

For a Golden With “Class,” Head to School

By Donna Baker

Over the years, many of my responsibilities with DVGRR have involved reading intake profiles completed by relinquishing owners. I almost always look first at the line that reads “Why do you want to give up this dog?” Frequently, the reason given is something like “he jumps, barks, and digs too much” or “he won’t listen” or “he has too much energy and he’s too wild.” It never fails to amaze me that, invariably, when I look down to the question that asks whether the dog has had obedience training, I find that the owner has checked “no.” On one recent intake profile, the owners of a seven-year-old dog (ironically named “Chance”) actually wrote: “He would be obedient if properly trained by a trainer.”

It continually saddens and frustrates me that so many dog owners expect their dog to just figure out for himself or herself what is acceptable behavior and what’s not. And when that doesn’t happen, they often give up, blame the dog...and call rescue.

DVGRR, like all other rescue organizations, is committed to making sure that scenario isn’t repeated: part of our adoption contract specifies that the dog must be enrolled in a basic obedience class within 90 days of adoption. And yet, when I talk with adopters or prospective adopters in the course of my various responsibilities, they often seem less than enthusiastic about fulfilling that part of the adoption contract.

I’ve always been a big fan of training, so it’s hard for me to understand others’ reluctance. I made every mistake in the book with my first dog, a little mixed breed, but one thing I did right was take him to obedience class. Eliza, my first Golden Retriever, started classes as a puppy and continued for several years, earning her AKC Companion Dog (CD) title in 1990. And Tyler (#01-047), one of my adopted Golden Retrievers, was two months shy of her ninth birthday when we enrolled in a beginner’s training class soon after her adoption. We had such a good time we continued on with the intermediate class as well.

Perhaps some owners’ hesitation stems from the word “obedience,” which conjures up images of a dog being ordered around or forced to submit mindlessly to the owner’s wishes. Indeed, some years back, typical obedience methods *were* quite autocratic in nature and often emphasized what are now perceived as pretty harsh corrections. In my opinion (and my experience), however, obedience training needn’t be about human dominance and canine submission; it should be about education, mutual understanding, and fun! Fortunately, there are many trainers around today who offer just that.

Good Manners and More

It goes without saying (but I’ll say it anyway!) that a well trained, responsive dog is a happy dog, a joy to own and live with. Of course, dogs don’t just arrive in this world knowing what constitutes good manners. Training, along with consistent and ongoing reinforcement, helps your dog learn appropriate behavior and manners — but that’s just the beginning. Training also helps *you* understand the world from your dog’s perspective, which greatly improves your relationship and helps you effectively problem solve throughout the lifetime of your dog. And it strengthens the bond

between you and your dog — a particularly important aspect for dogs adopted through rescue.

Training also serves as the foundation for lots of rewarding things you can do with your dog! These range from obtaining a Canine Good Citizen® certificate to pet therapy work, agility, competing at obedience matches and trials, and even search and rescue work.

Finding a Reputable Trainer

You can find dog trainers via word of mouth, from brochures or flyers posted at vet offices and pet supply stores, on the Internet, and in the phone book. But training won't do you or your dog any good unless it's provided by someone with appropriate qualifications. So how do you go about finding one? First, keep in mind that there are lots of different training philosophies, styles, and theories out there and that what works best for *your* dog may be different than what works best for someone else's dog.

Then start by knowing what criteria to look for. The Association of Pet Dog Trainers (www.apdt.com) has a good list of factors to consider as well as search tool for locating member trainers in your area. Some things to ask about are how much and what kind(s) of experience the trainer has had, how they keep up to date (attending seminars, workshops, etc.), and what training method they use in class. Location and class time are practical considerations, of course, but don't let them be your *only* considerations.

With respect to method, *be sure any trainer you are considering uses a humane, positively oriented approach.* As the American Dog Trainers Network notes: "Reputable trainers are concerned about their dogs' welfare. They also know that harsh or abusive handling methods are not only unnecessary, but are often counter-productive as well." Positively oriented trainers know that learning should be a fun and motivating experience for your dog, not something to avoid or dread.

Once you've identified a few potential trainers, I *strongly* recommend that you sit in on one of their actual classes before signing up. Some things — like the trainer's teaching skills and their actual interaction with the dogs — are best assessed by observation. When I was looking for a trainer to use for Tyler, I sat in on four different classes before I found one I was completely happy with. Yes, it was time consuming (and no, you probably don't have to go to quite as many as I did), but it was definitely worth it in the long run to make sure Tyler had a good experience.

Practice Makes Perfect

Trite, but certainly true...you won't see much benefit from class unless you consistently apply what you've learned at home. The good news is that most training classes these days show you how to easily incorporate several brief (5 to 10 minute) practice sessions into daily interactions with your dog, so it's not a big imposition on your time.

Keeping your dog's skills sharp, however, is a long term commitment — albeit one with a short term (i.e., daily) payoff! Susan Greenholt, one of the trainers at the school I attended with Tyler, often tells her students: "You are always training your dog, whether you realize it or not." So if you forget to praise or reward good

behavior, you've lost a chance to reinforce it (making it less likely the dog will repeat it), and by the same token if you're too tired or distracted to correct the dog for inappropriate behavior...well, you know what's gonna happen again tomorrow.

Keep in mind, too, that for lots of dogs, a beginner's class is just that...the beginning. If your dog (or you) needs additional work...take the next class! Every training experience with your dog is a great way to provide him or her with increased confidence, stimulation, socialization, and exercise. Keep your own skills sharp by reading books and articles about training (I personally find *The Whole Dog Journal* consistently helpful), attending workshops if available, and talking with other dog owners.

As a final note, listen to trainer Pat Miller in her book on *The Power of Positive Dog Training* (Hungry Minds, Inc., 2001):

When you train your dog you establish a powerful bond that helps to cement the relationship. This bond is the critical difference between the unfortunate dog who ends up at the shelter [or rescue] because his owner is moving and can't keep him and the dog whose owner would live in the car or on the street before he would consider giving up his faithful, four-legged friend. Every dog has the power to be great. Will yours? It's up to you.