Interview with Craig Ogilvie

"Move the toy, run with it, run, run!"

Craig Ogilvie, the man with superhuman energy and enthusiasm, is in full throttle, as another of his interactive play workshops gets underway.

Dogs and handlers take it in turns to hone their play skills, and at the end of the session, there is a real buzz of excitement (despite the exhaustion!) as Craig promises his on-going support so the work that has been started can progress.

This is a man who gets up at 3am so he can take in a visit to the gym before he starts his day’s work – and finishes late at night catching up with on-line correspondence with his students. Clearly Craig is passionate about what he does...

“I love developing dogs and people and seeing the massive difference that interactive play can make to a relationship,” he said. “This applies to people with their pet dogs, handlers trying to get the best from their competition dogs, and to dogs and owners who are struggling to overcome behavioural problems.”

The premise of interactive play is to use a dog’s natural chase instinct to focus on a toy, and grip it – and then to enhance the experience by interaction.

“The play is with you,” said Craig. “You are the centre of your dog’s universe, and the best thing in the world is for him to be interacting with you – not running off with his prize to do his own thing.”

For agility handlers, the concept of using play as a reward is embedded, so what makes Craig’s system different?

“I see a lot of agility dogs driving out for the toy,” said Craig. “But where is their focus? Their desire is for the toy, whereas we want to make it all about the handler.

“The toy is the bridge of the experience you are creating with your dog. When he is gripping the toy and you are interacting with him, you are entering a new level of communication. You are making him feel big and strong – you make him feel like a rock star – but that only happens when he is playing with you.

“You are no longer the person who plays with him and then takes away his prize. You are the creator of the best game in the world – and the fun is with you.”

Craig works with all types of dogs, ranging from those with very little desire to play to those who are highly aroused by any form of play.
“When you work with a dog you have to take on board his breeding and his genetic make-up,” said Craig. “You have to look at what comes naturally to him and then find a way of using it. The key is to discover what your dog likes most. This could be food, a tea-towel, or a tuggy – it doesn’t matter what it is as long as it is safe and your dog sees it as a reward that is worth working for.”

The game is still on for those whose dogs only work for food.

“There are no hard and fast rules that says your dog has to work for a toy,” said Craig. “I have had a lot of success using crossover toys, attaching a Lotus Ball to a tuggy for example. It’s all about thinking outside the box and finding a solution that works.”

Moving or activating the toy is an essential part of the play experience, and this demands a lot from the handler.

“Dogs communicate with body language and we must do the same,” said Craig. “When you are encouraging your dog to play, you need to make it stimulating – you need to twist and turn, run and dance – whatever makes it fun for your dog. For an anxious or nervous dog, you also need to ensure the play is on his terms so he never feels overwhelmed or threatened.”

What about the dogs that become over-aroused when playing, often to the point when their thinking and thought processing is adversely affected?

According to Craig, this happens when a handler has not learnt how to interact with a dog that is in a state of arousal.

“It is all too easy to get into bad habits and play too roughly, and certainly without proper consideration for the dog,” said Craig. “The aim of interactive play is to lift the level of stimulation and then to channel it calmly and constructively.

“Yes, a dog may be aroused but you can mould that behaviour to enhance your relationship with him. You are working on producing a consistent response, where the focus is on you – and not on any other form of inappropriate behaviour he may find for himself.

“I have found this time again when working with behavioural cases. Through interactive play, an aggressive or reactive dog finds a way of channelling his energy, an anxious dog learns to feel big and strong, but – most important of all – the dog learns that his owner/handler is the centre of his universe.”

Craig is dedicated to helping people develop their relationships with their dogs – but he is realistic about how much time this takes.

“It’s all about taking small steps that will change the big picture,” he said. “A simple change in lifestyle can have a big impact; a few minutes of interactive play, which opens up communication, can make all the difference. We need to build on
what we achieve, step by step, and then these achievements will spill over into daily life, enhancing the relationship we have with our dogs.’

He also emphasises the point that every dog is different – and that means you have to keep the door open to new ideas and possibilities.

“I can honestly say that I learn something new every day, and with every dog I work with,” he said. “That is what makes the job so fascinating.”

Craig now has a diary crammed with workshops, seminars, and behavioural consultations. So where does he go from here?

“I want to spread interactive play message far and wide,” he said. “I have been invited to do some work in Australia, and there is growing interest from the USA. I am passionate about what I do, and I want to help as many people as I can.”

For the cynical, this may like so many words – but coming from Craig Ogilvie – the most genuine man I’ve met in the dog world – you can rest assured that he means it...