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The Prong Collar Revisited

By Julia Maclachlan

Fact Vs. Fiction

Of all the tools used in dog training, perhaps none is more widely misunderstood and maligned than the prong collar (also known as the pinch collar). Many well-meaning but misinformed people assume that judging by its looks, the prong collar is a barbaric device intended to "stab" a dog's neck in order to correct misbehavior. While walking my own dogs on this type of collar I have encountered complete strangers who think nothing of telling me how cruel I am to use such a harsh device. While I am indifferent to this type of comment, I worry that similar incidents will drive responsible dog owners away from using this excellent, effective and kind (yes, kind) training tool on dogs that benefit from it the most. This article is meant to reassure those who are already using the collar or are considering it and more importantly, to educate those who think it is "cruel" or unfair to the dog.

While many people think that the prong collar is a trendy new gadget for the modern dog owner, the fact is that it predates the much more commonly used choke chain. Prong type collars appear in photographs and sketches in European training literature from the turn of the century. Presumably invented by people who relied on their dogs' obedience, responsiveness and good attitude in a time when most dogs had actual "jobs", the prong collar still has a prominent place in the "toolbox" of the modern, balanced dog trainer.

The prong collar works on the concept that evenly applied pressure is gentler and more effective on a dog's neck than the quick jerk and impact of a choke chain or the steady, relentless pressure of a flat collar. While a professional trainer can make a choke chain correction look fast and flawless, it is very difficult for most pet dog owners to master the timing and the release of the correction. Also, even a perfectly executed choke chain correction is a repeated impact on a single spot on a dog's neck. The current trend of the "head halter" system is equally flawed. In an earlier edition of this article, I referred to it as a good choice for dogs with structural problems. In the past few years I have spoken with veterinarians, trainers and owners who took issue with that recommendation based on the potential insult to the soft tissue of the dog's upper neck and the often careless way in which the headcollar is used by people who are assured that it is "humane" and cannot harm their dog. Like every other training tool, it also has its place. However, for a breed already beset with potential spinal and structural problems such as the Doberman, I find myself recommending it less and less. The self-limiting tightening action of the prong collar also makes it a safer bet for strong-pulling dogs. A prong collar can only be pulled so tight, unlike the choke or slip collar, which has unlimited closing capacity and in careless or abusive hands, can cut a dog's air entirely.

Another aspect of the prong collar is its simulation of a natural "correction" that one dog gives another. If you watch a couple of dogs interacting, you'll notice that a lot of mouthing behavior takes place. Dogs have evolved over tens of thousands of years to tolerate the toothy attention of their canine friends and family, usually in play or posturing and sometimes in a more serious mode. The degree of intensity in their mouthing can be inhibited or increased depending on their relationship with a particular dog and the issue at hand. Likewise, the prong collar can be configured in several ways other than the traditional "live ring" setting that most people use. It can be deadened by hooking both the "d"-ring and the "o"-ring together, rubber tips can be

put on some or all of the prongs, prongs can be reversed so that there is only pressure on certain areas. Many of the prong collar's loudest critics are unaware of these variations of its use and throw the word "pain" around freely. A close look at the actual prongs will tell a more perceptive person about the concept of "pain" as delivered from a prong collar: the tips of the prong are very blunt. The larger the prong, the milder the pressure. Put a prong collar around your own arm or leg (or neck, if you must!) and judge for yourself. Now take another look at your dogs as they play roughly: the type of mouthing they solicit from one another in fun would send a human being to the emergency room and yet it barely ruffles the fur on their necks. Remember this when you see a prong collar; not only doesn't it "hurt" your own ultra-sensitive human skin, when correctly fitted and used, it is only a fraction of the pressure dogs use with one another.

The prong collar is often referred to as the "hearing aid" collar: a dog properly introduced to it in the hands of a person likewise prepared suddenly understands the expectations upon him. Rather than the nagging of a choke or slip collar or the constant muzzle and poll pressure of a head halter, the dog feels no pressure at all except at a precise instant when he makes an incorrect decision. Because of its ease of use and the usually rapid positive change in the dog's attitude and behavior, the prong is an excellent choice for elderly or physically compromised people with strong dogs, small people with large dogs, and even the tiniest of the toy breeds which risk permanent damage from regular collars. Even dogs with certain structural problems can be worked successfully on a prong collar rather than allowed to drag their owners around on a harness!

So, with all of the good stuff associated with the prong collar, shouldn't every dog wear one? ABSOLUTELY NOT! Some dogs, due to genetics or a poor upbringing, respond poorly to any sort of pressure. Some dogs have spinal problems so severe that no pressure should ever be put on them; these are often dogs who would benefit more from the judicious use of an electronic collar, which uses no overt physical force at all. Very dog aggressive dogs can sometimes escalate their behavior if the prong collar is used primarily as a correction around other dogs. They are often the best candidates for head halters. A good dog trainer will assess your particular dog and your own handling skills before recommending any type of method or equipment. In your search for that trainer, stay clear of those who swear by only one tool, one theory, or one way of doing things. While we balanced trainers have benefitted from their limitations and make lifelong friends and clients of their "failures", they are responsible for many dogs and owners parting ways. Many dogs in the DRU shelter bear the label of "untrainable" from a trainer who was inflexible.

The next time you see a dog being walked or worked on a prong collar, think before you jump to conclusions. Does the dog look fairly happy and comfortable with his handler? Does the handler have control without restraint? Ask people who use them how they like prong collars and why they chose this tool for their dog; they'll probably be relieved that you want to be educated and that you're not going to accuse them of cruelty to animals! If you use a prong collar on your dog, try to educate those who would judge you as "harsh" rather than responding defensively. Most of these people mean well: they are quite willing to learn the truth and will be flattered that you take the time to explain it to them. There will always be erstwhile "trainers" and owners who are ineducable due to their personal opinions or emotions. Try not to worry about what they think: your dog will keep reminding you of what he knows. Since we at Doberman Rescue Unlimited are in it for the dogs first, we endorse the use of prong collars on many of our charges.

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