

An Old Trainer continues to learn New Tricks with her Old and New Dogs

By ELIZABETH ANNAND

Within the last two years, I recently switched from compulsive to persuasive methods when training my dogs. I have successfully trained using compulsive methods, so that is not to say that it doesn't work. But it doesn't work with every dog.

My dog, Ted, was the incentive for switching. Ted did not respond classically to correction and simply became an over-corrected dog rather than a trained dog. (Ted, incidentally, is a German Shepherd, but a field-bred English Springer Spaniel). This was later reinforced with my first-ever attempt to train a young shepherd for the conformation ring. In this case, my instructor absolutely insisted that there was no place for correction when training for the breed ring; it was imperative the show dog and handler have fun. Certainly, get out there, work the dog, and pay attention to the judge, but DO have fun. Putting this all together, I concluded that there is no reason why persuasive training shouldn't work under any circumstance with any dog.

Given that I had a reasonably "fresh" dog, my young shepherd, I decided to train her using all positive techniques. I hooked up with some "new age" instructors and put away my choke and pinch collars. We go to dog class faithfully (we are almost always enrolled), and we train everyday. For background, Gracie is my first shepherd out of American show lines. Compared to the shepherds I have had over the years, Gracie is atypical of my experience (nearly forty years of personal exposure yet with only six individuals- some may say that is rather limited exposure). Gracie is what one might call a "hotter" dog. She is high-energy, hard-headed, and quite reactive around other dogs. She is not soft, so folks occasionally offer, "She could stand a little correction." And at times, I have wanted to pummel her. But as my experiment continues, I maintain that correction is to be reserved for serious infractions only, like biting another dog. And that takes the form of a forced down; no true corporal punishment.

As a trainer, I have had to do a fair amount of re-programming to keep it all pleasant, and I have not achieved an entire conversion yet. Maintaining a loose leash while heeling has been the most difficult habit to break. No more guiding the dog with pops on the collar to get up or get back. No more corrections to get that perfect sit. Because I have not trained enough dogs, I cannot ascertain whether positive training takes more time and is less efficient. It certainly takes no more patience because it is a hell of a lot more fun, especially with a more difficult dog. I do think with positive training that training segments can be longer in duration because it builds drive so the dog's attention will tend to last longer. Also, it builds courage simply because the dog is always set up for success. Also, because there is no correction, it is easier to remain neutral when exercises go poorly.

Gracie and I have been a team for a year and a half, and I must say that I have never had more fun training a dog. To date we are still not ready for any formal competition, but we are definitely having a whale of a time. Gracie is intelligent, high in drive, works tirelessly, but she has not been an easy dog for me to train. Today she is almost two, but only now do I have fabulous attention. Only now can I say, "She gets it," and today we fly through new exercises. It is important to note that I am an average dog trainer, and more than likely, I will always be a marginal handler. I am a natural-born underachiever, and I am not likely to do amazing things even with an amazing dog. I am always astonished when certain people tell me that they put ANY capital letters after their dog's name before it's two-years old.

I am primarily working both my young dogs in Rally-O and Agility. I fully appreciate the value in the Formal Obedience exercises, but those exercises are tough for my two "hot" dogs,

especially the long stays. Even if I never trial my dogs, Rally and Agility are excellent foundation builders for all the other sports. I believe that the fast pace of Rally has been the tool for getting my wild child, Gracie, to channel her drive and use her head at the same time. Agility is wonderful for improving coordination and establishing balanced independence.

Because I am not a marvelous handler, I thought about turning Gracie's training over to someone else for a couple of weeks. But what would be the fun in that? Gracie is spayed, so there is no marketing reason for doing so. And if I expect so much from my dogs, why shouldn't I be made to improve my skills? Maybe my difficult dogs will make me a better trainer and handler. Only time and hard work will tell.

By the way, I have completely abandoned the training philosophy that dogs want to please their owners. Rather I believe dogs work for you to get what *they* want. (This could be earth-shattering for some dog people, particularly shepherd people!) This philosophy is not a new concept, and positive training is soundly based in this philosophy. If you believe it, then there is very little space for compulsive methods in dog training.

As I work with Gracie I am learning how she thinks. What will she do to get what she wants, which is her ball or Frisbee. I carefully analyzed the varying intensities in each of her individual drives. From the beginning, she had very strong prey and pack drives, so I worked on her food drive with fine dining treats. Today all her drives are quite in balance, and I am now able to bring toys back into training with some limitation. And I fully realize that, like a person, Grace will continue to evolve over time, and training techniques must bend with these changes.

Thank goodness there are so many performance options for dogs today. Not everyone can turn around and get another dog every time they finish putting titles on their current dog. Ted and Gracie both have proven themselves to be capable of many things besides beautiful heeling patterns and downs in motion. I would like to try EVERYTHING with them. My husband has become so impressed with Gracie as a tracker and retriever that he professes he is going to use her to hunt grouse this fall. This would be an interesting test of nature versus nurture. In the meantime, I will continue to believe that *you can* teach your dog anything as long as *he* thinks *he* will get something out of it. You just have to figure out what that something is.

Elizabeth Annand can be reached at warbler@gwi.net.