

THE LOOK AT THAT GAME (LAT)

The Look At That Game (LAT) was made popular by Leslie McDevitt in her training book "Control Unleashed – Creating a Focused & Confident Dog". Basically it is a counter-conditioning game that teaches your dog that it is OK to be a dog & look at things, but it is no big deal & no need to react to it. It has many applications, including, but not restricted to, reactions to movement eg. cars, bikes, skateboards, other dogs running etc, being distracted by & needing to chase other animals, fear & aggression & in the case of border collies, simply staring with a strong eye & getting "stuck".

Leslie McDevitt sums it up pretty well when she says, (quote)

"This game is a simple behaviour chain of two "orienting" behaviours. The dog looks at a certain stimulus in the environment & then turns back to look at you. Rather than just using a Watch Me cue, LAT actively teaches dogs to read stimuli such as running dogs, as an environmental cue to automatically reconnect with you. Once you have taught this game, you can relax & let the environment do the work for you. Instead of you having to react once the dog has noticed something, & then having to ask your dog to watch you when he is already in the process of reacting, we can flip the tables here & teach him to tell you when he sees something. In other words this game changes the "conversation"

When a motion-triggered dog sees a trigger, such as another dog running an agility course, the handler typically asks the dog to pay attention to her & the dog typically responds with "that would be very hard for me right now, since my instincts have taken over & I really can't hear you!!" LAT changes that conversation so when the dog sees another dog running, he immediately turns to his handler & says "there's a dog running over there....did you know about this"

Reframing the trigger into something that your dog can "point out" to you, then collect a "finder's fee", keeps him in an operant or thinking state of mind when he sees that trigger, rather than his going into react mode or chase mode. Trying to make a dog only look at you around things that trigger an instinctive response can be difficult & frustrating. It is both safer & a lot more pleasant for both members of the team if the dog learns that he can see those things & stay thoughtful & play a game with his handler instead of answering the call of the wild."

When applying it to agility, not only does LAT improve your dog's concentration & connection with you, the handler, it also improves his obstacle focus. *Watch Me* may be OK for Obedience work, but in agility, you don't want a dog that is completely handler focused & not be able to switch between handler & obstacle focus.

I first became interested in the LAT Game a couple of years ago when I read about it in a Clean Run magazine, & thought "Hey...that might help me with the problems I am having with my Border Collie, Bindi". Bindi is *Motion Reactive*, ie. she is easily distracted by anything that moves & reacts by lunging, & spinning if on lead, or chasing, if she is off lead. Before LAT, at agility trials, while waiting in line, she would be like a Tasmanian Devil as soon as she saw another dog running or tugging etc. She would also get distracted very easily on course & sometimes would even leave the ring to join the dog running in the next ring. She also becomes "stuck" & is triggered by anything that moves. When she goes over the threshold, she literally, switches to the other side of her brain & she cannot hear me. This is called "sticky dog syndrome" & is common in working dogs, especially border collies that have a *strong eye*. Her strong eye would also get her into trouble with small dogs, as her "staring" would bring about a reaction from the little dogs who lunge & bark at her, causing her to react back & of course her being the larger dog, would be the one to get the blame. Fortunately she has never been aggressive, but will react to other dogs' aggressiveness.

Now when we first arrive at a venue & for a few short sessions during, we walk amongst little dogs practicing our LAT. Previously these situations would have triggered her into reacting to the dogs' aggressiveness. They still bark & lunge at her, but now she will ignore them most of the time.

After teaching her the LAT Game, she became so much more manageable & now I may only have to play the game with her for a minute or two, when we are at an agility trial/training to get her to calm down & work with me. I still allow her the occasional "Tassie Devil" moment but this can be quickly brought under control, by bringing out the clicker & playing the LAT game. Within a few clicks, I can't even get her to look at the other dog running. I still want her to enjoy "being a dog" & it is almost impossible to eliminate motion reactivity or stickiness completely, but LAT has certainly gone a long way to bring it under control & now about the only thing that will distract her on course is if my partner suddenly appears or disappears.

Although most dogs that are motion reactive are Border Collies or other working breeds, *any* dog can be triggered by seeing another dog running, barking doing obstacles or tugging in class. As mentioned before, LAT has many applications...not just in the agility ring.

Fortunately, my younger Border Collie dog, Cricket, is neither motion reactive or "sticky", but sometimes he will find the environment a little scary or stressful. Playing the LAT game with him in these situations soon relaxes him & he no longer feels like he has to be on guard or fearful.

So...how do you teach the LAT Game ??

This is best done with your dog on lead or on a long line with knots along it every meter or so. This is to stop him running off & self rewarding. You want him right by your side or directly in front facing you. If he runs off, simply step on the long line to stop him. Best not to try & grab at the line, as you might get rope burn if he is a strong dog.

It is a prerequisite that you and your dog are familiar to shaping using a clicker. If you are not, please visit my web page on this link [Introduction to Clicker Training](#) . It is important that your dog is familiar with & enjoys being taught tricks with the clicker, as LAT will just become another trick that you can put on a verbal cue. A clicker works best in this situation, as it not only acts as a marker for the desired behaviour, but also as an interrupter. It is completely different to just shoving food in front of your dog's nose to distract him from a stimulus. For the sake of this exercise, we will assume that the dog is motion reactive & we want to counter-condition him to seeing other dogs running. You can substitute anything that your dog reacts to, the process is still the same, but obviously you will use different environmental stimuli.

The first behaviour in the chain, is initially taught using a neutral object. It may for instance, be a teddy bear sitting in a chair, or if this is too much for your dog, just use something a little less stimulating. You are going to have on you, some really yummy, small, soft treats & your clicker. The object is going to be a visual target only, you don't want your dog moving towards it or touching it. Present your object, & the exact moment the dog looks at it, click, he will turn back to you & you treat. Repeat, every time the dog looks at the target, click & treat when he turns back to you. Soon he will be giving a quick glance, then immediately turning back to you to tell you "hey...look at that thing". It is very important to click & treat this too.

The dog can also "refuse" to look toward the interesting thing & just stare at you instead, which tells you there is no need to keep playing the game in that context. The dog is ready for work.

So now we are ready to go onto the next step. You can either set up the exercise by arranging for another dog to be at a distance, preferably just sitting or walking calmly. As soon as your dog looks at the other

dog, click & he will orientate back to you for the treat. **You need to click precisely the moment he looks & BEFORE he has time to react or become "stuck"**. You are marking for looking & not reacting. Of course if its horses or cows or men with dark glasses that your dog reacts to, then you would introduce those stimuli at a distance. When he starts to just offer a quick glance or refuses to look at it at all, it is time to gradually bring the stimulus closer, clicking the exact moment the dog looks at it & treating when he turns to you. If at anytime you click & he doesn't immediately orientate back to you, then you know that you are too close to the stimulus & you need to back off and give a little more distance. If you click & he doesn't respond, don't be tempted to wave the treat in front of his nose or force it on him...if he doesn't turn back to you when he hears the click, he doesn't get the treat. Just go back a step to where he was being successful.

I didn't have the benefit of being able to train with another person and their dog, so I had to start on the agility field, which was not ideal, but it still worked. I started a long way away from the action & gradually moved in closer. I was amazed how quickly she picked up the game. Once your dog knows what the game is, you can put it on verbal cue, usually something like "Look there's a dog", but I find my girl is so wrapped up in the game that she loses all interest in what-ever it was that was holding her attention or reacting to before & if she does look when I give the verbal cue, it's a very, very quick glance then back to me as if to say "that's just a dumb dog running Mum, I'm far more interested in what we are doing"

LAT can teach your dog to see something that ordinarily would trigger a big reaction & to turn happily back to you. If you feel you have to keep asking your dog for attention in challenging environments, LAT will take the conflict out of your relationship when your dog makes you part of the conversation. He can notice things as long as he is telling you all about them! And you will find that you actually get more consistent & sustained attention from him if you teach him this game than if you rely only on a Watch Me command.

So if you have a dog that is easily distracted or runs off to chase or interact with other dogs/animals, or is fearful or reactive in any way....give LAT a try & you may be pleasantly surprised how such a simple game can change your dog's whole relationship with you. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen if you look for opportunities to play LAT.

Remember :-

- (1) Clicker & yummy small treats
- (2) Dog on lead or a long line
- (3) Click the exact moment he looks at the stimuli, then treat
- (4) If he doesn't turn back to you the moment you click, then you are too close to the stimulus.

I hope you have as much fun playing the Look At That Game with your dog as I do playing it with mine 😊

Leslie McDevitt, MLA, CDBC, CPDT, is a dog behaviourist consultant and agility enthusiast who lives with her pack near Philadelphia. Leslie specialises in behaviour modification for stressed & reactive performance dogs & is the author of the popular book Control Unleashed : Creating a Focused & Confident Dog from Clean Run Publications.

Cheers,
Sue

