

## How to Teach an Old (or Young) Dog New Tricks

The first step in learning to become an effective dog trainer is to acquire a dog, if you don't already have one. I recommend rescuing one from the shelter rather than buying a purebred, for two reasons: first, a mixed-breed dog will generally be both healthier and more intelligent than their purebred counterparts, and second, buying purebred dogs assures that more dogs will be put to death in shelters, sometimes in inhumane ways. If you *must* have a purebred, get it at the shelter; nearly a third of pound animals are purebreds.

If you are lucky enough to already have a dog, get ready for some fun. It doesn't matter if your dog has never learned a thing in all the years you've known him; if you follow my simple instructions, your dog will be doing silly and ridiculous tricks in no time at all. I will use my own dogs as examples to illustrate how easy it is to teach your dog an endless variety of foolish tricks.

Before we begin, let me go over some basic facts about dogs that will make the training of your dog more enjoyable. The very first thing to remember is that dogs are natural comedians; they love to laugh and have fun. They also love to see humans laughing and having a good time, so whatever you do, don't ever try to teach your dog anything useful. Leave that stuff to Lassie or Rin Tin Tin. Dogs are proudly foolish, so it will be necessary for you to *act* the fool if it doesn't come naturally.

We'll begin with an account of how I taught my old dog Rose to bark at the door when she wants to come in. Yes, sometimes it's necessary to teach a dog something you'd think they should already know, or in Rose's case, something she used to know, but suddenly forgot. She took to whining piteously when she wanted in, and that drove me crazy, mainly because half the time I didn't hear her. The other half, I did hear her and the sound itself drove me nuts—she sounded like she'd been taking lessons from Lassie. The times I *didn't* hear her I'd open the door to discover her, huddled and forlorn, teeth chattering, her whole body in shivers, and those soulful eyes looking up at me accusingly. It sent me on an all-expenses-paid guilt trip every time, so I resolved to retrain her to bark instead of whimper.

Here's how I did it: Every time I'd hear her out there, I'd go right up to the door and yell "Bark, Rose!" I'd repeat this as her whining became increasingly vocal. I'd throw in a bark every now and then, as a hint. Inevitably, she'd become irritated enough with me to bark at me, at which point I would swing open the door and act surprised and delighted to see her. I'd praise her extravagantly, tell her how smart she was, and then say "good girl, Snorty!" (her nick name), then "Old dog, new trick!" (You have to exclaim a lot when you talk to your dogs—they love that). Then she'd get a dog biscuit, me all the while telling her how smart and good she was. After only about fifty or so of these encounters she stopped whining and began to bark confidently when she wanted in. See how easy it is? Never believe the person who tells you that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks".

There are some tricks I believe every self-respecting dog should know. These include catching the food you throw to them with their mouths, and eating off a fork or spoon. The main reason it's important to teach your dog these tricks is so that you'll have less chance of getting that horrible dog-slime on your fingers, and if you have a big, clumsy Great Dane, as I do, you'll also have a better chance of *keeping* all your fingers.

To teach a dog to catch food is easy and extremely entertaining to watch until he or she catches on. First, get your dog's attention. If you're eating food, you probably already have that. Make a lot of vocalizations as you eat the food, to make sure the dog knows that you've really got something good, and keep eye contact with your dog as you moan and eat. The dog should begin to salivate. At this point you should act like you just got a great idea and say to the dog "you want some? It's *really* good." The dog will become excited and begin to flip his head around—watch out for flying dog-slime. Take a bit of what you've got, and showing it to your drooling friend, begin to swing it (I prefer underhand) so that the dog knows you mean to toss it to him. When both you and your dog are ready, let go. Don't be mean—aim for the mouth. Many dogs nail this the first time; the ones who don't are where the entertainment comes in. Virtually any dog can learn to catch flying food, but some, like my Fritz, will be slow learners. Just be patient and prepared to laugh until they "get it". Praise them profoundly each time they succeed, as if you can't believe your luck at having such a clever dog.

The silverware trick will take a little longer, and be sure to refrain from trying it unless you're sure you've had enough of whatever you're eating. (That dog-slime thing again.) It's best to have the spoon or fork full of food. Don't let the dog lick the food off the silverware, because it will only end up on the floor, and we're teaching *manners* here, remember. Make the dog open its mouth, then insert the spoon as you would with a baby. It's easy, but it usually takes quite a few tries. Once in a while you'll come across a dog who just doesn't see the point of dogs eating off forks and spoons. When that happens, don't try to explain the reasoning behind it; just let it go. There are plenty of other tricks.

Catch and Fetch are the classics, of course. Catch is much easier to teach than Fetch, because many dogs don't feel like giving back what you just deliberately gave to them. Their idea of give and take is you give, they take, and do whatever they have to do to keep it away from you. In that case, it's best to just resign yourself to playing Keepaway.

If your dog decides to play Keepaway, make sure you have a good pair of running shoes and check with your doctor before teaching your dog this trick. You'll want to know that your cardio-vascular system is in good working order before you begin. I personally like to go to rummage sales or dollar-a-bag thrift shops and buy my dogs stuffed animals to use in our Keepaway games. They will all take turns mauling the stuffed animal until there's not much left but the fake fur, but the fur will be all spread out and far easier to grab a hold of, if you're lucky enough to get close enough, than the original version. Once you've thrown the toy to your excited playmate, the fun begins. Your dog will take off like a bullet, and it will be your task to chase him down and get that rag away from him. Dogs are better at running than we are, and they like to play this game for a long time; that's why you should check with your doctor before you begin this, or any other

strenuous exercise program. I recommend growling and barking as you chase your dog around. This really winds them up; they can relate to you much better if you do this. (Warning: do not try this if your dog is a Pit Bull, Doberman, or just plain mean.)

Frisbee is another great game you can teach your dog to play, but I can't tell you how, as neither Jim-Bob, (my Great Dane) Rose, nor Fritz will play it with me. Jim-Bob's too old and arthritic to be as foolish as he once was, and Rose thinks it's stupid. Fritz is a little learning disabled, but I haven't given up on him yet. I gently throw it at him, it hits him, I laugh, and he picks it up and chews on it till I try to retrieve it to try again. Then he gets confused and thinks we're playing Keepaway again. I'll keep trying.

Because both Rose and Jim-Bob are so old, I have to amuse myself with teaching Fritz as many silly tricks as I can think of. I've taught him the wheelbarrow walk, which is a really easy one. All you do is wait until you see your dog up and walking around. Casually walk behind him and quickly grab him by both back feet and pull his legs up, then say, "let's do the wheelbarrow walk!" as you gently urge him to go forward. Before you know it your dog will be doing the wheelbarrow walk like a real pro.

Another trick I'm working on is teaching Fritz to ride in a wheelbarrow. He still won't get in the wheelbarrow willingly (I have to wrestle him to the ground then put him in it, repeatedly, until he stays), but at least once he's in it his time staying in before he jumps out is getting longer and longer. This will probably take quite a while to teach him, as each time I try it I only have one chance. After he jumps out he insists on playing Keepaway, even though he has nothing to keep away from me. Nutty dog!

Fritz's favorite game of all is one no one will play with him; he taught this one to himself, so maybe he's not so dumb after all. You be the judge. We call this game Horse Turd Frisbee. I had a wonderful old horse that I saved from slaughter, and though she was only here for six months before her death, she left behind quite a bit of manure. Fritz's idea of a good time is to find a bite-size piece of one of these souvenirs, and using his mouth, toss it high into the air, then catch it again and run with it, all around the yard, growling all the while. Then he'll plop down, throw it into the sky and repeat the whole process again and again. When he's tired of that he usually comes to the door and scratches to come in. That drives me crazy, so I go to the door and bark at him through the door. If he starts to scratch the door again I open it just a little, and continue to bark at him until he barks back. Then I let him in, and exclaim loudly and repeatedly "Good Boy! Good Doggy! Smart Dog!" He's learning. Another fifty times or so and I think he have it down.

