

Bringing the black dog to heel

Black dogs are notoriously resistant to obedience training. They skulk around your legs when they should be off fetching; they get in the way and trip you up; they bark so much you can't hear yourself think. Coming when you call is seldom a problem- the typical black dog is rarely far from your side anyway- but try and get one to roll over, play dead or even sit. It's fair to say that no black dog has ever sat atop the podium at Crufts.

Such disobedience is endemic across breeds. For some reason it doesn't seem to matter if the beast in question is a Shih Tzu or a sheepdog, a beagle or a bloodhound, just as long as it's black. The black dog of a friend of mine is a kelpie, and boy can it go. Kelpies, I'm told, are highly intelligent and eager to please, with a tractable disposition. But not if they're black. Her swarthy shadow is active day and night, rounding up thoughts that should be left to graze, herding others in the wrong direction, snapping and worrying at their heels until they stampede relentlessly through her brain. She whistles and she calls, but it does no good. That dog is deaf, or set on its own dumb course.

But it doesn't have to be that way. My own black dog is a Chihuahua, though it started life as a Great Dane. That's one good thing about black dogs. They're no good with children, and they'll never bring your slippers, but they can evolve. (Not many

people know that. For such a common species it's astonishing to note that *Burke's Backyard* never road-tested the black dog.)

Or maybe it's the owner that adjusts, man and beast finding ways to co-exist. Your average black dog will never be a pet, but it can be a companion. Perhaps not one you'd necessarily choose, but one you can abide. I know one man whose Rottweiler became a corgi. Only after a bit of hard work, mind you, and that furry coffee table isn't one Her Majesty would welcome, but nonetheless the cur is now a hell of a lot easier to live with.

In the case of my own black dog, exercise was a key factor. Everyone had told me that being active would help, but at first his sheer size made it almost impossible. I'd think about going for a run but there he was, blocking the door, his great paws threatening to knock me down every time I tried to get the leash round his throat. It was easier just to stay on the couch. One day though I got up early and took him by surprise- we were out of the house and into the park before he'd properly woken up. The funny thing was though, that once we were there I'm sure he enjoyed it.

Endorphins, I'm told, chemicals released during exercise that act as a natural form of anti-depressant. Since then I've tried swimming, dancing, cycling, and always the daily walk. My black dog usually comes with me, but I swear that by the time we finish he never looks as big as he did at the start.

Along with exercise, grooming is also important. By and large, black dogs are ugly creatures- all melancholic eyes and lacklustre coats. Take the trouble to dress yours up a bit though and you'll be surprised at the difference. A quick brush or a new collar

may all feel like a bit too much effort at times, but have a look at the effect on your dog. Isn't he picking up his feet a bit more, sniffing the lamp-posts with renewed interest? And note how others are noticing, and in turn find your beast less frightening, more approachable. That makes him feel better too. It's only a little thing, but looking good can advance the transformation to feeling good.

Then there's diet. The natural black dog tendency is to eat too little, though some go to the other extreme. Whippets and Labradors- the former surviving on air, the latter those mongrels you're always chasing away from the front of your house on bin night. Instead, to better manage your back dog you should be watching what he eats: ideally the sort of balanced diet they're always banging on about in the Pal commercials. In other words, make sure your black dog's breakfast isn't a dog's dinner. And watch out for chicken bones.

And of course no obedience training can be completed without appropriate discipline. Sure, it would be easier just to let him have his way, but let's remember who's the master here. Do you really want to listen to him howl all night, or have him scare all your friends away? Discipline is about working through the hard yards every day- making sure you eat enough; doing some exercise; getting up, brushing your teeth and going out even when it doesn't feel as if any progress is being made. It is, even if only by the simple act of not giving in. And above all, don't punish yourself. You didn't ask for the dog, but it's not your fault he's there either. Chances are he just followed you home.

Just remember that training takes time and effort. Every black dog is different, and of course they all have their days. It's hard to turn a pug into a poodle, and it has to be said that success isn't guaranteed. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. There are bound to be times when you will feel you're fighting a losing battle, and often that's when you need to get others involved. Some people like to call in the professionals, the Barbara Woodhouses or Hugh Wirths of black dogs, if you will. When you're stuck these people will know what to try next or can make sure you're headed in the right direction. There are rarely quick fixes, and you'll have to commit yourself to staying the course. But if you do you might just find that after a while your black dog is significantly more obedient or has even skulked off all together.

Others might simply want to call on a friend or two. Black dogs are exhausting- sometimes you just need someone else to help you hold the leash for a while, or at least follow behind with a pooper scooper. Friends can help by listening, talking, reassurance, by sticking by you and getting you involved in other non-canine activities. It's hard to do this entirely by yourself- in most cases it really does help to see a man (or woman) about a dog.

And that's about it. Nothing too magical, nothing miraculous, but the black dog can be brought to heel by a combination of things. Regular exercise for a start, good grooming, the right diet (and make sure you stay away from the hair of the dog). Try to get plenty of rest- let sleeping dogs lie- and don't be too hard on yourself. Find someone you can talk to, be that a professional or a friend, someone who acknowledges your black dog and knows how to handle him. The black dog will

never be man's best friend, but with a bit of work and help with any luck you will eventually be able to put your own dog days behind you.