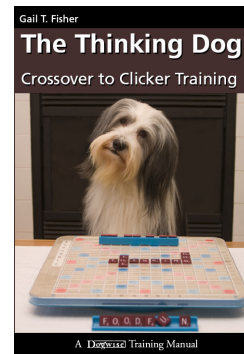


An excerpt from

The Thinking Dog. Crossover to Clicker Training **Chapter 1—Crossing Over**

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Why I crossed over to clicker training

Throughout my career as a dog trainer, I've been open to finding something better than what I already know. As I learned different ways to get a dog to "obey," it became clear that virtually every approach I tried, read about, heard about, or observed "worked"—that is, they all achieve some level of dog compliance (potential downsides or side effects notwithstanding). Since so many training methods "work," at least with some dogs some of the time, how does one discover or choose which method is "best?"

As I've studied dog training and instructing (teaching others to train their own dogs) and learned about learning theory and dog behavior, I've solidified my principles into a philosophy that seeks and uses training techniques that meet the following criteria:

1. A technique must "work"—the dog can learn how to perform the desired behavior.
2. It must be fair to the dog and do no harm to either the dog or the relationship between the dog and owner.
3. The average dog owner, including children, must be able to do it. That is, it cannot rely on exceptional talent, innate dog-handling skills, or dominating the dog.
4. The average owner must be willing to perform the training technique. That is, a method must not require owners to do something to their dogs that they find too challenging or objectionable.

My "old" approach to training, based on the method in my two books with Jack Volhard, met these criteria. But in terms of #1—that it works—clicker training blows everything else out of the water, while being in harmony with the rest of my philosophy. I simply could not ignore this "new" training.

As I've learned clicker training, using it to train dogs and teaching it to others, I have become more and more convinced that clicker training communicates information to and with dogs as it should be. But it was a tenacious little dog that changed my training approach forever.

Maggie the Pug

My staff and I first saw clicker training in action when we hosted a seminar with Karen Pryor and Gary Wilkes. The effect was monumental, with every one of our trainers agreeing that we wanted to learn more. I was not about to blithely toss out the method that had served us well over 20 years of training people and their

dogs, but we all wanted to experiment and learn more about clicker training. It wasn't long however, before clicker training was put to the test.

About a week after the seminar, Laura, our head trainer, came to me with a problem. She had been training Maggie, a five-year old rescue Pug who had recently been adopted by two of our doggy daycare "parents." Maggie had been coming to daycare-training for three weeks and was doing well in everything except lying down. Clearly having had some prior training with a method that had created an aversion, this otherwise sweet, loving Pug became a Tasmanian devil, viciously biting at any attempt to get her to lie down.

Laura had tried everything she could think of—luring with food didn't work, and gently placing her in a down was out of the question. Even after three weeks of desensitization, Laura could not touch her if Maggie thought lying down was in the offing. And the pressure was on: We had just learned that Maggie's family was moving to California. Training Maggie to lie down before she left had become a mission...and we had just three days to do it.

With other options exhausted, we had nothing to lose: Let's try clicker training—our first "professional" foray. Armed with a clicker and a bowl of cut-up hot dogs, Laura, Maggie, and I got started. I began by clicking and giving her a treat. Maggie got right into this neat, new game: "You make a funny noise and throw me a hot dog? Awright!!!"

Next, I started clicking for different behaviors—whatever she did. She sat—I clicked and tossed her a treat. Stand up—click and treat. Walk toward me—click and treat. Eye contact—click and treat. I didn't say anything; no commands, no cues, just a click followed by a hot dog.

A Pug's face, with its wide, alert eyes, smiling mouth, and open, honest expression is really easy to read. We could tell that Maggie was having a good time, when suddenly her expression changed from enjoyment to pensive. In a moment of clarity Maggie realized that I was clicking *her*—that I clicked when *she* did something. She paused. Her eyes got even wider, and in a moment of pure communication, she tested me. Looking directly into my eyes, she sat—click and treat. It was instantly clear to us that Maggie got what the click meant: *She* could make me click.

With Maggie now playing the game, I began to use selective clicking to shape the behavior we wanted. I clicked anything that led toward lying down. If she lowered her head, dipped her body, sat and put a foot forward, anything that approximated starting to lie down, I clicked and treated. This meant that she was no longer clicked for everything she did. Maggie didn't like this rule change. She got mad. Looking right at me, she started swearing—barking, spitting, sputtering, growling—language that would embarrass a longshoreman. Suddenly, in a fit of temper, Maggie threw herself down! Click.

Silence. No one moved. Maggie stopped dead. Clearly, her brain was working overtime as she pondered this new development. Then she erupted in furious barking...and threw herself down again. Click and treat. She ate and immediately began barking again as she quickly lay down once more. Click.

At that point, I began to wait for her to lie down without barking or we would have achieved our mission of getting Maggie to lie down, but only accompanied by furious noise! Waiting for quiet took a while as Maggie continued loudly barking, repeatedly throwing herself to the ground. And then she took a breath as she lay down. An accidental moment of quiet—I'll take it! Click and treat. She went through another spate of barking, then quiet with another down. I waited until I had marked and rewarded two more quiet ones, then we took a break.

I looked at the clock. From start to finish, from the first click to the third quiet down in a row, had taken ...What?!...Could it be? No...This isn't possible!

Just *eight* minutes?! I was flabbergasted. There was something really powerful here. In eight minutes we had accomplished more than we had been able to in literally weeks of training and desensitization. Over the next two days, Maggie continued to improve. On her last day with us, after just three days of clicker training, we were able to show her Mom that Maggie would lie down on cue. She performed beautifully. And we were hooked!

The “Aha!” Moment

Actually, I was hooked before Maggie's final “go home” performance. Unquestionably the most exciting moment for the clicker trainer is when your dog “gets it”—that “Aha! moment” when it “clicks” for your dog...when you can see your dog's mental wheels start to turn. I was hooked the moment Maggie figured out that it was her behavior that got me to click and toss her a treat. I didn't know it at the time, but in retrospect, this was a momentous event. By giving Maggie—and every dog I train—volitional control of her own behavior, I was for the first time, working in partnership with a “Thinking Dog.”

I get an adrenaline rush whenever I work a new dog through a behavior, especially the moment the dog

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unhesitatingly and proudly performs the behavior I'm looking for. I particularly love that moment at a training seminar when participants can see the dog thinking it through, testing the behavior, working out what he needs to do to get me to make that noise and reward him—and then finally, he's got it!

My Crossover Journal

At a seminar in California, I was demonstrating shaping a Papillon to “settle” (go to the blanket, lie down, and stay there). Because I was looking for feet on the mat, not how the dog got onto it, I happened to click him several times when he moved onto it backwards. After just two or three repetitions, this wonderfully bright boy was literally leaping backwards onto the mat. After the click, I'd toss the treat away from the mat. He'd eat, and then cavort over to the mat, turn his back, pop up into the air, and land backwards, much to everyone's delight.

An “Aha! moment” doesn't happen just once. Thrillingly for the trainer, it happens over and over. Seeing a dog start to think, offering you behaviors as your true partner-in-training: “Watch this! Did you like that? How about *this*?!” Having your dog become an active participant—helping drive the bus, not just along for the ride—makes for the most exciting human/dog partnership, the most wonderful human/dog relationship imaginable. This is what training a thinking dog is all about!

Clicker training is fun; it's exhilarating; it's rewarding, joyous, and exciting. I can't promise that you won't have moments of frustration. In fact, I guarantee you will! The information in this book is for you, the crossover trainer, to prepare you for some of what you'll likely encounter so you and your dog can experience that thrilling “Aha! Moment” many times over the years to come.

Gail Fisher has been training dogs professionally for over 30 years. She is the owner and founder of All Dogs Gym, one of the largest training centers in the country. Gail is the co-author of *Training Your Dog* and *Teaching Dog Obedience Classes*. She lives in Manchester, New Hampshire with her dogs, Canon and Kochi, and two cats.