

# ACADEMY OF CANINE BEHAVIOR

The following article, written by Colleen McDaniel, owner of The Academy Of Canine Behavior, won First Place in the 1997 OFF-LEAD National Writing Competition, and appeared in the September 1997 issue of OFF-LEAD. The concept has since been incorporated into several nationally recognized canine behavior programs and is now a regular technique used in classes and evaluations at The Academy.

## The Colors of Dog Training ©

By Colleen McDaniel

Your dog is quietly lying at your side. His head is down. He's not asleep but very relaxed. Your dog is *blue*. He lifts his head up, looks at you while obviously listening to something outside. Your dog is *green*. He gets up and follows you, happy and wagging his tail, as you stand up and walk towards the door. Your dog is *yellow*. He leaps in uncontrollable bursts, all over your guest in greeting as you open the door. Your dog is *orange*. He then sees the mean neighbor walking by and charges him, snapping and lunging. Your dog is now *red*.

These are the colors of dog training. What do they mean and why are they important?

### *How can the concept of color help in dog training?*

The language of color speaks through emotion, or state of mind. We use color extensively in our society to elicit feeling. Blues, the color of cool water and azure skies, are used to create a calm, serene atmosphere. Greens, the color of plants coming back to life in the spring or a traffic light that gives you the right to proceed, are used to create a sense of health, well being, and progress. Yellows, the color of sunshine and ripe citrus fruit, brighten us up and give us energy. Oranges, the color of construction signs and fire, tend to make us cautious. And finally, reds, the color of fire trucks, blood, and stoplights, issue immediate warnings of danger and alarm. Whether we realize it or not, we are constantly conversing with each other in the language of color.

This same language can also be applied to the dog training environment. In order to help a dog learn, the skillful dog handler must be able to accurately determine what state of mind the dog is in and when that state of mind changes. By using colors to portray a state of mind, you can not only show the student/client what state of mind the dog is in, but also illustrate how to *change* that state of mind. It has been an ongoing problem for all instructors to articulate this concept to their students/clients. With the language of color, you can virtually "draw them a picture" of it!

For example, let's say you were teaching your students how to paint, and you wanted them to see the color green. You would mix the colors blue and yellow together and show them how to make green. This same idea can be applied to dog handling. The dog represents one color, and the handler represents another. You can now show your students how to mix the two. Managing what the resulting color turns out to be is the key to successful dog handling.

### ***How does a dog function in each color?***

The color you want your dog in when you are in a training situation depends on what you are trying to do with the dog. If you were working a dog on a long down stay, blue would be nice. When a dog is in blue, he is relaxed. He may even be a little too relaxed to want to learn anything new. A blue dog would have his head down and be very accepting of the prospect of staying there for a while. A dog doing a utility signal drop, however, would have to be green. He is down but really focused on you. He knows that he will be required to do something and you are the key to what that may be. Green is an open and receptive mind. It is the perfect color for learning. A dog doing an open drop on recall would be in yellow. Yellow is energy that is focused. He is animated and happy but very focused on the handler. A dog that is retrieving is also very yellow. Any exercise that the dog is active and working with the owner is yellow. A dog that is orange, however, is not a dog that is working for, or with, its handler. It is a dog that has allowed a distraction to close its mind to anything the handler is trying to teach it. And a dog that is in red is a dog that is in a highly reactive state based on flight or fight. It has already chosen a reaction and its mind is so geared into survival, it could not possibly learn anything new.

### ***The color concept must also be applied to the handler.***

Look again at the dog described in the beginning of the article and see how the dog's state of mind matches the colors described above. Next, determine which color the *handler* is in. While the dog is lying quietly at his side, the owner is also sitting quietly, engaged in a low energy level activity such as watching television or reading the paper. He's *blue*. As the owner hears the same thing outside that the dog heard, he looks at his dog and says: "Hey pup, let's go take a look and see what is going on." He's *green*. As the owner gets up and moves towards the door he becomes more animated, talking to the dog in encouraging bursts of words. He's *yellow*. As he opens the door, excited and happy to see his guest, he starts grabbing at the dog, yelling at the dog to stay off. He's *orange*. And as the dog attacks the neighbor, the owner starts screaming, as he becomes aware of the danger of the situation and his lack of control of the dog. He's *red*.

### ***How does the handler function in each color?***

A handler that is blue is very quiet and calm. His body language is similar to that of a statue. While in blue, the handler never touches the dog. If he talks to the dog, it is with monotype vocabulary and always in a quiet, controlled voice.

A handler that is green feels very connected to his dog. Connected but absolutely in control. When the handler is in green, the dog can sense that the handler is in control, and affords him all the respect that goes with the position of a leader. In green, the handler only touches his dog as long as he totally controls the touching. His touch is calm and reassuring to the dog. If he reaches down to pet his dog and it brings its head up to meet his hand, he is not in control of the touching. If the dog is jumping on him or constantly bumping into him, he is not in control. A dog and a handler working together in green can accomplish just about anything.

A handler in yellow is animated. Most of his communication with the dog is in quick, short bursts with a lot of encouragement. While in yellow, the handler changes his body posture as needed to encourage the dog. He may start an exercise with upright posture, dip into play posture, and return to upright posture all in seconds. He may even find it advantageous to run with his dog. His voice may modulate with encouragement but never goes to yelling. Yellow is active yet still very focused. A dog and handler working in yellow are having a good time.

A handler in orange is usually a frustrated person. His energy is fragmented, often showing up in erratic body language. His voice is also vibrating with frustration and often will increase in volume until he is literally shouting at times. A handler in orange makes all kinds of training mistakes. While training, he stops thinking of constructive ways of accomplishing his goals and blames the dog for all that is not going right. In plain words, the handler is out of control.

A handler in red is not fun to be around, especially if you are his dog! There is no room in training for a handler in red. Red is a venting color. The only response the dog has to a handler in red is fear or aggression.

### ***How do you change your dog's color?***

To increase productivity of training sessions, set *your* color first! If your dog is in blue, and you want him to be green - set your tone at yellow. Be energetic, sunny - lift him out of his blue zone into green. As soon as the dog starts responding in green, the handler must move to green if that is where he wants the dog to be. Matching color enhances that color. If the dog is orange, and you want yellow, set

your tone in green or blue. Don't play into the antics of his orange behavior; stay calm and focused on what it is you are trying to do. Remember, if you go to the same color the dog is in, you will be enhancing that color. Too many times, the handler sets his tone to match that of a dog in an undesirable color. A dog and handler both in blue will probably not get anything done. A dog and handler in red is disastrous. If you want to change the color of your dog, get yourself into the proper color first, so that it will mix with your dog's color and produce the results that you want.

Being a good dog handler requires no special artistic talent. By learning the colors of dog training, you can visualize "a picture" of what state of mind your dog is in and what state of handling you need to be in. Just as a good artist manages color to produce a beautiful painting, you can manage your handling colors to produce beautiful training sessions, performances, and relationships with your dog.

### **The Colors of Dog Training ©**

<b>COLOR</b>	<b>ENERGY</b>	<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>
BLUE	RELAXED	Calm. Quite. Peaceful.
GREEN	FOCUSED	Composed. Watchful. Alert.
YELLOW	HAPPY	Sunny. Excited. Positive.
ORANGE	WILD	Distracted. Frustrated. Unfocused.
RED	NEGATIVE	Fearful. Aggressive. Panicked.