

Stubborn as a Mule

by Peggy Swager

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When people say their dog is as stubborn as mule, I have to wonder if their dog actually pulls back on the leash and plants all four feet. Sometimes mine does. Years ago, I contacted Brad Cameron, a well-known mule trainer, to see if he had any ideas to help with my stubborn dog's training. I confess I was expecting more commiseration than advice, but I was completely shocked when Brad flatly stated he didn't consider mules to be stubborn animals.

As Brad talked about training mules, I could see similarities with training dogs - both stubborn and more compliant ones. His statements, such as "They spend a lot of time thinking about what you're doing and trying to figure you out," "They will not be coerced, threatened, or forced," and "Training takes a little longer, not because they don't figure it out quickly, but their compliance comes when they feel it is in their best interest, not ours" certainly had a familiar ring. Here are a few ways of applying Brad's ideas to dogs.

Just like mules, some dogs like to think about what you're doing and try to understand it. I recall one Lhasa Apso who figured things out while learning to jump in an agility class. He jumped once or twice for a treat, then realized it was much easier to go around the jump. The dog's owner responded by attaching a leash in an attempt to force him over the obstacles. The Lhasa became stubborn and defiant, and would *not* jump.

To resolve the problem, a different technique was required. The owners was instructed to hold out the reward on one side of the jump. A handler took the Lhasas to the other side of the obstacle and herded him toward it, using her hands to direct the dog, tightening up he tried to escape and loosening her grip when the dog moved in the right direction. The small dog was not forced to jump, but neither was he allowed to go around the obstacle.

It didn't take long for the little Lhasa to figure out that the only way he was going to get that treat was to take the jump. Letting the dog make the decision to cooperate created a willing dog, whereas trying to force him was producing a reluctant, stubborn one. Forcing them just doesn't work.

Typically, when dealing with a more stubborn breed, we are the ones who need the training. For example, a young Boxer who belonged to a student on one of my puppy classes suddenly became sullen about walking on a leash. One day the dog simply planted his feet and refused to go any farther. Pulling on the leash will get a more acquiescent dog to comply, but a dog with a stubborn nature must be coaxed into doing things your way.

To accomplish this, the student took a treat from his pocket and used it to lure his dog. The first time he tried luring with a treat, he ended up feeding it in the attempt. But the second treat worked to get a few steps forward. One training session didn't cure the Boxer, but eventually, by encouraging instead of forcing, the owner got his dog into the habit of complying, instead of resisting unless forced.

The challenge is in figuring out how to get the dog to cooperate without using force. I watched a Shiba Inu become quite resistant when the owner tried to shove the dog's behind down to get him to sit. The dog thrashed and pulled on the leash. After about five minutes the dog owner gave up and the Shiba won the battle. This taught the dog that stubbornness is rewarding.

If a dog doesn't lure with a treat, sometimes another motivator, such as a toy, can be used. I once watched a trainer use a ball to teach the sit. First the trainer played with the puppy to ensure his attention was on the ball. Then she held the ball just above the puppy's head and the puppy sat to keep his eye on the prize. The trainer immediately praised the pup and threw the ball as a reward. Later, the command *sit* was introduced when the puppy sat for the ball. Now, as an adult, whenever that dog sees a ball he can't seem to sit down fast enough, in hopes of getting to play.

The younger the dog when you work out a stubborn streak, the better. Katie, a rough-coated Parson Russell Terrier, wasn't even 6 weeks old when her stubborn streak reared its ugly head. This puppy often refused to follow the other puppies or to come when called. One day, just after the other puppies came inside to be fed, Katie sat down and refused to budge. I called to her, clapped my hands, and tried to sound excited. A chunk of cheese right in front of her face didn't persuade her to move, so I got a squeak toy and tried to lure her with that. Katie fidgeted, but then decided she was not going to cooperate.

At that point I was tempted to grab her and drag her, forcing her to obey, but I didn't. Dogs with a stubborn nature do better if allowed to *choose* to comply.

I walked a short distance away and gave one last call for Katie to come. She remained firmly planted. Then I stated playing with the

other puppies, making sure that between the sound of squeaky toys and my happy voice, Katie knew we were all having a lot of fun. One thing a Parson Russell can't stand is to miss out on *fun*. Finally Katie joined us and was rewarded with play. After a few similar episodes, Katie eventually decided to comply the first time she was called.

At 4 months Katie went to a new home. We touched base with the owner a year later. He commented that Katie wasn't stubborn like other Parson Russells he'd owned, but was amazingly cooperative. Although we haven't been able to study many cases like Katie's, we suspect that the younger a stubborn is when reformed, the more reformed that dog will end up being.

Dogs who are inclined to be stubborn must be managed differently than other dogs. Force will not get you the results you want. When my mulish dog was young, I did use force; later I learned better techniques. She is less stubborn now, but she still will plant all four feet when she doesn't like something. Still, by allowing her to *choose* cooperation, I've managed to get her to comply in many different situations, and have placed with her in agility and obedience classes.

Although training a dog in this fashion takes more time - and sometimes a *lot* of creativity - if we handle our dog correctly from the beginning, we may understand what Brad Cameron meant when he said he didn't consider mules stubborn.

Peggy Swager lives near Monument, Colorado with her husband Ken. She has two grown children, two horses, and three dogs. Her Jack Russell Terrier, Cookie, is characterized in her first book. There was no attempt to disguise Cookie's basic personality and there are rumors her dog has employed a lawyer about the situation. Peggy is a member of the Pikes Peak Writers Club and Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers