

Business

From 'bad dog!' to 'good boy!'

Got a cantankerous canine? Help is at hand if you want to reform that problem pooch

BY MICHELLE MYERS |

If you're at the end of your tether with a recalcitrant pooch, take heart. With the right training, there is really no reason, area canine experts insist, why you should ever have to say "Bad dog!" Dan Gebbia has been training dogs for 35 years and says the business has changed radically over time.

"I started training dogs in the city," he said. "Over the years, dog training methods have evolved and for the most part trainers now use humane methods. For example, there was a time when shock collars were used quite extensively but they're fairly rare now."

Mr. Gebbia works mostly one-on-one with dogs and their owners, although he says he runs a couple of group classes in spring and fall at the Peconic recreation center. He describes his method as positive and progressive.

"We use repetition, praise and consistency with food rewards that we gradually phase out," he said. Mr. Gebbia also believes all family members should get involved in training.

"A dog is not just a pet, it's family" he said. "And because it's a family member you need to select one that fits your lifestyle. If you have the right pet, it should be trainable. It's a very rare case where a dog simply doesn't respond." In Cutchogue, Dawn Bennett and Asha Gallacher, co-owners of North Fork Dogs couldn't agree more.

"Our training is family oriented," said Ms. Bennett. "We're also interested in showing people that breeds with a bad reputation respond well to training."

To prove the point, Ms. Bennett and Ms. Gallacher were working last week in Southold with Samantha Perry's five month-old pit bull, Tao. Tao just completed the American Kennel Club's S.T.A.R. Puppy Program and last week's session aimed to see if he was mature enough to embark on the Canine Good Citizen program, a prereq-



JAY WEBSTER PHOTO

Dawn Bennett of North Fork School For Dogs conducts a home training session with Tao, a 5 1/2-year-old pit bull adopted from the Southold Town Animal Shelter by Samantha Perry of Southold.

uisite for some therapy dog groups.

"We'd like Tao to become a 'spokes-dog' for pit bulls," said Ms. Bennett. "He might be just a bit young yet for a canine good citizen award," added Ms. Gallacher.

In addition to one-on-one training, Ms. Gallacher and Ms. Bennett offer four and six-week group classes.

There's a discount if your dog came from a shelter, which the women feel may encourage people to adopt. Tao is a case in point.

"He was part of a seizure of a large number of pit bull terriers and was adopted from the shelter," said Ms. Gallacher as Ms. Bennett worked on his sit and stay commands.

"I want him to have as much training as possible," said Ms. Perry.

Sonja Johanson and her Swedish vallhund, Sven, host a variety of classes at Talk to the Paw in Aquebogue designed to get both dogs and their humans to understand each other and to promote happy relationships.

"I train people to train their dogs," said Ms. Johanson. "Most of the time people assume dogs understand English. That's not the case but you can get them to work out what you want if you take it nice and slow and use short words. And always stop on a positive."

Often assisted by her young daughter Kayla and Kayla's remarkably well behaved Pomeranian, Snickers, Ms. Johanson helps people with barkers, boisterous greeters and selectively deaf canines, among other problems.

"People often inadvertently reinforce those problems by yelling," she said. "Try and distract the dog and then give a reward for doing something more positive." Ms. Johanson has been training dogs since 1991. She did a stint at Petco in Riverhead but says the classes outgrew the store and so she moved to her current 1,200-square-foot facility a couple of years ago, where she offers agility instruction as well as a variety of obedience classes.

"The rally obedience class is a twist on obedience training," said Ms. Johanson. "We warm up with skills and then the dogs maneuver around the course."

And both dogs and humans seem to like it. Judy Kozora and her Jack Russell, Jinx, are regulars at Talk to the Paw, where they enjoy the company of half a dozen other dogs in the rally obedience class.

"He's 10," said Ms. Kozora. "He needed something to do in his retirement."

'A dog is not just a pet, it's family.'

Dan Gebbia




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