

Mistakes - ©2005sinbajé

What's the first thing I would tell someone that asks me how to get started? Try not to make the same mistakes I did. Despite being a total novice few could fault the preparations I made prior to receiving Tre. I read numerous books in the months preceding Tre's arrival.

I called several dog clubs and training facilities before locating a trainer that was familiar with the breed. I then met with them in person where I asked a multitude of questions and yet I still made one crucial mistake. As training progressed I ignored a vital piece of myself – my gut instinct. Instinct that told me jerking and pulling, as is the Koehler way, a 10-week old puppy was not beneficial to his growing body and developing mind. Instinct that screamed “No!” when the trainer proceeded to ‘hang’ Tre for daring to show a bit of attitude after an unfair pop correction. Instinct that wanted to give treats for a job well done but was told that went against everything ‘*real*’ dog training was about – “make the dog do it or there will be hell to pay if they don’t”. Instinct that knew there was something better out there for Tre and I but lacked the confidence to seek it out.

It would take yet *another* 10-week course of modified Koehler methods, this time in a class setting with a different club before I could summon the courage to listen and trust in myself despite my novice status. Sadly my courage arrived well after Tre decided obedience was not to his liking.

Through trial, error and word of mouth I would eventually find a training club whose primary focus was positive motivation via reward methods. Sure, corrective measures were still used when needed, the key difference being I did not feel correction was mandatory as I had while training with Koehler instructors. It was during these sessions that I happened to notice a woman off to the side doing what appeared to be

‘play training’ with her dogs. I stopped to watch and the more I watched the more I liked. She was very upbeat, very motivated and both her dogs seemed eager to be with her – something Tre lacked. I knew at that moment, if at all possible, I wanted to train under her. That was five years ago and I have been working with Marie weekly ever since. I would find out later that she was a seasoned obedience trainer and competitor with three coveted Obedience Trial Champion dogs to her credit. While having a successful competitor as a trainer is a definite bonus – what immediately caught my attention was the repertoire she had with her dogs and the means by which she worked them.

As in many sports, people just starting out often times assume that success equates to the best or the most knowledgeable and will invariably seek out ultra successful people to be their mentor. In my opinion this can be a mistake – just ask anyone who has trained briefly under a top ranked obedience competitor. They might fill your ears, as they have mine, with tales of how these, as I call them ‘only-way’ trainers, named for their ‘*my way is the only way*’ mentality, ruined their more non-traditional dogs in a few short sessions or how it takes months, sometimes years to undo the damage.

While Marie is a successful competitor what makes her a great trainer is not her success but rather her ability to relate to every dog as an individual and adjust her training accordingly. I personally define a good trainer as someone who truly understands that not all dogs respond in the same way, not even dogs within the same breed. A good trainer should be up to date on current training methods and have a veritable bag of tricks that can be called upon to bring the best out of each individual animal. To expect that every dog will respond exactly like a Border collie or Golden Retriever is, in my opinion, a recipe for disaster with most dogs, but *especially* the non-traditional breeds. And yet many top trainers and top training facilities expect just that – without any

apparent regard for the type and/or temperament of the dogs in which they are training.

So when in the market for the right training facility or private instructor might I suggest the following: visit during a training session to see what kind of methods are being used as opposed to just meeting with the instructor and taking their word for it. Ask point blank if they are considered a positive or negative facility. Get references of past students – specifically those with non-traditional breeds, then make some calls and ask questions. I would also attend a local obedience trial if possible to watch potential trainers ‘in action’. But most of all – listen to your heart. If it tells you it doesn’t like what is going on there’s usually a good reason for it - so pay attention!