Collars

Training Collars

Which type is best for your needs?

There are many kinds of collars on the market, for all kinds of dog activities.  The information in this section are my personal opinions based on my (and my dogs') involvement in many dog sports and activities.

**Plain Buckle Collar**

These are what I call my "travel collars."  These collars hold the dog's county license and identification tag.  I try to make sure that these are always on before we leave the house, because you never know what could happen, even on a short drive.  You could wake up in a coma in the hospital, wondering what has happened to your dogs.

Buckle collars come in various styles.  There is the "rolled" collar, which is supposed to be best for dogs with profuse, long coats, like collies.  It supposedly doesn't mat or damage the hair.  Most buckle collars are what we call the flat buckle collar.  These can come in leather or nylon.  I prefer nylon, hands down, over any leather product.  It doesn't shrink, doesn't dry stiff as a board and can be washed in the laundry machine to remain clean and fresh.  The flat buckle collars come with a belt-type fastener (with holes for size adjustment), or a plastic snap.  Most leather collars have the belt-buckle type fastener, whereas most nylon collars have the plastic, click together fasteners.  I prefer the plastic fasteners.  It makes the collar look tidier (no dangling, curled up, excess strap).  It also makes the collar easier and faster to get on and off (you just squeeze the plastic fastener).  The plastic is also light-weight.  The nylon buckle collars are adjustable too.  You adjust it once, for the size of your dog, then just snap it around his neck each time (you don't have to remember which hole it was in).

Nylon collars also come in a wide variety of colors and styles, and often have matching nylon leashes available.

**Martingale Collars**

A martingale is a type of "limited slip" collar, sometimes called a Greyhound collar, which is made to slip on over the dog's head (there are no fasteners on most of them, but some newer styles also have a plastic snap.)  Once around the dog's neck, if the dog is not pulling on the leash, the collar can lie flat and loose, like a buckle collar. If the dog pulls on the leash (either forward or tries to back out of the collar), it will constrict to be snug (not overly tight) around the dog’s neck.  Adjusted correctly, it will not constrict to a size smaller than the dog's neck.  In other words, it won't continue to tighten, or choke the dog.  It does, however, prevent the dog from squirming out of his collar.  In its tightened position, it will not come back off over the dog's head. This is especially helpful when the dog’s neck is larger than the dog’s head (like most greyhounds.)

We use this type of collar for flyball training.  The dog, in his excitement, can not wriggle free of his collar, and the loop gives you an instant "handle" which disappears as soon as you let go.  The other flyball collars I have seen, have "built-in" handles, which I would fear could get caught on something, or have a dog put a paw through them while jumping, resulting in potential serious injury.

Martingale collars are also dandy for agility training.  The loop eliminates the need for a "tag line" (for those that use them), and it allows for control without danger of choking.

We also use these collars for sled dog racing.  There is another type of "limited choke" collar used by the majority of sled dog enthusiasts, but it's probably because they haven't discovered the martingale type, yet.  Racing rules require that the dogs not be run on choke collars (for safety purposes.)  But they get so excited to go that they often slip out of the buckle collars.  A martingale collar answers both problems.

The best type of martingale collar we have found is called the "Premier Collar," and is made by the Premier Pet Products Company.  This is not a paid advertisement; it is just my personal endorsement of this product.  DSA sells a small variety of Premier products. The company sells all sorts of leashes and harnesses, too.  Call 800 933-5595 for more information.  Don't forget to tell them that Lonnie from Dog Scouts of America told you about them.

**Limited Choke Collar**

A limited choke collar is a piece of nylon strap with rings sewn into either end, like a choke chain.  But, the one ring is sewn into a flap of material so that it can only travel a few inches.  The average dog's head is about 2" larger than his neck area.  When a leash is attached and the collar tightens, it gets no tighter than the size of the dog's neck (it can't choke him.)  These collars are used by most sled dog racers, and by PAWS With A Cause, a service dog training organization.  I understand that they are used a lot for dog training in general in countries like Norway.

**The Choke Chain**

This is a device which has largely outlived its usefulness.  When dog training relied on leash corrections and punishment, these collars were employed to control the dog.  By jerking on the collar, it causes an uncomfortable tightening and releasing which caused the dog to think twice about what he was doing.  It could also be tightened and kept tight to the point of making the dog very uncomfortable--a technique used in the dark ages to teach dogs a "forced retrieve," or to "string up" an aggressive dog.  Usually these collars are made from chain, but in recent years, they have come out in rolled and flat nylon webbing.  If your obedience trainer or class instructor insists on the use of one of these collars, please run away, as the instruction you receive from them is based on fear and punishment. These collars are not supported by DSA.

**The Snap-around Choke**

This collar is similar to the nylon web choke chain, except that it snaps around the dog’s neck.  It is fitted to be very snug and worn up high on the dog's neck (right behind the head).  This way, if you need to give a leash correction to your dog, the collar is already snug and it doesn't provide as much of a jolt.  However, the collar is positioned very high on the dog's neck, in a more sensitive area of the neck, which helps control the head, and less force is required to “correct” the dog because it’s more painful.  These are not supported by DSA.

**The Head Collar**

Head collars come in a wide variety.  They may be referred to as head halters, or by any number of brand names, such as Halti, Gentle Leader, Easy Walker, or Figure 8 Collar.  These fit on the dog's head with the leash attachment under the dog's muzzle.  These should be used as a training tool only, not something the dog needs to wear the rest of his life when he is on a leash. With it, you can gently guide the dog where you want him to go (never jerk on a head collar as serious damage to the dog’s neck can result.) It gives you control of the head, and where the head goes, the body must follow. This can be especially helpful if the dog is reactive and likes to bark at others. With this collar, you can turn the dog’s head away from the trigger. Dogs will have an adjustment period to wearing this collar.  It feels funny on their face.  It looks like a pony halter, and some people mistake it for a muzzle.   There is a right and a wrong way to train a dog while using this head collar.  If you just pull him along each time you want him to go "your" way, he will have to come along!  But, if you truly want to train him, you must teach him that he can get control over the situation.  In other words, when you ask him to heel or to walk away from something, he has the opportunity to comply without being forced, and learns to control the halter.  Otherwise, if you just use the halter to control HIM all of the time, he may fall into the "learned helplessness" trap, and will always count on you to DRAG him away from anything he is trying to investigate.  Please read Chris Bach's book or view her videotapes on how to properly use the head collar.  She uses two collars and two leashes.  This method is very effective.  (Chris Bach "The Third Way" thirdway@milwpc.com)

**The Pronged Collar (or German Pinch)**

This collar is often used to gain control of a dog that has a very thick, muscular neck and/or has an attitude of "might makes right."  If you are physically unable to control your dog because he's wild, or because you haven't learned how to "mentally" control your dog yet, this collar tips the balance in your favor.  It applies pressure only in areas of protruding "fingers" which poke out toward the dog's neck.  The same amount of pressure applied over this relatively small surface area of skin (where the prongs touch) produces a more painful effect.  These collars might not be as damaging to the windpipe as traditional choke training collars (that’s up for debate), however they still use the pain principle and DO cause pressure to the dog’s neck which can cause serious physical health problems for the dog.  Many trainers feel they are unnecessary.  This is true! If control is an issue, try a front attach harness. People are also having success teaching a behavioral approach to dog training instead of using out-dated punishment methods.  With the "Naked Dog" training approach, no collar is needed at all.  However, some dogs may get seriously over stimulated in certain environments, and the owner may have to resort to physical control.  If that owner's weight and age are roughly the same (90 pound weakling), and the person is trying to train a 180 pound Rottweiller with strong drives in every area, the person may need to tip the scale in his or her favor a bit.  This is when a pronged collar or a head halter are helpful.  But the front attach harness is just as effective, more humane and the dog’s don’t fight it like some do with a head collar.

**Front Attach Harness**

If you have a large or unruly dog, this could be your life saver (and your dog’s!) These harnesses do NOT use pain, they use physics. Similar to the principle of “where the head goes, the body follows” except in this case, you are able to control where the dog’s shoulders go. Any harness with a ring in the center of the chest can be used in this way, but there are some harnesses made specifically for this purpose. Premier makes two such harnesses: The “Easy-Walk” and the “Sure Fit.” Because of the extensive adjustability of the sure fit, it is my preference for use as a front attach harness. When the dog pulls, the tension on the leash brings the dog’s shoulders around to face you. Dog’s have much less power to pull when they are sideways or facing away from the direction they want to pull. You should not jerk on the leash attached to any training device and you shouldn’t let the dog lunge or hit the end of the leash without providing a bit of shock absorbing motion with your arm or body. Keeping the leash short enough that the dog can choose to keep it loose, but not long enough to provide a lot of momentum before the dog gets to the end is best. Toss out the choke chains and prong collars and attach a leash to the front ring (at the dog’s chest) of a harness. You’ll be amazed! And the dog will be able to learn because he won’t be worried about feeling pain, which can cause forceful opposition in strong willed dogs.

**Electronic Collars**

I'm not going to say much about electronic collars.  I won’t use something that I am unsure of whether or not it is delivering what it should exactly when it should (I don't trust radio waves and depending on the distance to the dog, there could be a delay.)  I have seen these collars set off by a car driving by with a faulty ignition.  I have tested the voltage out by shocking myself with the collar, and I must say that the fear and anticipation of getting the shock is maddening and the shock is not pleasant either!  But why should my dog be quivering with the fear and anticipation of getting a shock (even if I rarely shocked him)?   Fear inhibits or prevents learning. People tend to want to eliminate problem behaviors by punishing the dog, rather than replacing the unwanted behavior with something more productive.  I don’t support this type of collar in any training situation. Anything you want to teach a dog can be taught using reward based methods without the need for fear or pain.

**No-Bark Collars**

These collars are meant to produce an undesirable consequence to the dog when he barks.  They work on the principal of positive punishment (something unpleasant added to reduce the likelihood of the behavior being repeated.)  When the dog barks, the vibration is picked up by a box on the dog's collar.  This in turn, activates the punisher, which could be either a mild electric shock generated from a 9v battery, a high-pitched (ultra sonic) screech, or a puff of citrus-scented spray directed toward the dog's nose.  The latter are referred to as ABS (Anti-Barking Spray) collars.  Again, I would suggest that before you invest in one of these devices, you try to figure out what is making your dog bark in the first place.  Is he bored?  Does he see something?  Have you taught him to bark?  Do you really want to punish ALL barking?

How could you have taught your dog nuisance barking?  It's not hard.  Here's an example:

We have a whole bunch of sled dogs.  Each night when my husband feeds them, he piles the food and water in the pickup truck and drives back to the dog yard.  The three dogs we have kenneled behind our house know the sound of the truck means that food is coming.  They begin to bark in joyous anticipation.  They bark and bark, and if they bark long enough, the truck reappears and my husband feeds them.  In their minds, they have been rewarded for barking.  We have trained them to scream their heads off until fed.  It would be easy to break them of it.  All we would have to do is to feed them first, or to make sure that Ed did not go directly to feed them after the truck came back.  I've told him this, but unfortunately, husbands are not as easy to train as dogs, and for some reason, he persists in feeding them last, and does so without waiting a sufficient "disassociation time."

There are many more kinds of collars not mentioned here:  ornamental collars, and hi-visibility or light-up collars to wear at night.  There are also collars worn by dogs for other specialties, like conformation (thin, light-weight strings), or schutzhund training (thick, heavy leather with fail-safe buckles).  I have tried to focus mainly on training collars or everyday use collars.  My favorite collars are the Premier (martingale) collar, which my dogs wear 95% of the time they have a collar on, and the plain buckle collar. If the dog has behavior issues, the front attach harness can work wonders!  For most training of new behaviors that takes place in a safe location like my home or fenced yard, my favorite collar is no collar at all!

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