

TRAINER TEACHES OWNERS TO PLAY WITH THEIR DOGS

In 1979, a suggestion from a friend sent Ben Kersen down a career path that would eventually lead him to the “wonderdogs.”

Then owner of a big doberman, he took his friend's advice to “get control” of the dog and embarked on a training program without the help of books or a professional trainer. Instead, he followed his instincts and used techniques he thought would seem natural from the dog's perspective. Within two months, the doberman had learned 17 commands. Twenty-five years and hundreds of success stories later, Kersen is a well-known professional trainer offering seminars, training videos and the first government accredited professional dog trainers program in Western Canada.

“I fluked into it,” admitted Kersen of the business, but added that his unique methods, although self-taught, are now time-tested.

To demonstrate the high level of training his own dogs have achieved, Kersen often presents his pooches in an entertaining program doing tricks and responding to hand signal commands from distances sometimes as far as 1000 feet (333 metres) away.

Ben Kersen and the Wonderdogs have appeared at various events, on TV and in newspaper articles in Canada and the United States. Originally there were six wonderdogs. That number is now down to four, but Kersen said the “new generation is taking root as we speak.”

However, he said the main purpose of his show is to promote responsible dog ownership and to save dog's lives. He referred to the many pets that are put down in North America each year for “common” problems, after they change from cute puppies to chewing, barking dogs.

As a professional trainer, Kersen offers a “praise and play” method that he uses to ease families into the pressures of a new puppy, and to teach old dogs new tricks.

He described his training program as a type of “doggie aerobics” and said it is intense and fast.

“Typically in a dog obedience class the dogs are walking around in a circle and they're bored,” said Kersen. He said he shows clients how to “play like dogs” and mimic the

dogs' movements, using quick erratic moves and “catch me if you can” games.

However, he also noted that there are options for owners who are not physically able to participate in the play method.

Clients generally start with 12 to 14 one-hour sessions depending on the “baggage” the dog brings to class. Kersen said it's amazing how far dogs can get in six to eight sessions.

Some of the other techniques that Kersen said make his program different than others include not using the dog's name while training. This is to keep commands simple and fast. he also doesn't use the word “no” if the dog makes a mistake. He reserves that word for things he never wants the dog to do.



BEN Kersen performs a trick with one of his wonderdogs at a show

“Dog training in my opinion has changed for the positive,” said Kersen. “There used to be a lot of boot camp training.”

He explained that he has relied on feedback from his clients over the years to let him know what has worked and what hasn't. However, he said there were some methods he never embraced such as electric collars

that “had a red flag to start with.”

Kersen said it's important to create “positive momentum” for the dog by setting up situations so that the dog doesn't have a chance to fail. For example, providing enough walks and chew toys to prevent restlessness and boredom that could lead to dogs chewing and breaking things around the house.

Although many clients come to Kersen with eight-week-old puppies, he recommends owners come in before they get the dog home so he can teach them some tricks to deal with the challenges of a new puppy, “before every pair of shoes gets chewed up and sleep deprivation takes its toll.”

Despite his success, Kersen said he is planning on retiring in about five years, and is looking forward to travelling with his wife and two children.

“I don't want to go out like Neil Young,” he said with a laugh. “I want to be coherent.”

For more information on Ben Kersen and the Wonderdogs, and the professional trainers school, call 1-800-961-6616, or visit the website at www.wonderdogs.bc.ca.

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