

TOOLS OF THE TRADE—The reasons why they exist © KYLE WARREN DOGS

Both trainers and owners are continually reminded that all dogs are not the same in personality and strength. Trainers are additionally reminded that not all owners learning to be handlers have an equal ability to control every kind of dog based on the owner's age, agility, strength, and/or personality. The tools utilized to work with a dog can also be connected to the dog owner's choice of the appropriate dog for themselves.

Given our variables within our dogs and handlers, there have been many tools over the years that have been invented to aid owners in gaining more control over their dogs. Different devices have different levels of success, depending on the dog and the handler's ability to use them. When determining what tool is most appropriate for your individual situation, please understand that this should be based on employing proper training strategies over a reasonable period of time with quality handling. After that, if the handler is not making progress with the dog or if the dog is clearly a strong challenge from the start, then we need to look at what the next appropriate tool to use with the dog will be.

Every year there seems to be another tool invented that helps many people manage their dogs better. I will list the ones that I frequently use and why, and from that, you should be able to find a good choice for you and your dog.

Here is a list of some of the most common tools on the market that I will most often choose from: a regular one-inch-wide collar, a martingale with a chain component, a medium-sized pinch collar, a body harness, and a Gentle Leader or Halti. Let's go through these one at a time. The main purpose of these tools is for teaching your dog to walk well with you on leash when studying the Heel command. Please keep in mind that while these tools assist in handler deficiencies they are not meant to take the place of the owner learning how to handle their dog.

Quality training leashes make a huge difference in the interaction between you and the dog during the training process. Having a leash that the handler can maintain a good grip on has to do with both the leash material and the width. I prefer rubber-coated or leather-like leashes. Leashes should be five-eighths to three-quarters inch in width for the best fit for grip in hand.

One-inch-wide regular collars are the usually the first tool I start working with the dog in the first one to three lessons. This gives me a gauge as to how pliable the dog will be in basic training early on with both the owner and me handling. If the dog has a soft personality, is fearful in any way, or simply very cooperative, then this regular collar is likely to be adequate with quality handling.

Martingale collars with a chain component are my most commonly used tool based on the majority of dog personalities and the degree of the owners' dedication to learning to become a good handler for their dogs. The average dog is not overly submissive or overly dominant; dogs most often simply require a consistent plan day to day and clarity of who

is the leader with quality command structure. That's what makes everyone involved happy.

What is specific to this collar is that it provides an auditory aspect for when you give a leash correction. Since most dogs hear far better than humans, this noise can be very helpful in grabbing your dog's attention when it gets distracted while you are handling in challenging environments. If your dog has an average benign personality, has a well-formed bond with you, and has low to high-medium energy, this tool should be adequate with quality handling.

Medium-sized pinch collars are another tool that I will use for dogs that are very stubborn, incredibly strong, super high energy, and/or have dominant-aggressive tendencies. Dogs that fit the descriptions for one-inch-wide regular collars or Martingale collars with a chain component should only wear a pinch collar if the handler has been consistently successful in executing quality training strategies for a reasonable amount of time. The pinch collar does exactly that; as the handler gives a tug and release on the leash, the collar will constrict and release, and on constriction it will pinch the dog's skin, creating a discomfort for lack of compliance with the task at hand.

If this type of collar is appropriate for the dog, most often there are favorable results very quickly because of the dog's respect for the collar. As handlers, this is not where we want our respect to be. However, for those challenging dogs that fit the profile, it can give the handler enough of the dog's attention to then be absorbing the handler and their skill set.

The general public gets lazy with the pinch collar on the dog and sometimes uses it as a Band-Aid. Do your best to use the pinch collar as a tool and not the only reason why your dog listens to you on the leash. There is so much that a handler can gain from quality dog handling when using the leash. Much off-leash success is based on a quality earned response from the dog while on-leash.

The use of the pinch collar can devalue a handler's credentials if you are not demonstrating a skill set while using this tool. Please be smart, be aware, and be appropriate when choosing to use a pinch collar.

Body harnesses are used on dogs that weigh roughly fifteen pounds or less. Usually, these dogs are low to the ground and I get concerned that I will not be able to use the leash effectively and safely with a dog that is only six to ten inches off the ground with a collar system.

If using a harness proves to be very difficult for a specific little dog, then I will try our other tools at that point as an option. In general, I have not been a fan of using body harnesses for training larger dogs; even if it's a no-pull harness, these often are inadequate for the more exuberant and/or aggressive dogs.

The Gentle Leader or Halti is a head harness that can greatly reduce a dog's pulling on leash. When the dog asserts itself forward on the leash, the harness attached to the

underside of the muzzle pulls the dog's head back and to the side. This annoyance and discomfort encourage the dog to not pull.

Many dogs really dislike the head harness and it can be difficult getting them used to it. These head harnesses and no-pull body harnesses are restraint mechanisms and while they may assist you in creating a more pleasurable walk with your dog, it's not the most effective way to make your dog believe that you are a good handler.

I have used the Gentle Leader and Halti with dogs that have sensitive tracheas, where any collar on the dog causes the dog to gag regardless of pressure. For these particular dogs over the years, it was a necessary tool to get the job done safely, and I am sure glad that I had the head harness to use for these dogs.

Remote electronic collars are never my first choice to be used as a training tool, they are always my last. However, as with all the devices mentioned thus far, I do feel there are a time and a place for them. I only use electronic collars that have tone, vibration, and electric stimulus.

I only use remote collars on the following types of dogs: boldly confident dogs whose handlers have performed terrifically, using all commonly used methods for the Come command and failed miserably; hunting dogs that work off-leash and great distances from their handler in wilderness settings; and very rarely, but at times, for aggressive behavior. Less than three percent of dogs that have aggressive tendencies I use electronic collars on.

I hope this section has provided you with the insight to make the right decisions when selecting the proper tool for your specific dog.