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## Praise keeps canines from going to the dogs

**BY ROB OWEN**

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**L**ike a drill instructor pacing before his platoon, 16-year-old Nathan Woods walked back and forth in front of his class of canines and their owners.

"You cannot train a dog through correction," Nathan said. "You can only train them through them doing something right and you praising them."

Nathan should know. The rising junior at Lee-Davis High has been working at the Richmond Dog Training Center since he was 11. He's an instructor and is familiar with every step in the school's multiple-week courses.

"Have we been working on our 'stays'?" Nathan asked the class.

When they try to get the dog to stay, one pooch gets up and follows his owner.



**OBEDIENCE.** Nathan Woods explains dog handling techniques to (center to right) Charley Soukup (with Hobbitt) and Tiffany Cable (with Samson).

"I know why he did that," Nathan said. "You stepped off on the left foot."

Turns out that's the dog's signal to heel (Latin for the word, walk), so the dog did just that.

"You have to start with obedience," Nathan said. "It's kind of like if you didn't go to school, but you wanted to be a professor. It just doesn't work."

Nathan got his start in dog training after doing the traditional kid things, but nothing really struck his interest.

"Like any other 10- or 11-year old, I didn't know what I was interested in," Nathan said.

That changed when he got his first dog, a poodle named Mindy. Now he also has four boxers, including Michaela and Sully, named after characters from the TV show "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman."

Ben Johns, founder of the Richmond Dog Training Center, remembered when Nathan got his start.

"He couldn't get focused and didn't have an interest in school," Johns said. "Then he started reading everything he could get his hands on [about dogs]. His school work picked up and soon he was on the honor roll."

And since then he's even had some of his school teachers enroll their pups in the Dog Training Center. The tables turned.

"It kind of is weird," he said. "But they realize I know what I'm doing."

Right now he's on a crusade to save white boxers, an unusual variety often destroyed by breeders.

"You can't sell a white boxer, because it's a recessive gene," Nathan said. "But they make wonderful pets and a lot of people don't care



BOB BROWN/TIMES-DISPATCH

**CONFIDENCE BUILDING.** Nathan Woods helps Elizabeth Neal and her dog, Gus, negotiate a confidence course bridge.

about the colors."

Nathan is doing an apprenticeship with a professional dog handler, who is kind of like an agent for dogs when they're entered in dog shows. Nathan said he'd like to open an obedience school of his own or become a professional handler.

For now he'll keep working at

the training center.

"Training the dog has nothing to do with the dog," Nathan said. "It's 100 percent the handler. Anything a dog does that's good, you've taught him to do it and anything a dog does that's bad, you've taught him how to do that, too. Dogs think through trial and error."