



Our partners: [GoDanRiver](#) | [WSLS](#)
Tuesday, May 19, 2009 |
Lexington, VA 54° Feels Like: 54° Clear

Boot camp molds canine behavior



Media General News Service

Trainer Julie Serfass works with Cricket at K-9 Consultants' dog boot camp in Richmond on Wednesday, March 26, 2008. Boot camp training targets specific behaviors such as walking on a leash and getting in and out of cars, and is geared toward dogs of all sizes and backgrounds.

Text size: [small](#) | [medium](#) | [large](#)

BY KATHERINE CALOS
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER
Published: March 28, 2008

Lauren Schwartz loves her shipoo — a Shih Tzu-poodle mix — but she didn't love what he was doing.

So, she made a wish list — come when called, don't run out the door, stop barking for attention — and sent him to doggie boot camp.

"It's my fault," she said as she dropped off little Larry at K-9 Consultants. He'd been well-behaved when he finished his first session of boot camp, but then "I let him do keep-away. His favorite game is to run away from me." So, he was back for a refresher course.

Jemi Hodge nodded knowingly when Schwartz talked about her lapse. "See, we have her trained well," Hodge said, laughing with the owner. "She knows it's her fault."

Spring break for people is a prime time for boot camp for their pets, because they can leave the dog for training while they head out for fun. In a 7,000-square-foot space near Chesterfield Towne Center, Hodge and her staff had 51 dogs at midweek learning everything from where to relieve themselves to how to walk on a leash.

Peter Jackson, a 120-pound Great Pyrenees, was afraid to get in the car. Three people had to push and pull every time his owners wanted to take him anywhere.

After a week of boot camp, he hopped in the back seat without protest and sat there comfortably. Two techniques made it happen, Hodge said. The first trick was to open both car doors and run the dog through the car over and over until he wasn't panicked by it anymore. The second was to feed him only in the car. Soon, he welcomed the opportunity to get in.

Tank, a 9-ounce Chihuahua, learned to use a litter box so his owners would be able to take him along the next time they travel.

Cricket, a 4-month-old Brittany spaniel, needed to temper her energy and tolerate a leash. It was a work in progress.

"She's really sweet, but she can pluck your last nerve," Hodge said as trainer Julie Serfass took Cricket out for a walk on a gentle leader leash. Cricket tried to paw it off her face, bite it, and pull away from it, to no avail. "We do this 10 or 15 times a day," Hodge said. "We're teaching her to walk on a leash with the owner, not 20 feet away."

Boot-camp training is a little different than regular obedience classes.

"Most dog trainers teach them to do things — sit and stay. We teach dogs not to do things anymore — not to jump the fence, not to bolt through the door, not to bite the neighbor."

And they do it without raising their voice, pointing fingers, repeating themselves or giving food rewards.

"That's when people look at us and say, 'That's everything I do,'" Hodge said.

Her form of "tough love" takes away all attention except for good behavior. Praise becomes the motivator instead of food.

When owners come to pick up their pets, they have a 90-minute session on how to maintain the animal's new behavior. Two weeks after camp, the trainer does a home visit. Four weeks later, the pet comes back for a refresher class.

The cost is \$600 to \$800 for a boot camp of seven to 10 days — "cheaper than a divorce or a new carpet," she said.

Hodge, 53, works with about 3,000 clients a year, including a few celebrities who've sent their dogs in by limousine or, in one case, a helicopter.

Like her other clients, they tend to be at wit's end. But they don't have to stay that way.

“There are quick fixes,” Hodge said. Looking at a newly trained dog walking on a leash with head and tail held high, she added: “You don’t have to break a dog’s spirit to do it.”

Katherine Calos is a staff writer at the Richmond Times-Dispatch.