

JOHN DEERE: One Dangerous Dog

The three boys met me at the front door. They were all excited that the trainer had arrived. Both parents were home, so we all sat down at the kitchen table to discuss the problem. J.D., short for John Deere, they explained, was beginning to bark a bit at children through the fence. They did not think this was a real problem but were uncomfortable with his behavior. They said he really was a sweet dog, just a bit overprotective of the yard. This was early in my career, before I learned the art of thorough questioning, an art John Deere taught me to cultivate. I said I'd be happy to take a look.

As we stepped out onto the brick patio, one of the largest St. Bernards I have ever seen came running across the yard at me. All 210 pounds of him slid to a halt, hesitated a half-second, and mounted me. Putting a massive front paw on each shoulder, he almost forced me to the ground. I staggered under the weight. His basketball-sized head was next to mine; his low threatening growling filled my ears. I was in real trouble here. "Call your dog," I said through clenched teeth, as I hopped across the patio, propelled sideways with every thrust. It was all I could do to keep my balance under the onslaught. When I spoke, the growl deepened, until it sounded like it came from the center of the earth. If you move, the growl assured me, you will be hurt.

The father had obviously never seen anything quite like this. He stood slack-jawed and immobile on the patio. The wife, equally as mesmerized, had her hand over her mouth in surprise. The three boys, watching from the kitchen window, were howling with laughter.

"Call your dog," I said sweetly as I could under the circumstance. Any strong use of voice would have caused an attack. "Call him, now!" Finally the man snapped out of his daze and called the dog off. J.D. left reluctantly. I leaned against the house for a moment, shaking, adrenaline pumping through my system. As we went inside, J.D. stood at the door, growling.

The parents shook their heads. "What's the problem with these dogs?" they asked me. "This is our third one, they've all been like this." Coincidence? Not at all. They were unknowing experts on how to raise an aggressive dog.

It turns out J.D. had been raised in the backyard, purchased "for the boys." The parents did little but give him food and water. The boys played boy games with the dog—lots of tug-of-war, wrestling and teasing. They and their friends played poke-the-dog-through-the-fence games and laughed when he growled or grabbed the stick. He had never left the backyard. He had never met anyone but immediate family. Now two years old and unneutered, he was king of all he surveyed. J.D. was a disaster waiting to happen.

I told them the truth: "You have no choices. Either you return the dog to the breeder, if she'll take him, or you euthanize the dog." They returned him to the breeder, who herself euthanized the dog six months later. A terrible waste and not the dog's fault.