

Teaching the "BACK OFF" Command

by Erick Conard

At times I need my Anatolians to physically back away from something or someone. Since Anatolians are famous for disregarding commands with which they disagree, I've placed a high priority in finding a training method that achieves a reliable response. So far, I've had the greatest success by teaching the "Back off" command, which I found easy to teach and quickly learned by my Anatolians. As with any training method, teaching "Back off" requires repetition, periodic reinforcement, and lavish amounts of praise for a correct response.

Although Anatolians receiving the training from early "puppyhood" achieve the most reliable response, older Anatolians also respond well to this command. As with all training methods, consistency is vital. When I say "Back off" to my dogs, I use a firm and explosive (but not angry) sound which hopefully sounds somewhat like the alpha dog barking a command to the pack. Since Anatolians working in groups use verbal cues to communicate, I try to take advantage of this natural ability. My dogs can detect urgency in my voice and will respond more readily to the command when I believe there is an urgent need for them to back away than if I merely wish they would.

When my pups are about four weeks old, I begin using every potential training situation I stumble across to reinforce the "Back off" command. In general, I look for a situation in which I have easy control of the consequences. I only use the "Back off" command when I can provide a mildly negative consequence if the pup does not back off (back away). However, this mildly negative consequence works best if it also physically moves the pup backwards and away if the pup chooses to stay put!

I believe the best negative consequences are those which appear to have occurred without my assistance. I want the pup to experience situations in which I "bark" a warning to back off from some perceived potential problem. If the pup backs off, nothing happens. If the pup fails to listen to the warning "bark," a mildly negative consequence occurs that physically moves the pup backwards. This method reinforces my alpha position and creates a desire in the part of the pup to respond to this particular command.

One way I begin my "Back Off" training is to use my pups' interest in goats' milk. I feed my puppies fresh goat's milk daily; they love it. All the pups sit around me in a circle watching while I milk. They know the milk's for them. I let the pups lay as close to the goat as they wish, allowing them to smell the goat's legs and feet without comment. However, when a pup approaches the milk bowl too closely (6 inches or less from their nose), I say "Back off" in a stern, no nonsense "barking" voice (but not shouting or angry, just firm).

Generally when I begin this training, the sound of my voice as I say "Back off" causes most pups to stop and move backwards. Inevitably, one pup decides to drink the milk anyway and continues to move forward despite the command to "Back off." I say "Back off" one time only. If the pup chooses to ignore the warning, I IMMEDIATELY place my hand in front of the pup's nose and shove smartly and abruptly backwards about three inches without making any additional sounds. This shove is firm enough to physically move the pup backwards and away from the milk pail and the Anatolian pup will often fall backwards to the ground. (Falling backwards and going limp on the ground is an excellent behavior for working Anatolians and is one indication of the pup's potential working ability. When Anatolians are punished by sheep or goats, falling down limply is the perfect response.)

When I work with my dogs, my goal is to remain completely unemotional. If I feel any anger or irritation, I know I'm out of control and stop working with the dog immediately. It is vital that I'm emotionally balanced before I work with my dogs. Emotional balance is especially important when working with Anatolians as they respond to your "real" emotional state.

Following is an example thought process that I use which helps me consistently maintain good emotional control. If I say "Back off" and push the pup backwards and the pup jumps up and returns repeatedly, rather than being upset I think "Isn't it great that I have this opportunity to reinforce this lesson so thoroughly!" This thought keeps me in emotional balance as long as I believe it. Thoughts lead to emotions. I calmly repeat "Back off" and shove the pup backwards as many times as necessary, happy my pup is learning this lesson thoroughly. (NOTE: Although I use my hands for little pups in their initial lesson, I generally try to avoid using my body as part of the negative consequence from their failure to back up!).

Eventually, the pup will see that all this effort to reach the milk is useless and will sit or lie down to wait. When that happens, I immediately praise the pup in a calm voice, saying "Good dog, good dog." The praise part of the learning process is important because I want my dogs to recognize when they do things right. Correct behavior always receives notice and praise. When I praise, I make certain that genuine happiness is wrapped around every word of praise I speak!

Most of my Anatolian pups achieve some understanding of the "Back off" command very quickly (during the first day) and will just sit watching me milk their goats with great interest. After that first day, the occasional pup that insists on moving forward for the milk bowl almost always responds to the verbal "Back off" command. The rare time a pup doesn't back off, I reinforce the verbal command with a smartly executed shove. I NEVER EVER HIT!!! Control of Anatolians must be gained without ever hitting them. If you are having difficulty and are tempted to hit, don't! Instead, look at what you are doing critically and modify your technique.

I think "Back off" (spoken correctly) sounds a great deal like an Anatolian bark command, which Anatolians learn quickly. The sound of the words themselves seems to convey a warning to me. I think that fact is a part of why I've had such success with this phrase. Of course, to reinforce this command I use progressive, ongoing training as the pup grows up. It is vital to be consistent.

Another situation I use to teach "Back off" is when the pups crowd a gate; I use "Back off" to teach them to back away from the gate.

When pups approach a gate and don't leave enough space for me to open the gate toward them and enter, I say "Back off" and then open the gate into the pups, shoving them backwards a couple of inches if they haven't moved. (I push the gate into the pup carefully, not hard. Hard isn't necessary.) I continue saying "Back off" followed by nudges until I have them moved back where I want them to learn to wait. Next, I shut the gate and wait a bit to ensure that all the pups stay back. If a pup moves forward and again gets too close, I say "back off" and open the gate into the pup another time.

I try to never let a pup out of the gate! However, if I do open the gate too wide and the pup gets through, I say nothing to the pup. I follow the pup and immediately return it inside the gate as if nothing happened. Then I continue the exercise. However, I am far more careful to not allow any pup to get through uninvited. I continue opening and shutting the gate until all the pups have backed off and stay back. After they have learned this basic interaction, I also open the gate toward me as well as toward the pups! I'm willing to spend whatever time is necessary to achieve the correct response! When the pups have backed off and sit quietly waiting no matter how I open the gate, I praise them heavily, allow them to go through the gate, and continue praising them. Then I end that lesson for the day.

Another situation I use to reinforce the "Back off" command is when a pup is at the feed trough eating goat pellets just before I let the goats into that pen. All the goats rush into the pen and run to the trough, knowing there is food there. Just before the goats arrive, I say "Back off" and then the goats crowd in pushing and shoving! A young Anatolian quickly learns that if they "back off" quickly nothing happens to them. However, if they chose to ignore my warning, they get buffeted by the goats. This is an example of a passive way to teach the dog that listening to me will help them.

A situation I frequently use to reinforce (not teach) the "Back up" command is when the dogs approach the horses. I believe it works best to introduce the pups to my horses when the pups are about three months old.

My pups love checking out the "horse apples" around the round bale and this puts them in close proximity to the horses. When they are near the horses I watch them very carefully because one well placed kick could injure or kill the pup. Good working Anatolian pups will be aware of what animals around them are doing. When a horse moves toward a pup or lowers its head and swings it around to check out the pup, I say "Back off" sharply and with some real concern in my voice. I then immediately move away and praise the pup for moving back and toward me (which they almost always do in this situation). My adult dogs are concerned when the horses run towards us and I frequently need to use "back off" when the dogs become alarmed with the horses.

Another way I teach a dog to back off is by using my body to physically move the dog backward by stepping into the dogs space, causing the dog to back up. This body pressure technique is especially useful in older dogs. (Note! I believe you MUST be alpha to your dog to safely perform the following with an adult Anatolian.) Sometimes one of my dogs wants to intimidate another dog while they are eating. (I feed all my dogs together in close proximity and I stay there to supervise. I use my alpha position to ensure that my dogs eat together peacefully.) I say "Back off" and then use my body to step into and move the encroaching dog backward and toward his/her own food bowl.

With my adult dogs I don't use my hands in any way (except as a cue) in enforcing the back off command. I sometimes have to use my hands a bit with pups to move them backwards. Generally, when a dog knows the back off command, the most I have to do physically is move one leg forward and stare at the dog's eyes (an intimidating thing for the alpha [which I am] to do to an Anatolian) and the dog moves back quickly. Even when I have to physically move the dog backward a bit with my leg, I immediately praise the dog for the backward motion! I also praise the pups even if I've had to physically move them backwards.

What I want as a response when I say "Back off" is for the dog to actually take a step(s) backward. The dog must move back physically at least one step initially for me to be satisfied. As I know the dog understands the command, I expect even greater movement. When I need one of my dogs to move back (i.e. when one of my dogs moves to another dog's food bowl) I tell the dog (in my special "Back off" voice) to "Back off." If the dog doesn't immediately back off and move away after my command, I immediately step forward and into the dog's space... even moving the dog forequarters backward with the movement of my leg (as if he had been standing there in the way and I'd informed him that I was coming through.). I want my dogs to learn that after I've said "Back off" it is critical that they move backward and away from whatever they were focused on, even if I have to do move them myself. Of course, I praise immediately.

A really simple but effective technique I use is when I'm cleaning out a water trough. Although my dogs love playing in my creek, they hate having water thrown on them. Since I'm going to throw the water out of the trough anyway, I say "Back off" and if they don't move immediately I throw it toward them. If they back off, I throw it where they were and they don't get hit. They quickly get the picture - move when he says "Back off."

All of my dogs know their individual names. I teach them to respond to my commands both individually by name and as a group. When I am giving an individual dog a command, I say the dog's name followed by the command. When I give a group command I say "Dogs" followed by the command or I just give the command alone. Using individual names gives me greater flexibility in using my commands.

I'm not certain how fully ingrained the "back off" command can become when learned as a mature adult. However, some of the opportunities I use to keep my dogs responsive to the "back off" command may help a bit. The "Back off" command has worked very well for me and I'm happy to share it with you. I just hope it works as well for you as it has for me.