

TABLE TRAINING

Getting and Keeping a Rock-Solid Stack

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Whether you prefer to show your Manchester hand-stacked or free-baited, the first step in show training any puppy is teaching him to stand in a correct show pose. For your show photographs, or to assist your dog when he's tired, overheated, or disinterested in the bait, he needs to know how to stack.

The method I use for all my puppies is called "table training". It teaches the puppy not only the "stand" command and that "stand" means "don't move until I say so", it simultaneously teaches him to stand *correctly* each and every time, pushing from the hindquarters through the back, so he is standing properly over his front. Further, this isotonic use of the body and leg muscles helps the puppy to develop the correct condition for the show ring, and establishes the "muscle memory" which encourages him to stand correctly for the rest of his life.

Puppies can be started on the table once they are well up on their legs and reasonably well coordinated at all gaits and speeds. This is generally achieved by about 7 or 8 weeks of age. Young puppies are sponges for learning new things and are also easier to manipulate on the table than older youngsters. Training sessions should be kept short and *fun*, with lots of "happy voice" praise, and gentle and supportive hands.

The only piece of equipment you need to accomplish table training is.....a table. Many people who show only Manchesters don't own a grooming table; I advise you to get one anyway. A grooming table affords the only proper surface and stability for table training, and it is a lifetime purchase. So, make the investment in your future show ring presentation and get a grooming table. I like the ones with the ridged rubber tops, rather than the ones with the pebbly tops. Rubber affords a grippier surface for your puppy.

Teaching "Stand": Standing behind one of the long sides of the table, place your puppy in front of you in the normal position, i.e., with your right hand at the head end and your left hand in charge of his rear. You may use a soft puppy collar if you wish, but I find I have more control and less resistance from the puppy if I simply support the puppy's head. You can do this by supporting the neck directly behind the jaw (where a show collar would rest) by making a "U" under his throat with your thumb and first finger. (Don't pinch inward and choke your puppy!) In this way, the puppy cannot twist or duck his head as he can in a collar. When your puppy is older and understands collars better, you can do your refresher training with a collar on.

Stack the puppy up in the usual manner, i.e., beginning with the left front leg, then the right front leg, then the left rear leg, then the right rear leg. For this work, you will NOT change hands on the puppy's head when you move from the left front to the right front. A puppy needs more support than that, and changing hands on his head will merely give him an opportunity to move, so just use your left hand for all the legs. Always handle the front legs from the elbow; always handle the rear legs from behind, by the hock. Do not reach underneath and use the stifle at this point.

One at a time, you will gently but firmly pick up each leg and set it down where you want it, and say "Stand". *Place* each foot where you want it; do not just drop the leg or throw it down. Say "Stand" each time you set a foot down. Somewhere through this progression, the puppy will move a foot which you have already placed. When that happens, simply say "No", pick up that leg and re-place it, saying "Stand". With some more obstreperous or easily bored puppies, you will have to do this over and over. Keep at it until the puppy stands where you put him on all four legs, and stays there for several seconds. The puppy must understand that "Stand" means "stand until I release you". Be firm but use a quiet voice. No yelling or heavy-handedness is required – just persistence.

Giving Your Puppy the Edge: When your puppy understands what "Stand" means, and will let you manage his stance reasonably well, reset him at the far left-hand or "back" edge of the table. Stack him up

the same way as you did in the middle of the table, but positioned so that his hind toes are right on the edge of the table. When he feels his feet there, he will likely move one or both of them forward. Simply say “No” as you have before and re-set his feet, saying “Stand”. Do not move ahead with this training until his feet remain where you put them.

When he is positioned properly, pick up his tail from underneath, *at the root*, with your left thumb and first two fingers, and pull *gently* straight backwards. The puppy will dig in with his hind feet, pushing forward against the pull on his tail, bending at the stifle, tightening his topline, tightening his feet, and rocking up over his front. Continue to support his head as always with your right hand, but allow for this slight body movement forward – this is what you want, so long as the feet don’t move. Count to one or two seconds, and release him, praise, and pick him up off the table for hugs. Wash, rinse, repeat. Do not expect the puppy to hold his stance for more than one or two seconds at first. The goal is to slowly increase the amount of time he holds the stance *without* moving his feet, so that *you* are always the one to release him. As he becomes more confident on the table, and understands what it is you want, the amount of time he will hold this stance will increase rapidly. Once you have started him at the back edge of the table, do *not* do any more middle-of-the-table work. Also, as he learns what he is supposed to do, you may find he is more comfortable rocking forward if you initially set his front feet an inch or so forward of where you would normally set them. This will allow him to rock *into* the correct stance, rather than ending up with his front legs too far under himself.

Some cautions regarding tail handling: 1) Always grasp the tail *at the root*, never in the middle or by the tip – that hurts! If the rest of the tail lays over your hand for now, that’s okay. Make sure that your grip with fingers and thumb is not causing his tail to kink.

2) Pull gently, and only to the point where you get a “rock forward” reaction from the puppy – you’re not trying to outmuscle him!

3) Use a firm, steady pull – never yank or jerk!

4) Pull the tail *straight* backwards, in line with the spinal column. Do not pull downward, upward, or off to either side – that will only unbalance and possibly hurt your puppy.

When your puppy has learned what to expect from all this, all you’ll have to do is stack him up and reach for his tail, and he’ll do the rest. There’s nothing quite as much fun as going to your first show, setting your puppy up just as you did on the table at home, picking up his tail, and feeling him push forward, properly using his back and hindquarters, and looking glorious! As he matures, he will even learn to “rest” against the pull on his tail, which comes in very handy in those two-hour Best of Breed competitions at specialties. As long as your “tail arm” can hold out, you’ll know your dog looks great even if he’s tired. I’ve seen some people go so far as to stand behind the dog and just grip the tail; a dog which will hold his head up on his own can lean against his own tail and still maintain a pleasing outline.

Important rules of the road: 1) Do this training every day for two weeks when starting your baby puppies. After the two weeks is up, let the puppy rest from table training for a month or two, and do other things. Do a few more “reminder sessions” when the puppy is about 4 months old, and work on further extending the time he will stay parked. You may then want to do a bit more before his first shows in Puppy Class. You will find your youngsters will fall right back into it if they had the early training as a baby.

2) Make your table training sessions no longer than 10 minutes per session, once a day. If you have the opportunity to train more often than that, do no more than two sessions a day, spaced well apart, such as one session in the morning and another in the late afternoon.

3) During the period in which you are table training, *do not do any static training on the ground – stacking OR baiting!* This is most important! The point of table training is that the puppy learns he must stay where you put him, and that moving is not an option. If you stack or bait him on the floor, he will soon learn he can move anywhere he wants to, and you’re back to square one. The only training you should be doing on the ground with youngsters is that which involves moving, i.e., gaiting and executing turns. As the dog matures, you will find that he anticipates your stacking him, and he will be more and more likely to “walk into” a correct pose. That’s when you can start bait training, if that is your choice.

- 4) Do *not* use treats as rewards during table training. Having food around is a terrible distraction which will only prevent the puppy from focussing on learning what you want him to do.
- 5) Do not perform other things on the table which the puppy might construe as a “negative”, such as nail-trimming. Table training forms the foundation of your show training, so you want all the puppy’s associations with the table to be positive.
- 6) It doesn’t hurt to train your puppy to an overly-exaggerated pose on the table, i.e., almost too forward with very bent stifles and a sloping topline. It will translate to a correct pose on the floor.