-end assembly. When you begin training, set jump heights no higher than eight inches. Once the dog learns how to jump reliably, you can raise the jump heights. If you are starting with a puppy, you should not jump him at full height until he is mature and his bones are strong and well developed.

The idea of agility is to teach your dog to take the obstacle to which you direct him. You must first teach your dog to listen to you, and to watch the obstacles in front of him. To do this, you use food to target him forward. The best way to start training is with the help of a friend or family member. While you hold your dog on one side of a jump, your helper, on the other side of the jump, excitedly shows your dog a piece of food and gets his attention on it. Have your helper place the food on the other side of the jump and stand back. At this point, you give your dog the command to “Wait”, and move to the side of the jump. Give the command to “Jump” or “Over”. If the dog makes the jump, he gets the food! If the dog goes around the jump, it is up to your helper to grab the food before the dog gets to it. It won’t take long before your dog makes the connection between jumping the obstacle and getting a treat. Once he can do one jump, have him do two with you giving him the “Jump” or “Over” command before he gets to each obstacle. You can build from there by adding other obstacles like tunnels, and setting obstacles up so your dog is not just running a straight line.

Contact equipment such as the A-Frame, Dog Walk, or Seesaw are also taught with lots of food. In the beginning, the obstacle is often lowered or stabilized, and baited with many tidbits of food. Basically, it turns into a smorgestbourg for your dog. He eats his way across. As your dog becomes more comfortable with the equipment and gains confidence, the food is reduced.

Of course, this is just a very short overview of basic training techniques. You will also need to learn how to direct your dog verbally as well as with your body language. It is always better to find training classes for the sport as they can help you, especially with handler cues and problem solving. If this is just not possible, there are several quality books that have been written about this subject over the past several years.

JUST DO IT!

No matter if it is Obedience or Agility, the main thought that this chapter is aimed to impart to you is that training is fun and enjoyable for both you and your dog. Training your Basset will not only make him a better companion and family member, but it will also bring the two of you closer together. It won’t be long before you will be able to “read” your dog, and better understand his likes and dislikes. Training can help, make a dominant dog more tolerant, or bring a shy dog out of his shell. One thing I will guarantee you right now, you will never regret the extra time and you spend with your dog, or the special bond that the two of you will inevitably form.