

Leader of the Pack

Dog trainer says being an alpha is the key to success with dogs

By Michael Cleveland

Hollis Brookline Journal staff

HOLLIS—Two dog stories: In the first, a nice couple owns a border collie, a herding dog. Like all dogs, thousands of years ago its ancestors were bred to do something. In the case of a border collie, it was work. But this border collie was a pet and was left at home while its owners went to their jobs.

Ah, but you can't keep a working dog down. This dog gave itself a job: carrying clean laundry downstairs, when its masters were at work, then, before they came home, carrying it back upstairs.

How did they know? They found a lot of dirt on their laundry, so they installed a video camera and caught the dog in the act.

But, said Sarah Holzer in her talk to the Hollis Woman's Club on Wednesday, rather than flipping out, the owners let their dog keep its job. It was, after all, better than some jobs it could have selected.

In the second story, a couple owns a Newfoundland, one of those huge, black, slobbering, really nice dogs that take up so much room in the house. Newfoundlands were bred to save people, and even after thousands of years, and even if they've never had to save a soul, the urge to save is instinctive. This couple's dog would go rescue anyone it saw in the water, whether the person needed rescuing or not.

Holzer, of Pawsitive Dog Training Center in Boston, "Said that the behavior of dogs can certainly be modified, but never eliminated, and before one goes looking for a pet, it's best to know as much as possible what one is getting.

There are, for instance, seven types of dogs recognized by the American Kennel Club, and each has characteristics that—while there are exceptions—are general and endemic.

Terriers, for instance, are bred to kill rodents on farms, so they're going to be aggressive, independent, tough, very vocal, and smart. And they're going to dig. Don't be fooled, she said,

by the Jack Russell terrier one sees on the television show "Frazier." He's shown resting, not digging.

Sporting dogs were bred to hunt, so they're full of energy.

The working dog does a job, does it alone, and does it well. But some, like rottweilers and mastiffs, have a fair amount of aggression.

"Great Danes are beautiful," Holzer said, "but they will protect the house." That could mean a problem for visitors.

Toy dogs were bred to be companions for rich people. "A good toy dog is spoiled," said Holzer.

And, while dogs don't like to "poop or pee where they eat, sleep or play," a person's house is so big, comparatively, that a toy can do both in a spot where it never has to eat, sleep or play.

Herding dogs, like the border collie, are bred to run all day long with animals that are bigger than they.

"Don't be surprised if it herds your children," Holzer said, and it can be vocal and not averse to nipping.

"Before you bring a herd dog' into your home, be realistic and give it something to do," she said.

Hounds, she said, are "a tough pet" because they have "one-track minds—they are bred to find something and yell bloody murder about it."

Some hounds can get what she called "nasal-related deafness" because once they've found the scent, they tune everything else out.

But a "sight hound" is different from a "scent hound." They have incredible peripheral vision and don't rely upon their noses.

Greyhounds are sight hounds, she said, but while they appear docile, they are "very predatory" and will kill cats.

Non-sporting dogs used to have a job. The dalmatian, for instance, used to run with

stagecoaches, and guard them when the drivers were taking a break. And they are still very aggressive.

There is an eighth, unrecognized, type of dog: miscellaneous and rare, like “the golden poodle,” a cross between, obviously, a poodle and a golden retriever.

Holzer warned potential owners that such dogs “haven’t been bred long enough to breed out the negative traits.”

The message of Holzer’s talk was this: Don’t be surprised if your dog does what it was bred to do, even after thousands of years, because their traits will never be entirely bred out.

Negative traits, however, can be squelched by an alpha owner, the key to success with one’s dog.

“Dogs are pack animals,” Holzer said, “and naturally want to follow a leader. Dogs are all about hierarchy.”

She said you can love the heck out of your dog, and it will love the heck right back, “But guess what? You’ve just told it you’re below it” in the hierarchy and that generally means your

dog is going to do what comes naturally.

“I want to train dogs like I am alpha,” she said. And that means letting the dog know who is the leader. For instance:

Alphas eat first, alphas get greeted first, the alpha initiates affection, initiates play and wins the tug of war. The alpha makes direct eye contact.

“We treat dogs as if they are human and figure they will appreciate it like they were human, but they don’t,” Holzer said.

And she gave some tips on how to spot, and deal with, canine warning signs: If you approach a dog and its mouth is shut, its eyes are big and black, it turns its head away and looks at you out of the corner of its eye, beware.

And never approach a dog straight on. Move sideways towards it, offer your hand from the side. If the dog sniffs your hand, good. If it doesn’t, he wants no part of you and you’d be better off accepting that.

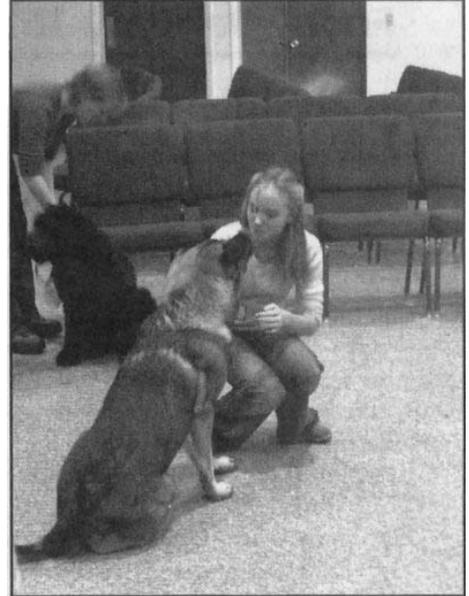
“Coming straight on and making direct eye contact?” she said. “That’s the best way to get bit.”



Dyllon rests before the meeting.



Sarah Holzer works with Dyllon, a German shepherd.



Mimi Eastman of Hollis approaches Dyllon, a German shepherd brought to the Hollis Woman’s Club meeting Wednesday by trainer Sarah Holzer.