

## Training for Obedience

**Find out if competitive obedience is right for you and your dog.**

*By Lyn Richards*

Training a dog for obedience competition is fun as well as useful for real-life situations. If for no other reason than this, I would urge anyone to pursue the sport of obedience. Many other reasons come to mind, too, such as having fun doggy gatherings, getting lots of exercise for both of you and adding discipline to both of your lives — but let's start with everyday life, shall we?

### Why Obedience?

Training for obedience helps keep your dog safe. Imagine not having to wrest your dog away from rushing traffic, but instead quietly asking it for a down or a sit, or even using a hand signal in extreme noise for an instant response — and a safe dog.

Or, imagine when among friends, you can whisper, “Watch me” or give a hidden signal to your beloved dog and see those marvelous ears perk right up, bright eyes riveted on whatever point you choose. People are greatly impressed by a dog that watches its owner, and mastering parlor tricks is rooted in training for obedience.

In addition, well-trained dogs can interact politely with other dogs that are also obedience trained, and this makes for some great barbecues and dog parties. Many owners leave their dogs home because the dogs can't behave or be trusted around strange dogs, but an obedience-trained dog can accompany you just about anywhere. For example, my dogs and I have been able to enjoy many opportunities because of our training, including the following:

**Obedience demonstrations:** Held at street fairs and at public service seminars for inner city kids, these are a ball because many folks haven't experienced really well-trained dogs. These demos are good practice for a dog-handler team, helping to “proof” the dog against distractions, and lots of fun for both spectators and teams!

**Doggy Fun Days:** These are special days at our dog-training school building when dog-and-handler teams have an opportunity to show off tricks and useful training exercises to outside observers. They're a draw for new students and good practice for teams in training.

**Therapy:** One of the most important ways obedience training has paid off for me is that every one of my dogs has become a Therapy Dog (TD), qualified with Therapy Dogs International (TDI) and serving as a valuable asset to the world of elderly, hospital and house-bound patients. The miracles I've seen brought on by the mere presence and touch of a therapy dog are amazing and wonderful.

To become a Therapy Dog with TDI, a dog must pass an advanced version of the American Kennel Club's (AKC) Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test and possess an excellent temperament. Most obedience-trained dogs can easily wing the TDI version of the CGC test after a few months of training if they have the proper temperament — friendly, outgoing and tolerant of change and other animals.

I cannot emphasize enough the immense satisfaction that comes from watching your beloved pet make someone who is in pain or lonely smile and chatter like a sunny day. I have seen some Alzheimer's patients who could not even remember that they are no longer living at home remember my dog's name: It's amazing, fulfilling and well worth all the training.

One of my therapy dogs was Apollo, the best ambassador for the Great Dane breed I have ever owned. He possessed both AKC and Canadian Kennel Club Companion Dog (CD) titles, as well as his CGC and Therapy Dog certification with TDI. In the beginning, Apollo was a very dominant, troublemaking dog, always getting into things in an attempt to get attention. I began his obedience training career in an attempt to give him something to do, a job of his own, if you will.

We routinely visited eight nursing homes and hospitals, and Apollo knew which rooms were his and which he was to avoid (some patients didn't like doggy visits). One lovely resident, Eva, absolutely adored Apollo. When she stood, she was nose to nose with him!

One day when we went up to visit Eva, I noticed that the bed was empty, and her bureau was cleaned out. Apollo sniffed everywhere frantically. It took a moment to penetrate, but then I realized that Eva must have passed away. Suddenly, Apollo sat on the floor and began to howl plaintively, with real tears running from his eyes.

Moments like this help me realize exactly how much our dogs value their relationships with us and how important it is to their well-being to give them a job. Training for obedience is an essential foundation to enriching your dog's life with such people-centered jobs as therapy.

For me, the work involved in training my dogs for obedience has become fun because it is a treat to spend "play" time with my dogs, unfettered by phone calls, doorbells ringing or people clamoring for my attention. More important, I spend quality time alone with each of my dogs, learning to know how their minds work and what their thought processes are.

In the end, the greatest thing I have gained through obedience training and competition is an impenetrable bond between my dogs and I. We have become so close that I know what they are thinking or are going to do before they do it. This evolved because of the individual time and attention I devoted to working with one dog at a time to train for competition.

Yes, you could possibly spend one-on-one, non-obedience training time with your dogs, but most likely, in this fast-paced world, you won't. A structured obedience training program helps you commit to staying disciplined and on track in terms of spending quality time with your dog.