

Column: Smart Dog Training
Publication: Vancouver Island Pets
Issue: Volume 1, Issue 1

No Littlest Hobo

My first serious infatuation was when I was 10 and, not unlike other ten-year olds, it was with a movie star. He had soulful eyes, an intelligent face and the kind of quick reaction time that saved the day. His TV job was to arrive in a new town every week and solve people's problems. His name was "London" and I was smitten. He was the German Shepherd star of his own made-in-Canada series, "The Littlest Hobo" and I would give up dinner just to watch it... over and over.

I particularly love the one where London is witness to a hit and run and helps the humans solve the crime by leading them to the right clues. What a fantastic story - ripe with suspense, heroes and villains! Unfortunately it reminds me of how much we love to imagine our dogs with human abilities. At 10 there was no show I would rather watched. Now, as a dog trainer schooled in animal behaviour, I shudder to think about how that series might have shaped my early misunderstanding of dogs!

Most of us know our dogs are not capable of remembering a crime and surreptitiously steering authorities in the right direction to solve it. But the job of TV and movies is to play with our sense of reality. As a result they can influence expectations of our animals. We can get tummy tucks and surgically enhanced body parts when we fall short of our own expectations but our pets cannot surgically enhance what they are. Is it reasonable to want our dogs to work for us because they have no greater need than to serve our whims? Walt Disney would have us think so. The trainers who worked for him knew otherwise.

Animal research shows that dogs learn through association. Remember Pavlov's experiments with salivating dogs? When your dog sees a leash and goes "ohmygawd, ohmygawd" running around like a whirling dervish it's because he has learned to associate leash means walk: a Pavlovian response.

And what about our own conditioned responses? Imagine walking past a private swimming pool every day. All summer

long there is an urge to swim and resentment that it's not allowed. When fall arrives there is *still* resentment even though it's cold and swimming is not appealing. Similarly, dogs can build up resentment about being restrained on a leash.

Negative associations are important for dog owners to understand as they can impede training. For example, if I am walking a puppy on a leash and another puppy triggers barking in my pup. It could be because my pup is not confident around other dogs. If I react by yelling "NO!" and jerking when he sees another dog he may learn to associate the sight of other dogs with my reprimands. As the pup matures he may hate the sight of other dogs because of this negative association with his human going ballistic!

Like children, dogs pay attention to which behaviours get them what they want. For example as a dog, I might think: "This leash is kind of choking me but if I keep going I will get to that sweet smelling lamppost!" Dogs often pull on the leash simply because it gets them where they are going. If this is unwanted behaviour, one training technique is to move forward when they don't pull and stop when they do pull.

Humans learn from consequences too. If I promised chocolate for coming to my class, when I handed it out people would know why. Dogs could never understand this - they cannot connect events so far apart in time. London was barking at the actor playing the policeman because he had been trained to bark on cue with many trials and a lot of instant feedback. Dogs need IMMEDIATE consequences in order to learn. That is why punishing a dog for having an accident in the house 10 minutes after it occurred, is useless - and has potentially dangerous side effects. In the dog's mind this could establish you as unpredictable and therefore scary.

But how do we explain that guilty look they give when one returns from a long day to find the cushions shredded? That's easy - dogs read body language and know you're upset and try to calm us in the same way they would other dogs - by averting their eyes, tucking the tail - that "hang-dog" look.

Dogs don't have the capacity for abstract thinking such as what is right and wrong. Nor are they trying to get back at us or be naughty. This is a myth. When a dog destroys a chair or book when left alone it may look like he is trying to get even but there are other explanations. He may be trying to relieve stress. Or he may simply be releasing pent-up energy and having fun. A good dog behaviour consultant will assess the situation by asking about the day-to-day life with the dog, his routines and so on. Like us, dogs come with individual personalities.

This in no way suggests that dogs are not smart. They are! Look at the endless things they learn - search and rescue, herding, guiding, and other assistance work. In television and film dogs help us believe the unbelievable for just a little while.

A rule in story telling is to create interesting characters and to keep the audience guessing. A rule in science and philosophy is to explain an event with the clearest explanation. Watch great animal stories with abandon but when working with a dog ask: What is the simplest explanation for this behaviour? Try not to project complex psychological human motivations for doing things! Simply reward behaviour you like and ignore or redirect unwanted behaviour. Also create as many *positive* associations for your dog as possible. You will never get your dog to solve a crime this way, but he will be a well-behaved and well-adjusted companion.

I know my dog is not the "Littlest Hobo" nor do I want him to be. It is precisely because he is who he is - always in the moment and not brooding about last night's suspicious smell - that I love him wildly.