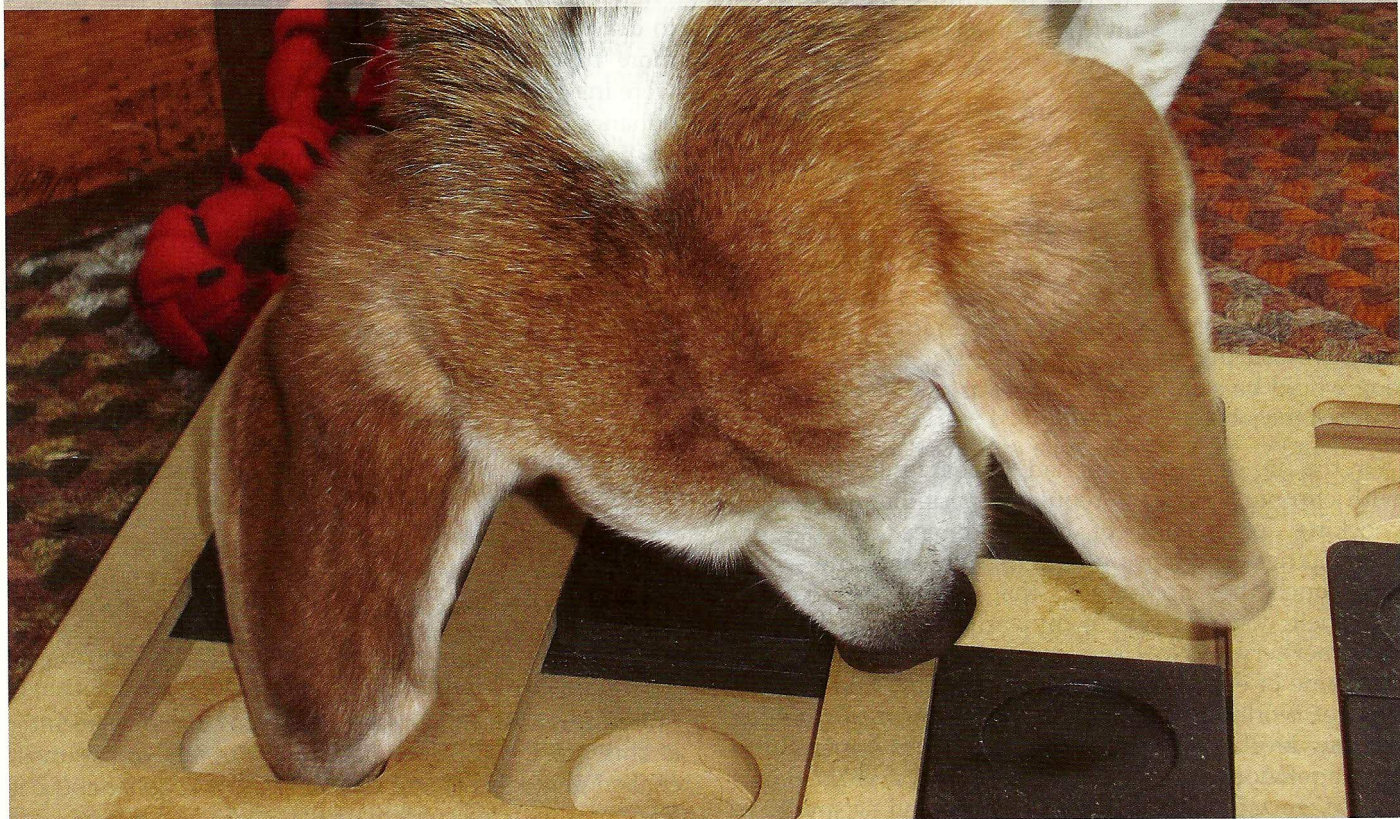


Control, Compassion, and Choices

Part 2 of 2

Risë VanFleet, PhD, CDBC & Tracie Faa-Thompson, MA, Cert EAGALA



One of VanFleet's Beagles, deaf with failing vision, focuses great interest on games/puzzles that involve using her superior olfactory abilities.

In Part 1 of this series, we explored the dimension of control and how that plays out in human relationships with canines, equines, and other animals including our own species. Excessive human control needs are often associated with compulsion-oriented training, yet they can also play a role in positive training if people are always expecting their dogs or horses to do their bidding, or train them so extensively and intensively that the animals' unique personalities are squashed. One way to prevent overworking animals to such an extent that they experience learned helplessness or lose interest in life is to shift our focus to the only thing truly within our control: namely, ourselves. It is incumbent upon us to provide animals with more choices and opportunities to control their own lives to whatever extent it is possible.

Even working animals can be more effective when they are interested in their world and their jobs, and that usually means balancing their work lives with some experiences that are enjoyable for them, much as has been found to be true for humans. As we also discussed in Part 1, having *compassion* for the animals' feelings and needs can lead to more enriched relationships and more

effective partnerships with other species. In Part 2, we offer some thoughts about how to accomplish this way of living and working with the animals in our lives.

Choices

We sometimes hear trainers and animal owners say that their animals "enjoy" activities because they do not resist them. This seems to be an oversimplified and rather human-centered way of thinking. Just because a dog follows his owner into the hospital for a visit with patients or moves smartly around the show ring with her handler does not mean that the dog is actually enjoying the experience. No doubt some dogs do enjoy the activities we select for them, but it is not likely to be true for all. Dogs often go along with what we want, whether they enjoy it or not. They tolerate our choices of activities. Horses may have their own ideas about how to spend the day, but they often do not visibly protest when we saddle them up for a ride.

In our enthusiasm for activities with our animals, we sometimes make an assumption that our animals will like whatever we like. But if we don't want to be controlling

of our animal friends, we need to give them a voice. We need to consider their preferences and choices if we want to maximize our relationships with them and their happiness with us. This raises two questions about our interactions with our dogs, horses, and other animals: (1) How do we know what the animal is interested in, what the animal enjoys? and (2) How can we provide more opportunities for our dogs and horses to make some choices and exert some control over their own lives?



Charlie's route choice for this outing with coauthor Tracie.

How do we know what our animals are interested in, what they truly enjoy? First, their *body language* can help inform us. We might notice an absence of stress signals coupled with interest shown by ears pricked forward, relaxed postures, soft eyes, animated excitement, loose movements conveying playfulness, or voluntary movements toward a person, object, or activity. Within the animal world of subtly nuanced communication, we should remember that individual dogs or horses also have their own idiosyncratic behaviors. It is important to avoid the mistake of reading communication signals too literally by what the textbooks say, and this is especially true of dogs or horses who have been separated from their own species at young ages with resulting deficits in their communication patterns. It is also important to read the *pattern* of signals in the whole body and to interpret them within the *context* in which they occur. We need to maintain some *humility* when interpreting animals' behavior, too, considering that human-to-human communication is imprecise at best, and communicating with other species is much more subject to inaccurate interpretation.

Second, animals' *repetition* of behaviors might give us ideas about what is rewarding for them. If Tillie the dog repeatedly sits below and looks up at the shelf where her favorite ball is kept, and then repeatedly fetches thrown balls even when the human ballplayer grows weary of the game, one can be fairly certain that Tillie enjoys playing ball. My (RV) own dogs have their favorite places to sleep in our family room, as evidenced by their repeated claims on those spots and their stare-downs

with each other to reclaim those spots if another dog has encroached on them.

Third, we can learn a great deal about our dogs', horses', cats', and other animals' interests and preferences by observing *what they choose to do when they are free and on their own*. After living with one of my (RV's) dogs for nearly four years, I began observing her more closely with the others in their large outdoor run. For the first time, I saw her burying and digging up toys that had been long abandoned within the run. She probably had done it many times before, but I had not been watching. The more I observed my dogs when they were on their own with relative freedom, the more I learned about their choices. I could then provide opportunities for these self-selected activities, or similar ones, to occur more frequently in the dogs' lives.

It seems that as people have become less reliant on animals for survival and more focused on animals' value for specific recreational activities, less time is spent "hanging out" with the animals observing them and getting to know who they really are. Our busy lifestyles also preclude stepping back and quietly watching our dogs play or our horses kick up their heels when they are unaware of our observations. Providing our animals with periods of freedom (removal of human direction or intervention) while watching unobtrusively can teach us much about what they really choose to do with their time. Furthermore, simply "hanging out" without specific purpose or activity can help us get to know them better as the unique individuals they are.

Fourth, perhaps one of the best ways of understanding dogs' and horses' interests and choices is to make a concerted effort to *think like a dog* or *think like a horse*. It is both surprising and sad for me (TF) when "horse people" visit my place and become open-mouthed in amazement when I call my horses from the far end of a 40-acre field, and they come to me immediately at a gallop. They wonder what trick I am using or what types of treats or clicker training I have used. The fact is I have used no specific training, treats, or tricks to elicit this response. My horses have learned that coming to me is always a positive experience. This is in contrast to horse owners who try to catch their horses with buckets of food, contraptions/equipment, a gang of helpers surrounding the horses, or by running after the horses with rising frustration and expletives. From the horse's point of view, something unpleasant is going on. Perhaps the horse has learned that every time the owner tries to catch him, he is put to work, or perhaps the commotion of the controlling methods of capture is frightening. As a prey animal, "getting caught" is not something to look forward to. Owners who provide consistently positive experiences when their horses come to them (not just carrots, but scratches in hard-to-reach places and friendly words) are much more likely to have horses who want to come to

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Observation of dogs' free choices teaches us more about their interests and viewpoints.

them. The horse is treated as a companion and herd-mate rather than as prey.

Similarly, knowing that a hound experiences the world largely through his nose suggests that providing nose/scent games and experiences would be satisfying. Taking time to empathize and truly see what the world might be like from the dog's point of view can yield insights into what the dog might find enjoyable. One must avoid generalizations, however, as individual dogs and horses vary. It is only by spending time being in the animal's shoes and really getting to know the individual that you can learn what they want. We need to put our own ideas aside and really listen to what the animals are telling us.

Another horse example (from TF) involves my first meeting with a young Arab filly at a rescue center where staff were very frightened of her quick, sharp movements (typical of her breed). As I met her, she quickly spun around and presented me with her rear end. Staff quickly moved far away as I reached out and scratched her back side. She curled her lip in ecstasy, as if this were her favorite thing. How did I know she wanted to be scratched? On my walk across to see her, I observed a curious filly, confident with her head held high, ears forward, looking with a soft eye and relaxed muzzle in my direction. As she swung her bottom, her ears turned in my direction but were not back and flat to her skull in a threatening way. She was listening to see what I would do. Her tail swung loose and was not taut nor swishing and angry. In her five months at the center, she had swung her back side toward the staff many times, but because they did not observe or understand her communications, they believed she was getting ready to kick them. Once the staff learned this was not a dangerous horse, but one who enjoyed "bum scratches," they were able to begin a new type of relationship with her.

How can we provide more opportunities for our dogs and horses to make some choices and exert some control over their own lives? In addition to making deliberate

attempts to understand more about what our animals want and enjoy, it can benefit our relationships and the animals' well-being to give them choices when it is possible to do so. We cannot always provide choices, just as we cannot always provide choices and freedoms to our children, but finding or creating opportunities for animals (including children) to have a "say" in their own lives some of the time can be beneficial on many levels. Following are just a few simple examples of providing more choices for the animals in our lives.

First, when initially meeting animals, especially skittish ones, *let them approach you*. When coauthor Tracie first met the ponies featured in Part 1 of this series, she slowly backed into their field and then stood still until they approached her. Soon they were eagerly taking carrots and running to her just as her own horses do. In a June training with Suzanne Clothier, I (RV) was reminded that voluntary behavior in a safe context is just as effective for behavior change in dogs as it is for humans, and more effective and long-lasting than human-orchestrated change. Trainers and owners can focus on providing that safe context that allows animals to approach on their own terms.

Second, *let dogs or horses make some choices when out on walks or rides*. When riding my horses, I (TF) mostly use a slack rein. If we are traveling along a road and nearing a gate into a field (of much more interest to a horse), one or both of the horses swivel their ears toward the gate (even if it is shut), and they then turn their heads and necks. If there is no instruction otherwise, they simply head in the direction of the gate with ears forward and purposeful stride. In much the same way, when walking dogs on a loose leash or off-leash in a safe area, I (RV) simply attend to the direction in which they look and turn their bodies, and when possible, we go explore the area of interest. At other times, the dogs need to stay with me, but giving them these opportunities for dog-directed exploration seems to cut through potential power struggles and adds to the enjoyment for all of us. Lucinda Green, a highly decorated horse trials winner in the UK, wrote in the August 2011 edition of *Horse and Rider* magazine that she encourages riders to ride sometimes like a "rag doll," allowing horses to think for themselves and to overcome obstacles without so much rider direction and control.

Third, find places where you can safely take off the harnesses and leashes and give your dogs or other animals some *free play time coupled with some play time with you*. Play is an inherently satisfying activity, as long as the players get to decide at least partly how they want to play. Sometimes I (TF) get down on all fours in a

field with my horses and canter around. The horses are familiar with this game and will run off with their heads and tails held high, stop, then come back to me before running off again. These games often last ten minutes before the horses return to grazing, but if they are not in the mood, they simply don't engage with me. I (RV), too, often join in canine games, offering play bows or joining in chase games with the dogs. This type of free play actually builds relationships in ways that more structured activities don't (although structured play activities are valuable in other ways).

Fourth, look for opportunities where you can give dogs simple choices, such as which ball to play with, where and how to cross a stream, which treat they want to pull out of the treat jar. The more you look for choices that build your dogs' confidence and independent thinking and that convey your willingness to let your dogs explore and engage in things of great satisfaction to them, the more likely you are to experience the freedom of loosening the reins of control yourself and consequently have the compassionate and mutually satisfying relationships most of us want to have with our companion animals.

The authors thank the canine, equine, and therapy professionals from the Animal Assisted Play Therapy Group on Facebook for their helpful suggestions incorporated into this article.

Risë VanFleet, PhD, CDBC, is a child/family psychologist and founder of the Playful Pooch Program in Boiling Springs, PA. She is the author of many books in the play therapy field, and her book, **Play Therapy with Kids & Canines** won the Planet Dog Foundation's Sit. Speak. Act. Award for best book on service and therapy dogs, as judged in the 2008 DWAA competition. Her series of articles, "Engaging Owners Fully in Dog Training" in the 2009 issues of **The APDT Chronicle of the Dog** won the DWAA Award for Best Subject Related Series in a Magazine. She conducts seminars on Animal Assisted Play Therapy, trains therapy dogs, and consults about canine behavior problems. She can be reached through www.playfulpooch.org or at Risevanfleet@aol.com.

Tracie Faa-Thompson, MA, Cert EAGALA, is a social worker and play therapist in the adoption field from rural North Northumberland in the UK. Growing up in a Scottish/Romany Traveller family, she has grown up with dogs and horses as integral to her native culture. She is certified as both mental health and equine specialist by EAGALA. She is the founder of Turn About Pegasus, an equine-assisted program for at-risk youth recognized for its positive outcomes for children and teens. She is the author of many manuals and articles, and she conducts seminars on Animal Assisted Play Therapy. She can be reached through www.turnaboutpegasus.co.uk or at playtherapyfaa@yahoo.co.uk.



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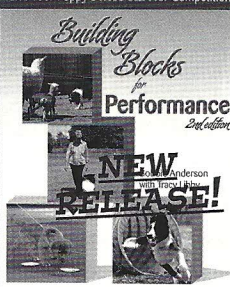


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