

## Positive Bondage

In 2002 the consummate agility competitor and teacher Susan Garrett authored a widely acclaimed training pamphlet called *Ruff Love*, published by the dog agility-oriented company, Clean Run Productions. Informed by behaviorist learning theory and the resultant popular positive training methods that have mushroomed in dogland in the last twenty years, the booklet instructs any dog person who wants a closer, more responsive training relationship with her or his dog. Problems like a dog's not coming when called or inappropriate aggression are surely in view; but, more, Garrett works to inculcate attitudes informed by biobehavioral research and to put effective tools in the hands of her agility students. She aims to show how to craft a relationship of energetic attention that would be rewarding to the dogs and the humans. Non-optional, spontaneous, oriented enthusiasm is to be the accomplishment of the previously most lax, distracted dog. I have the strong sense that Marco has been the subject of a similar pedagogy at his progressive elementary school. The rules are simple in principle and cunningly demanding in practice; to wit, mark the desired behavior with an instantaneous signal and then get a reward delivered within the time window appropriate to the species in question. The mantra of popular positive training, "click and treat," is only the tip of a vast post-"discipline and punish" iceberg.

Emphatically, as the back of Garrett's tract proclaims in a cartoon, positive does not mean permis-

sive. Indeed, I have never read a dog-training manual more committed to near total control in the interests of fulfilling human intentions, in this case, peak performance in a demanding, dual species, competitive sport. That kind of performance can only come from a team that is highly motivated, not working under compulsion, but knowing the energy of each other and trusting the honesty and coherence of directional postures and responsive movements.

Garrett's method is exacting, philosophically and practically. The human partner must set things up so that the dog sees the clumsy biped as the source of all good things. Opportunities for the dog to get rewards in any other way must be eliminated as far as possible for the duration of the training program, typically a few months. The romantic might quail in the face of requirements to keep one's dog in a crate or tied to oneself by a loose leash. Forbidden to the pooch are the pleasures of romping at will with other dogs, rushing after a teasing squirrel, or clambering onto the couch—unless and until such pleasures are granted for exhibiting self control and responsiveness to the human's commands at a near 100% frequency. The human must keep detailed records of the *actual* correct response rate of the dog for each task, rather than tell tales about the heights of genius one's own dog must surely have reached. A dishonest human is in deep trouble in the world of ruff love.

The compensations for the dog are legion. Where else can a canine count on several focused training sessions a day, each designed so that the dog does not make mistakes, but instead gets rewarded by

the rapid delivery of treats, toys, and liberties, all carefully calibrated to evoke and sustain maximum motivation from the particular, individually known pupil? Where else in dogland do training practices lead to a dog who has learned to learn and who eagerly offers novel “behaviors” that might become incorporated into sports or living routines, instead of morosely complying (or not) with poorly understood compulsions? Garrett directs the human to make careful lists of what the dog actually likes; and she instructs people how to play with their companions in a way *the dogs* enjoy, instead of shutting dogs down by mechanical human ball tosses or intimidating over-exuberance. Besides all that, the human must actually enjoy playing in doggishly appropriate ways, or they will be found out. Each game in Garrett’s book might be geared to build success according to human goals, but unless the game engages the dog, it is worthless.

In short, the major demand on the human is precisely what most of us don’t even know we don’t know how to do—to wit, how to see who the dogs are and hear what they are telling us, not in bloodless abstraction, but in one-on-one relationship, in otherness-in-connection.

There is no room for romanticism about the wild heart of the natural dog or illusions of social equality across the class Mammalia in Garrett’s practice and pedagogy, but there is large space for disciplined attention and honest achievement. Psychological and physical violence has no part in this training drama; technologies of behavioral management have a starring role. I have made enough well

intentioned training mistakes—some of them painful to my dogs and some of them dangerous to people and other dogs, not to mention worthless for succeeding in agility—to pay attention to Garrett. Scientifically informed, empirically grounded practice matters; and learning theory is not empty cant, even if it is still a severely limited discourse and a rough instrument. Nonetheless, I am enough of a cultural critic to be unable to still the roaring ideologies of tough love in high-pressure, success-oriented, individualist America. Twentieth-century Taylorite principles of scientific management and the personnel management sciences of corporate America have found a safe crate around the postmodern agility field. I am enough of an historian of science to be unable to ignore the easily inflated, historically decontextualized, and overly generalized claims of method and expertise in positive training discourse.

Still, I lend my well-thumbed copy of *Ruff Love* to friends, and I keep my clicker and liver treats in my pocket. More to the point, Garrett makes me own up to the sturming capacity that dog people like me have to lie to ourselves about the conflicting fantasies we project onto our dogs in our inconsistent training and dishonest evaluations of what is actually happening. Her pedagogy of positive bondage makes a serious, historically specific kind of freedom for dogs possible; i.e., the freedom to live safely in multi-species, urban and sub-urban environments with very little physical restraint and no corporal punishment while getting to play a demanding sport with every evidence of self-actualizing motivation. In dogland, I

am learning what my college teachers meant in their seminars on freedom and authority. I think my dogs rather like ruff tough love. Marco remains more skeptical.