

Training offers dogs true freedom

I am always surprised and dismayed when I talk to someone who feels that training a dog is a waste of time. There are even a few who believe that training is unfair and prevents a dog from acting “naturally.”

I can only guess that these people have never experienced the benefits of training or the freedom that training brings to a dog. As retired Canadian obedience trainer Susan Ailsby says: “Training doesn’t limit a dog; training frees a dog. My dog, being trained, is free – that is, free to walk with me, free to ride with me, free to play off-leash, free to learn and run. An untrained dog is ‘free’ to sit in the backyard where he can get into as little trouble as possible.”

I have quite a few stories to illustrate the benefits of training, but here are three tales specific to Durango that make my case well.

Gus was an active, 1-year-old Australian shepherd cross that lacked focus when he first came to his basic obedience class. Bill (name changed) clearly loved Gus and really worked hard to train him in the skills taught in the class. On graduation day, we were all proud of the progress that Gus had made, but we had no idea how important those skills would turn out to be.

Months later, Bill and his family went to Mesa Verde for a hike. As they began down the trail with one of Bill’s daughters and Gus up front, he suddenly heard a rattlesnake rattle. His daughter ran a few yards ahead as Gus turned to go after the snake. Bill commanded Gus to sit and stay, and he immediately obeyed.

This story, though, gets better. Later on the same hike, the family startled a different rattler on the side of the trail. Gus turned to investigate just as Bill gave the “leave it” command and then called him to come. Gus again immediately obeyed.

“I have little doubt that his training saved him and maybe my oldest from two potentially fatal snake bites within an hour,” Bill says.

Earlier this year, Dave and Irene were on a hike up Log Chutes Trail with their dog Chloe, an adolescent Australian shepherd. After hiking for a bit, Chloe took off at a run after a young bear cub that she soon treed. Because Dave and Irene are conscientious trainers, Chloe is responsive to their commands, and she quickly came when Dave called her.

In this case, her responsiveness might have saved her life because the mother and another cub were just a short distance away.

The last story illustrates the problems and pitfalls of owning an untrained dog. I received a phone call in early June from a tourist who was visiting Durango on vacation. He clearly was in distress as he recounted the loss of his dog while on a walk through town.

The dog had no training and was particularly poor at coming when called, so when he slipped his collar, panic set in. The dog dodged in and out of traffic as the tourist and several kind bystanders tried to trap the dog, but they soon lost sight of him. The search continued throughout the day and into the next day before the frantic man called my office for advice. I gave him what help I thought I could offer and asked that he stay in touch.

Two days later (the man's vacation had now been extended by three days), the tourist called to tell me that his dog had been spotted at the college, and he was able to leave his car open and entice the dog into the familiar vehicle.

The place of dog training is not to dominate and control but to bond and educate. As the stories above illustrate, an educated dog is an asset to the family in more ways than one.

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