Review

Really Reliable Recall

A video by Leslie Nelson

By Brenna Fender
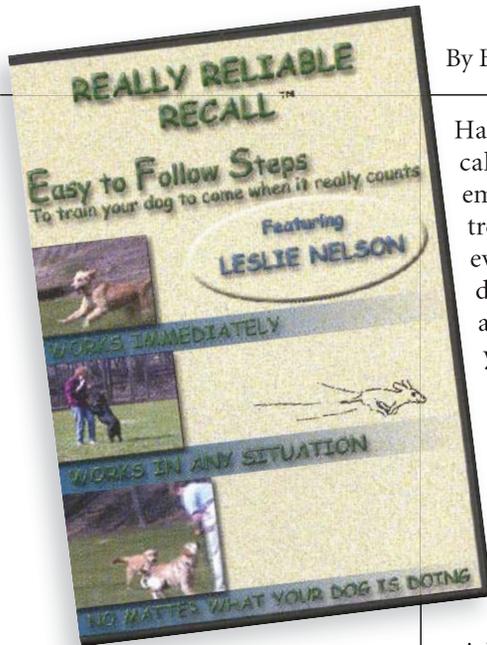
Have you ever stood in an agility ring, calling to a dog that doesn't come? It's embarrassing, and if it happens often, it's a tremendous waste of money. But have you ever stood beside a busy road, calling to a dog that doesn't come? Now we are talking about a life-or-death situation. That's why you need a Really Reliable Recall.

Leslie Nelson designed her new DVD to give you the means to train a powerful command that gets your dog's attention in emergency situations. Practicing this kind of recall strengthens the everyday recall as well. Having a dog that always comes when called gives the agility exhibitor the freedom to practice and trial anywhere without concern that the situation could become unsafe.

Nelson has been training dogs for more than 30 years and has owned and worked with a variety of breeds. Her interest in developing a reliable recall came from her ownership of her first Afghan Hound that ran away for the first time at 15 weeks of age. When Nelson began teaching at Camp Gone to the Dogs in 1991, she was surprised at how many otherwise well-trained dogs had the same problem: Their owners couldn't participate in some camp activities because they couldn't be sure that their dogs would come when called. So in 1992, Nelson premiered a camp class dedicated to developing a good recall. The class grew in popularity over the years as Nelson refined her method, which she wanted to be effective and easy to teach and learn.

The result is shown in Nelson's video production, *Really Reliable Recall*, which is divided into multiple sections for ease of use. Clicking the "Play entire show" option allows the viewer to see 60 minutes of the video, excluding the portion for instructors at the end. The viewer may also click on each section separately to watch "Introduction," "Really

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Ready," "Training the Really Reliable Recall," "Really Big Challenge," and "Instructors."

Nelson explains that the best recall is a conditioned response to a signal. The dog hears the signal and responds without thinking. In this way, no matter what the distraction is, the dog turns away from it.

Developing this kind of response requires practice. But Nelson explains that there must be foundation work done before the recall training can begin. In fact, the Really Reliable Recall system is made up of three elements:

- Management
- Relationship
- Training

Management means planning ahead to set the dog up for success. Nelson highlights the four main points of management, giving viewers everything they need to put the plan into practice. She also shows several games that are effective ways to practice recalls in highly managed circumstances.

Next, Nelson discusses how to build a strong relationship based on trust and cooperation. She says that every time you reward correct behavior, your relationship with your dog strengthens. Nelson states, "It's very easy for me when I'm walking with a dog to decide whether I should be doing a certain thing because I immediately think 'how is this going to impact the relationship that I'm building with the dog'." The Name Game is one way to build a positive connection. Nelson shows how to teach the game with the clicker. She explains the basics of clicker training, including how to turn the clicker into a conditioned reinforcer. Once the dog is conditioned to respond to his name, he won't be able to avoid looking at his owner when the name is called. Once this is established, Nelson says that the trainer is more than halfway to a reliable recall.

The major focus of the DVD is on training the Really Reliable Recall. Nelson discusses every aspect of this training plan, including how to choose the best recall signal, how much to practice, and how to reinforce every part of the correct performance. Nelson discusses different types of reinforcement and examines the use of food in detail. She explains and exemplifies the variations in food rewards and specific methods of food delivery.

Nelson also examines how recall training can go wrong. She points out three major causes of unsuccessful recall training and how to counter them. In addition, she shows common problems encountered in the training process and how to conquer these problems.

The Really Big Challenge part of the DVD addresses special problems common to particular breeds. Nelson says that Terriers, Hounds and Northern breeds often find recalls a bigger challenge because these dogs have been bred for independent thinking. She says that breeds like these were never meant to come when called, but they can learn. Some of these breeds consider freedom to run the best reinforcement of all, so food, toys, and praise may not work as rewards. Nelson shows alternative rewards, but she also makes it clear that there is no quick fix. Having a great recall on any dog requires work, but some dogs require more repetition at each level of training and more enthusiasm from the trainer.

In the separate Instructor section, Nelson explains how to integrate the Really Reliable Recall into group training classes. She demonstrates exercises that work well in a group setting and discusses how to know when to progress. She also shows what to do if a student's dog doesn't come when called.

This DVD thoroughly explains the concept of the Really Reliable Recall, alternating a classroom lecture format with live-action examples. Nelson shows handlers with dogs of multiple breeds, many of which aren't often seen in obedience and agility. During the lecture portion, Nelson pulls dogs and owners out of the audience to demonstrate exercises. Accompanying the lecture are "slides" that display major points in written form. Nelson repeats key concepts in different formats (lecture, live-action, and slides), which allows her to use repetition to get her various points across without boring the audience.

Although Leslie Nelson's *Really Reliable Recall* isn't as fancy or as exciting as some of the new handling videos from top agility trainers, it may be the only one that could actually save your dog's life.

Note: *Really Reliable Recall* is available from www.cleanrun.com or from www.healthydogstore.com for $29.95 plus shipping. Leslie also wrote an article on training the Really Reliable Recall for the May 2004 Special Puppy Issue of *Clean Run*.

Brenna Fender is a freelance writer and teacher with a masters degree in education. She is owned by a Vizsla, a Doberman Pinscher, and a Whippet. Her dogs are collectively titled in agility, obedience, conformation, hunting, rally, lure coursing, and Canine Good Citizen. She currently teaches agility classes at the Dog Training Club of Tampa and Bonjon Shepherd Ranch. Brenna can be reached at AgileWhippet@aol.com.