



Introduction

There are countless dog training books and DVDs on the market. Most are geared toward pet owners, and focus on training techniques and solving common behavior problems. But what if your goal is not simply to train your own dog, but to become a professional trainer? Where can you turn for information on getting an education, creating a business, dealing with clients, and all of the countless details that are involved in the profession? There certainly doesn't seem to be a glut of information available. What would be of real value would be to have a friend who has been in the business for years and is willing to give you the inside scoop; someone who would let you in on trade secrets, offer motivation, and share great ideas. ...Think of me as that friend.

We'll take it slowly, step by step. First, we'll consider the important factors that will help you to decide whether a dog training career is truly something you want to pursue. Then, we'll discuss various types of dog training, how to go about getting an education (which, by the way, doesn't necessarily mean going back to school), the nuts and bolts of setting up your business, how to deal with clients, and much more. All of this, and you don't even have to buy me dinner!

Allow me to share my own first experience with dog training. I was fourteen, and my mother had registered me and my Schipperke mix Skippy (yes, Skippy the Schipperke) for a group obedience class. I was secretly thrilled. Becoming a dog trainer was a fantasy I had harbored but could never admit to my parents. In my family, you were expected to finish school and get the sort of job you could "fall back on," something stable and sensible like being a teacher. Suffice it to say that aspiring to become a dog trainer was not a notion that would have been well received. I couldn't wait for the class to begin!

The first day of class was filled with anxious dogs and nervous owners. We students watched as the instructor explained and demonstrated each exercise. She seemed a nice enough woman, but appeared to believe that a certain amount of physical force was necessary in order to teach dogs what was expected. For example, to teach a dog to lie down, she would bring her foot down forcefully on the leash very close to the dog's neck. This would cause the dog's head to hit the ground; the body would follow. Although I was apprehensive about using these techniques that were so different than what I had imagined, I dutifully tried each one with Skippy. Poor Skippy! She was an extremely intelligent dog, and she did not look as though she was having any fun at all.

As the dogs learned new skills, the owners were taught how to correct them if they did not comply. We were shown how to jerk and release the metal choke chains the dogs wore around their necks, with enough force that they would "understand they had no choice." Although I was young and inexperienced, I could see that my dog was upset. So was I. Some of the other dogs and owners seemed stressed as well, and a few of the dogs were becoming increasingly agitated and less able to focus. As the owners' frustration grew, the jerking became more forceful. I wanted to cry. Never in my fantasies had dog training been anything like this! Though we completed the course, I was crushed. I knew I could never bring myself to do those things to dogs. How could I ever hope to become a trainer?

Fast forward to the present day. The good news is that dog training has changed in remarkable ways. Thanks to pioneers like Dr. Ian Dunbar, Karen Pryor, Jean Donaldson, Dr. Patricia McConnell, and others, more and more trainers are discovering the joy and the power of positive training. Rather than being physically coerced into learning, dogs are set up to succeed by making learning easy. The theory is similar to that of teaching children, in that we take it one step at a time and employ patience, consistency, and kindness. When a dog performs an exercise correctly, he is rewarded. If he has mastered an exercise completely but does not comply, there is a consequence, but it is instructional and fair, and does not involve physical violence. Reward-based training is not only effective, but is enjoyable for both dogs and owners.

You might be wondering how I got involved in a career in dog training after I had given up on it so many years ago. It happened in a roundabout

way. I was volunteering with an organization in southern California that rescues wolves and wolfdogs (wolf-dog mixes). In addition to tending to the daily care and socialization of the sanctuary's residents, I often visited the homes of wolfdog owners who needed assistance. Many were at the point of being forced to give up their beloved pets if something did not change. I assisted owners in building proper enclosures and, to the extent that I could, helped with training and behavior issues. I never considered charging for my services, and learned a lot through the hands-on experience.

Over the next ten years, while holding various jobs, I volunteered at a city shelter where I interacted with countless dogs of various breeds and temperaments. By this point I was co-running the wolfdog rescue, and I eventually began to train dogs for the general public for a fee. I found that while training wolves and wolfdogs can be difficult, training domestic dogs is much easier—although training the owners could sometimes be a challenge. I finally made the leap to training dogs as a full-time business. I now work daily with a variety of wonderful dogs, meet interesting people, set my own hours, and enjoy a healthy income.

Spending time with dogs, teaching dogs and people new skills, and helping to modify the behavior of dogs who might otherwise lose their homes is incredibly fulfilling. And to think, you actually get paid for this! Now, you might be thinking that while this all sounds wonderful, you have a personal roadblock or two to pursuing dog training as a career. Perhaps you lack experience with dogs. Maybe you believe you are too old to start a new career. Or, perhaps you find dealing with people challenging. Whatever your concerns, set them aside for now. Armed with the information in this book and the willingness to put in the necessary time and effort, you *can* become a professional dog trainer. Let's get started!