

INSIDE: Articles by Martin Deeley, Janet Velenovsky, Pamela Dennison, Liz Palika,
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Hot Topic:
**CHOKES
CHAINS**

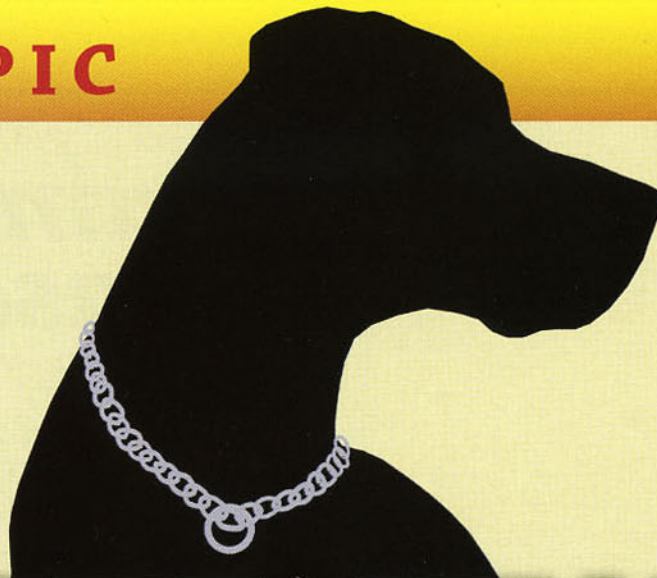
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CHOKES CHAINS

Thirty years ago slip collars or *choke chains* as they are commonly called were used by almost every dog trainer in North America. Today, far fewer trainers use them. Does that mean trainers are less or more effective than they were thirty years ago? Are choke chains a relic of the past or are they still viable today? Are they cruel and dangerous or simply one of the many tools trainers ought to have in their toolbox?

Emotions run high around this topic and often trainers with different points of view spend a lot of time talking at each other as opposed to really listening and hearing what the other is saying. In an attempt to allow trainers to listen and learn from both points of view, I contacted two trainers I know and respect. Given their vast experience, I knew I could count on them to present well thought-out perspectives. The following two articles are the result. Enjoy.

— Steve Appelbaum

PRO

THE CHOKES CHAIN – PRECISION GUIDANCE AND CONTROL

By Martin Deeley

After over 30 years of using a piece of equipment which has served me successfully and honestly, and probably also served millions more all over the world, I now find myself having to defend the choke chain collar against arguments which are irrational and colored by emotive objections. Objections that revolve around not trusting our fellow humans to behave and act responsibly with their dogs.

The first collar I was introduced to as part of my training to handle dogs was a choke chain. I will call it this, as, although when used correctly any correction given through its use is not through choking, this is the generic name that has been given to it and how most owners know it. The aim of this collar is to assist in controlling a dog and teach it the basics of good obedience. Over the years I have found it to do just this.

Continued on next page

CON

A CHALLENGE TO 21ST CENTURY TRAINERS: LET'S RETIRE THOSE ANTIQUE TOOLS!

By Janet Velenovsky,
MM, CPDT, CDBD-TAC

I enjoyed a recent trip into an antique store. Set around the corners of the dusty shop were rusty old pieces of equipment that had outlived their usefulness; washboards and hand-wringer washers, heavy flat irons, salt spoons, carpet beaters and rotary dial telephones.

How interesting to see things that must have seemed ingenious and valuable during their time, but are now clearly outdated and trumped by new inventions and better options. We think of them as quaint and evocative of a bygone era – collectibles. But they weren't all perfect, even then. I remember my grandmother talking about what exhausting and unpleasant work ironing with a flat iron was. She used them when that was all she had available.

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Maybe it is the word correction that some may object to, as if the very word itself implies abuse. Correction is not abuse; it is an action that assists the dog in doing the right behavior or in minimizing the chances of an unwanted behavior occurring again. So let's get away from the thought of abuse, as any tool used incorrectly can be abusive either physically or mentally. In fact we do not need any tools to be abusive should we wish to be. Therefore let's consider the Choke Chain for what it is – a tool we as trainers and owners can use.

The purpose of any piece of equipment is to use it effectively and correctly to teach what is required in a non-abusive way. Therefore if we teach the correct use of the choke chain there is no reason to even consider it's banning.

We teach people to drive cars safely, shoot guns safely and operate many other pieces of equipment that could be used incorrectly, so something as simple as a choke chain should create no problems.

In my years of training there have been a number of dogs that have been a little difficult. They will fight any form of restraint and in doing so can slip traditional collars that have not been fitted well. The choke chain does not come off easily, dogs cannot slip their heads out of it and a quality chain does not break.

The other positive factor that comes into play is when a dog is struggling on a leash. With the choke chain the pressure is evenly applied all the way around the neck. With a plain collar the pressure is applied on the opposite side from the pull of the leash. If the dog is pulling forward the pressure is on the larynx and is more intense than with a slip chain that is evenly providing pressure around the whole circumference of the neck.

So if a flat collar is jerked from above, the entire pressure is focused on the windpipe, which causes a strangulating sensation for the dog. The choke chain evens out the pull around the neck mechanically and therefore has to be the better

alternative, being more comfortable and less painful for a pulling dog.

Consider also, if the chain is actually choking, why do so many untrained dogs actually pull on it. Why, if it actually does choke, do they not stop pulling? I leave it to your common sense to answer that one. For me, this means that the collar is not choking because if it were, it would stop the dog pulling.

Other forms of control such as head halters and harnesses plus flat collars are full of problems when introduced and used incorrectly. The head halter forcibly closes a dog's mouth, can create sore noses, and corners of eyes, and give corrections that make a dog feel vulnerable. Sores under arms and bald spots from body harnesses designed to stop pulling are not uncommon. We

can actually find fault with every piece of equipment if we wish to.

The problems I am mentioning here are not to condemn and seek a ban on the equipment, they are simply made to

highlight the fact that no equipment is without its problems and its pressures. We can constantly search for the kindest, gentlest approach to training but no matter what we use the emphasis always has to be on how we use it.

As I have mentioned, like any piece of equipment the choke chain has to be put on and used correctly. To put the chain on a dog — hold the chain out horizontally, and then drop a loop through one of the end rings. The chain will form the letter 'P'. Now make the dog stand to your left side. Place the chain over his head so that the long portion of the chain, which is the straight part of the 'P', lies across the top of the neck.

If you want to train the dog on the right side of your body, simply reverse the chain. The aim is that, after popping it to gain attention, the chain is released to fall slack again. Try it on your wrist and see what I mean.

Owners using choke chains normally tend to apply a continuous pull pressure on the chain and hold it. This causes the dog's neck muscles to tighten and he pulls away from the pressure. He does

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But, she was happy to retire them and move on when innovations were offered.

Thank goodness for progress! I am grateful I was born in times of efficient electric irons and, more importantly, wrinkle-resistant fabrics and a relaxed dress code!

Along those lines, I am truly thankful I began training dogs during the era of research-based positive reinforcement training, clickers, and lots of dog-friendly head collars, harnesses and other training gear. I am pretty sure my dogs would be thankful, too, if they understood the alternatives.

Here we are, in the beginning of the year 2008 - time again to set new resolutions, re-evaluate our current paths, and see where we can improve our processes. Let's start by looking in our Trainer Toolbox. Do you see any antiques there?

For example, does anyone out there still own and use a choke chain themselves? Do you recommend them to your clients? May I ask why?

I can't understand them. You see, I have never used a choke chain. Never wanted to, and don't intend to. While I try to avoid saying "always" and "never" in my training philosophy, I have never heard an argument compelling enough to make me think about putting a metal chain around a dog's neck – let alone any device with no limits on how tight it can get.

Years ago, my dogs wore choke collars as recommended by trainers in the 'fashion' of the day. One evening while walking my German Shepherd Dog, I was alarmed to see her silently and slowly collapse onto the sidewalk. Thankfully, I realized before it was too late that my dog was literally suffocating to death because her choke collar had gotten caught on itself and failed to release. After that near-death experience with my dog, I've refused to use these dangerous devices and never looked back.

— Deborah Grodecka, Certified Pet Dog Trainer, Certified Dog Behavior Consultant

I don't have to try skydiving to know I wouldn't like it. My fear of heights and

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not surrender to the pressure and instead of correcting a dog, in doing this we just promote resistance and pulling.

The secret of the choke chain is to apply a quick snapping pressure sensation and then release immediately. To do this, the choke chain must be snapped quickly to the side and released immediately. Like you might crack a whip sideways. It is mainly a wrist action, snap and release. It does not have to be hard. We are using it to gain the dog's attention and have him focus on us as the trainer. It allows us to communicate quickly and clearly with our dog. The aim is to guide, direct, correct, communicate and not punish.

Very quickly a dog learns to feel the movement of the chain and its weight on his neck. This communicates when he is too far ahead or when he is going to be guided into another action such as a *sit*. The weight, the balance and even the sound of the chain moving communicates what is going to be asked of him and as a result becomes part of the command.

Try this yourself. Hold the end of the chain between your thumb and forefinger and then get someone to hold the other end. Ask them to begin to lift the chain or pull it towards them and feel the movement in your fingers or alteration of weight of the chain. This is what your dog is feeling. Through training we can teach a dog to recognize this movement as a signal, a command and a communication assisting in what is going to be or is now required.

I compare this to a dressage horse that responds to weight and very small body movements of the rider. Equally a dog can respond to these precision and small movements from a choke chain when taught correctly. The aim of any training is to be able to gain a response with no equipment at all and

the transition therefore from small movements of the chain and leash to no movement as the chain and leash is removed becomes a natural positive step. Just a small reminder here, following a training session or walk, always remove the choke chain. Like any collar it can be dangerous should the dog get it caught up on an obstruction.

I will repeat that any piece of equipment or even with no equipment anyone can be abusive. It is our responsibility to learn how to use everything correctly and humanely. The implications that I and millions of fellow dog lovers are abusive, inhuman, irresponsible and uncaring because we use the choke chain, is hurtful and aimed at promoting a feeling of guilt which is not constructive and helpful to the training and upbringing of dogs in today's world. It is an implication built on an ignorance of a piece of equipment by those who condemn it, and have either not used it or have used it incorrectly resulting in this opinion.

Our aim as caring trainers and owners should always be to help every dog learn or be rehabilitated so that it can be accepted in society today and in doing so live a full life with a loving family. To restrict any of the ways in which we can achieve this humanely through the correct use of all equipment available is an abuse in itself to dogs and their owners. ♦

Martin Deeley is Executive Director of the IACP. He has been training dogs for 35 years, both for the field and as good companions in the home. His International School for Dog Trainers (www.internationaldogschool.com) specializes in teaching the humane use of the E-Collar, an approach he calls E-Touch. In 2007, Martin was voted UK Gundog Trainer of the Year for his dedication to teaching dogs and their owners.

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understanding of skydiving is enough to make me choose not to pursue that activity. Likewise, I understand enough about dog behavior and about how choke chains work to know they are not safe or effective, even without practicing with them myself.

But, to make the best possible arguments, I solicited input from colleagues (some I know, and many I have never met) in the *International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants* (www.iaabc.org) and some of my clients. I was pleased with their eagerness to provide you with additional points of view on this subject.

World-recognized trainer Terry Ryan tells me there's a sign at her training center that says "Choke, Pinch or Shock collars are not permitted on Legacy property." That's the kind of training center I started in, but colleagues in different parts of the country tell me choke chains are still very prevalent in some places.

“Choke collars choke. Pinch collars pinch. Their names describe their effect but not their effectiveness. They don't work. Period. And how can we teach a dog respect if we abuse him on his walk? These collars are not tools: they are implements of torture. If you cannot teach your dog manners without hurting him, call me. I will teach you, or I will find your dog a home where he will suffer no pain or fear.”

— Dawn Watson, AKC Canine Good Citizen Evaluator Member, Association of Pet Dog Trainers Associate, International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants Member, Animal Behavior Society

To make it into my toolbox, a tool not only has to be dog-friendly and safe, it has to provide an opportunity for a positive training experience. You could call it a requirement for efficiency, or you could call me lazy, but the tools I use must pay off in constructive ways.

“Of all the collars and harnesses available on the market today, I believe that choke chains have the least utility in training. Corrections with these collars provide no directional or constructive information to the dog and their passive presence on the dog even is of no benefit.”

— Lore I. Haug, DVM, MS, Diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, Certified Animal Behavior Consultant, Certified Pet Dog Trainer

Have you ever seen people who are slight or small in stature carry heavy loads or move large objects you wouldn't think they could? Smart people know how to use leverage to give them advantages, and they prefer to motivate rather than resorting to brute force or violent actions.

“I remember all too well teaching dogs with choke chains. I remember the frustration, and how angry this method invites the handler to become. Using force as a means of getting something accomplished never feels good. This quick jerk method does not take into consideration the whole dog and the needs of the dog. It also discourages the handler to be creative in motivating the dog to want to do the desired behavior. I am a much happier trainer now that I use calm and dog friendly techniques. I observe the dog I am working with for stress and subtle progress instead of forcing something to happen. I accept baby steps towards mastery as accomplishments and successes and do not get wrapped up in the idea of making it happen NOW. This has brought me great long term results in the end and a greater relationship with my furry friends as well.”

— Jennifer Shryock, BA-MPH, Certified Dog Behavior Consultant

The “corrections” made with choke chains can only produce results because the dog experiences pain or the fear of pain. Jerking on a dog's neck is not an example of using leverage to accomplish your objective. As humans, with bigger brains, the ability to analyze and adapt,

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and the current opportunities for acquiring the latest technology quickly, there are no reasons to continue to rely on pain- and fear-inducing tools of torture to achieve our goals.

My mentor and friend, Veterinary Behaviorist Dr. R.K. Anderson, co-creator of the *Gentle Leader® Headcollar*, surprised me one day when he said his goal in life is to convince all dog owners and handlers never to use any conventional collar around their dogs' necks. It seemed a far-fetched and challenging goal. But, the more he explained and the longer I reflected on this, the more sense it made.

We know that dogs have an opposition reflex. When you press against a dog, he leans in to you. When you pull a leash on a collar or harness, the dog tends to pull the other way. This is why sled dogs do what they do. Choke chains are not exempt from this biological fact. Even if the "correction" or pull is quick and hard enough to hurt, it doesn't negate the opposition reflex.

In the same way, regular harnesses can't give you any leverage, either. Yes, they reduce the pressure on the neck and the possibility of tracheal damage or increased intraocular pressure, but for loose-leash walking? No help.

In order to be wise and benevolent handlers, we need to find the leverage points that allow us to "lift" the heavy weight of opposition reflex and all the interesting things in the world that entice dogs to pull on leash. Clickers, treats, toys, praise, front-clip harnesses, head collars, and lots of practice are all points for leverage. Choke chains are not.

“Years ago, while we were hoping for polite on-leash behavior, we thought we would try one last effort so I finally agreed to a choke collar. I knew going into it I was opposed to chokes, but didn't know what else to do. I thought choke collars were for huge, unruly dogs that were out of control. Other than the pulling, she is the most well-mannered dog. Well, it didn't slow her down a bit and we didn't have the heart to 'pop' the chain, so we resigned ourselves to having a Golden sled dog! We have since tried the *Easy Walk™*

Harness, which helps. As I become more educated about training and behavior, we have worked to motivate her with food and play, and started working with her off-lead so there is not anything to pull against. So now that we are no longer looking for an easy fix or a tool to do the work for us, we are making headway! I know now there is no substitute for putting in the time and effort. Some tools can be very helpful but choke collars are not the answer. If you want to have a well-mannered dog...get off the couch!”

— Michelle Mullins, Training & Behavior
Education Assistant, Premier Pet Products

Good trainers know it is essential to help a dog understand what you DO want him to do, not just what he should stop doing. True control comes from coaching a dog toward the behavior you want and rewarding that heavily, rather than punishing him for natural dog behavior.

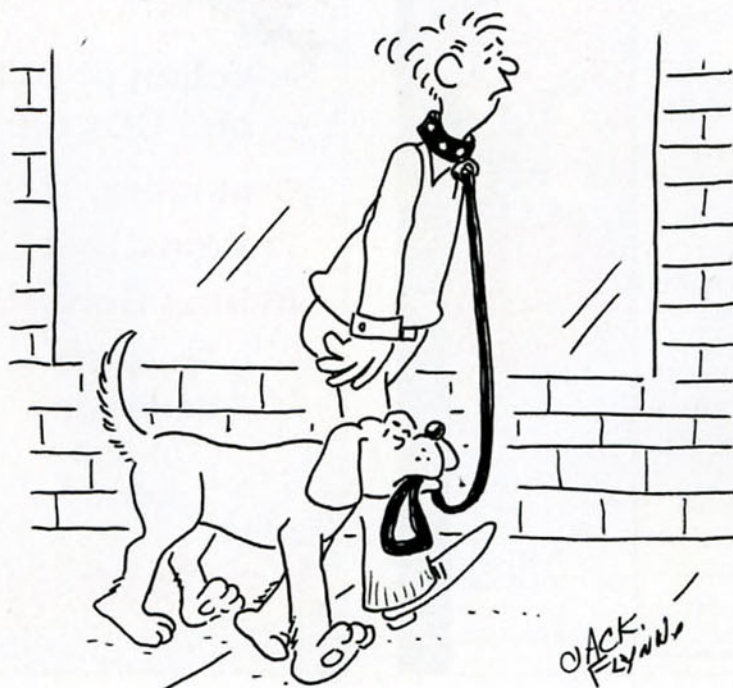
One of the greatest potential problems from using pain and punishment as regular training tools is the fallout that can happen when a punishment is accidentally paired with a previously neutral object or event. While meaning to eradicate the pulling, a handler can so easily create a fear of children, bicycles, the training center itself, or – worst of all – the handler who the dog needs to be able to trust.

“Years ago, choke collars were pretty standard. As someone who was new and learning, it was a method that I learned and knew how to use well. Yet, I was having difficulties achieving results with my own dog, so I began looking elsewhere. At about the same time, a series of events happened. While working on loose leash walking, I corrected my young dog as she went to sniff some garden lights. The end result was months of work convincing her that those lights were not evil. In class that same week I watched a head trainer expertly correct a Golden for pulling. The correction was done next to a set of stairs. Immediately, the dog refused to approach those stairs. Months later, the owner reported that this dog refused to go up or down any stairs since that day. When you work to modify the behavior of an animal, there are secondary consequences that need to be understood. When other methods are effective and do not require a choke correction, then I would ask why would anyone continue to use the choke collar?”

— Yvette Van Veen, Certified Animal
Behavior Consultant & Columnist

Lest you believe that I am speaking only as a *Premier* employee on this issue, let me set you straight. It's kind of the

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other way around. You see, I've been in love with animals since I could crawl and speak, and have always looked for the kindest ways to handle and work with them. In fact, I began using a *Gentle Leader* on my first Golden long before I knew anything about *Premier* itself. I've been training for longer than the four years I have worked at *Premier*.

My own philosophy and respect for animals, especially the importance of the human-animal bond, was set early in my life. I was only willing to entertain working for *Premier* because of their history of offering safe and humane training tools, and their emphasis on building and maintaining the relationship between owner and pet. I'm pleased and proud to help continue their mission. And, I'm hardly alone in seeing the incredible difference between using the force of choke chains versus the leverage of more humane tools.

“When I attained my first American Staffordshire Terrier, I wasn't aware of lots of training collar options. I was using a choke chain which was completely ineffective and painful for my dog. He would continue to drag me while strangling himself to get ahead. Not only was I concerned about the effects on his trachea but the fact that it wasn't working had to mean something. I purchased my first *Gentle Leader* six years ago and have never been more pleased. After only five minutes or so I was able to walk with my calm dog next to my side. Now I have three dogs and I don't leave home without a *Gentle Leader* either on my dogs or in my bag. The effects are amazing!”

— Mary Williams, dog owner,
agility competitor

Now, I know it is hard to change an old habit. Some people may be thinking “I've been using choke chains my whole life. What shall I try?

How do I begin?” Similar to long-term smokers, perhaps you could set up an opportunity to develop newer, better habits. So, instead of the “Great American Smoke Out” promoted by the *American Cancer Society*, how about the Great American Choke Chain Retirement Day? Pick a day to begin, or choose a new puppy or adopted dog to work with, and work on finding that animal's leverage points rather than falling back on your old crutch of pain and intimidation. Set yourself and the dog up for success and then follow through with patience and practice.

The next time I visit an antique store, I hope I'll find those familiar but antiquated training tools there on the shelves next to hat pins and pocket watches. A child might play with the limp pieces of short chain and ask Mom “What are these?” Mom, mildly distracted by the ancient manual typewriter or the Victrola wind-up phonograph she's looking at, replies “Why, I don't know, dear.”

Yes, I can envision those choke chains in the antique store. That's where they belong. ♦

Janet Velenovsky, MM, CPDT, CDBD-TAC, is very interested in strengthening relationships between pets and their people. She excels at problem-solving, and in helping owners to develop pet-friendly strategies that include both management and reward-based training techniques in order to cultivate enjoyable companions.

Janet is a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) and a professional member of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers. Janet also belongs to the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) and is a Therapy Animal Consultant (TAC) through IAABC. She was a speaker at the 2006 national APDT conference, and the 2007 IAABC conference in Cleveland, Ohio. Janet acts as Training & Behavior Education Specialist for Premier Pet Products.



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