



Enhancing the bond between dogs and their families

Ask the Trainer

Note: This is a continuation of the August 2006 installment

Question: I've heard that greyhounds aren't that smart, and that I shouldn't bother trying to train mine. Is that true?

Answer: In the last installment, I mentioned that greyhounds were not bred to work closely with humans. Does this mean that greyhounds are dumb and untrainable? Of course not! It simply means we might need to be more patient with them when learning new things. While the border collie, for example, might be able to figure out what we want despite or clumsy and inconsistent attempts to communicate, the greyhound might have a more difficult time figuring us out. Remember: dogs don't speak English!

Since they are generally less interested in what we have to say, we often need to prove why it's in their best interest to do so. That's not being stubborn. That's holding out for something they feel is worthwhile. Have you ever asked a family member, friend, or coworker to do something for you? Do they immediately jump up and do as you asked, no questions asked? How often have they tried to negotiate with you? People are frequently determining what's in it for them and often negotiate or hold out for a convincing argument as to why they should comply. The closer the bond with the other person, the more likely they probably are to help you out without asking for something in return. Why do we expect dogs to be any different?

Independent breeds, such as the greyhound, were often labeled "untrainable" by trainers who used traditional punishment-based methods. This is because greyhounds and similar breeds aren't all that concerned with pleasing their "masters" and do not respond well to punishment-based methods. It has far less to do with the dogs being dumb or untrainable than it does with the trainer using inappropriate and ineffective training methods.

Greyhounds (and all breeds of dogs, for that matter) will respond better and bond more strongly with human family members if training is handled using primarily positive reinforcement. Once your greyhound understands that good things happen when he does as you ask, he will be more than happy to comply! The tricky part can be figuring out what those "good things" are and ensuring that they are motivating enough for the dog to want to do as you ask. The good thing could be anything that your dog enjoys, such as his meals, treats, bones, toys, walks, play time, petting or simply some attention from his favorite human. Your job is to find out what motivates your dog. The rest is easy!

