

Your Smart Dog

Learning From Your Dog

January 2009

Regular readers of *Your Smart Dog* know my "bad dog" Lucky. He is the Australian shepherd I rescued long about 13 years ago, loaded with problems. I didn't know about the problems then, nor did I have any idea how to fix them, once I figured out how many and how deep-seated those problems were.

He died last month and as I reflect on our life together, I realize just how much that dog taught me. Some of the lessons were tough, others were easier. One thing's for certain, he made me a better trainer, as well as a better person. And for that, I'm forever grateful.

It was Lucky that taught me that force has no place in training. I often tell clients who are fans of the Dog Whisperer that Cesar would have met his match with a dog like Lucky. Short of stringing a dog up by his collar (as the Dog Whisperer has done), the force-based approach espoused by Milan on that show would have only made a dog like Lucky worse.

I know because I tried it. As I mentioned, I learned some lessons the hard way – that's one of them. Back before I relied on science-based training, I used a choke collar and corrections. All Lucky needed was someone to "show him who's boss," I thought. When I punished his lunging at cars, I wound up getting bitten. And he'd get even more agitated and would lunge at the next car with even more vitriol.

Thankfully, I found a clicker trainer and have never looked back. Neither did Lucky.

So, what can you learn from your dog? Lots...

LEADERSHIP

When Lucky first arrived, he thought he should be the lookout, the sentry, to borrow a phrase from President Bush – "the Decider." Trouble is, Lucky wasn't good at making decisions. In fact, almost every decision he made was the wrong one (except when he lunged at an inebriated fellow one night who himself lunged at us). So I had to begin (gently) taking the decisions out of his hands. I did this by becoming an effective and

trustworthy leader. **I made a promise to Lucky: "You are my top priority. I'll make sure I keep you out of situations you can't handle. I won't let you get yourself in a situation in which you feel the need to bite, growl, or lunge."**

And I followed through on that promise. This meant that I told people they couldn't pet him (even if they were "really good with dogs"), that I'd step in front of him if those people just wouldn't listen, that I'd not put him in situations that were overwhelming – in short, that I'd keep him safe.

Slowly, he began to understand that he could rely on me to keep him safe. That I was a good leader and could be trusted to make decisions for him. This was the key to our happy life together. Had I not assumed the leadership (read: protector) role for him, he would have been euthanized years ago due to his behavior problems.

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MANAGEMENT

There were times in which I couldn't control the situation, say when we visited the veterinarian where people who love dogs abound. True to my promise, I still kept Lucky safe by managing both the environment and the dog. To manage the environment, we'd sit as far as possible from the hustle and bustle of the front desk. To manage Lucky, he wore a Gentle Leader® head collar and I brought delicious treats with me. The head collar gave me control, while the treats gave Lucky something to focus on (instead of the people).

If we were having company over, I wouldn't subject Lucky to the stress. I'd simply put him in the bedroom with a couple of Kongs with frozen peanut butter inside. He'd be happy behind closed doors, and we'd be stress-free. It was a win-win situation for both the dog and our guests.

CREATIVITY

Lucky needed a lot of exercise – he was an Australian shepherd bred to run all day. Without exercise, his behavior problems were magnified. But how to exercise an aggressive dog? It took some creativity and trial and error, but we managed to figure out ways to exercise him. We'd take him to enclosed tennis courts early in the morning so he could run safely off leash. We found out-of-the way trails where we weren't likely to run into many people. We also discovered how much Lucky loved the water. We took him to Lake Anna as often as possible and let him jump in and out of the lake, chase fish, and swim as much as he wanted. As the saying goes "A tired dog is a good dog."

PATIENCE

Lucky was a dog "only a mother could love." Not many people saw the sweet, gooey side of Lucky. He was a handful of a dog. Trouble around every turn. A dog to whom progress came slowly. Without patience, Lucky didn't have a chance. We learned to celebrate the tiniest of baby steps. We celebrated because he growled instead of lunged. We were happy when he only barked for two minutes instead of five. We appreciated how much progress we'd made, not over two days, but over two months. Knowing how hard we'd work for each tiny success, we appreciated and celebrated each and every piece of good behavior.

APPRECIATION

Looking back over the last 13 years, my advice is to appreciate every single day you spend with your dog. Appreciate the good and the bad. While I feel fortunate that Lucky lived a full and robust 15 years, and know that he got as much out of life as possible, I'm still sad that he's gone. No dog loved life like that dog did. He didn't do anything halfway. It was all or nothing for him – both the good and the bad. I miss that exuberance, that zest for life, that "all-out" mentality that Lucky had. And yes, my patience wore thin when Lucky would bark at the neighborhood kids (who were out of sight, but within earshot)

relentlessly, but it was those moments that I'd learn how to redirect his attention and energy to a task or activity that was acceptable (chasing a tennis ball, for instance). **I appreciate him because nothing was ever easy with him – he made me the trainer I am today.** He made me understand that positive training wasn't only fun, *it was effective.* For an easy dog, and even for a "bad dog" like Lucky.

So don't complain about how ill behaved your dog is, take advantage of the opportunity your dog is giving you: learn from your dog. **Let your dog teach you how to become a better leader, a better friend to him. You'll enjoy the ride, I promise.**

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