



Santa Barbara Pet Services founder Nathan Woods has been training dogs since the age of 10.

Canine Companions

Trainer Nathan Woods Helps You Get the Most from Your Dog

Thanks, and enjoy your pet,” says the message on Nathan Woods’s voice mail. And if your pet is causing more headaches than enjoyment, he’s got the cure.

Woods, dog trainer extraordinaire and founder of Santa Barbara Pet Services, believes that we should all expect more from our pets—and he’s got the skills to turn even the most devilish of dogs into the delightful, obedient companions of your dreams.

Woods was somewhat of a prodigy in the dog-training world. At 10 years old, he wanted to participate in the training of his family’s new puppy Mindy, an 8-pound poodle. After a long and frustrating search, his mom finally found a center willing to work with

a child/dog team: the Richmond Dog Training Center in Richmond, Virginia. Ben John, the center’s director, said that he’d found that children can work wonders in dog training, so Woods, Mindy, and Woods’s mom signed up. Woods loved the experience so much that after finishing the first class, he immediately signed up for another session. When John asked Woods if he was interested in becoming an instructor, Woods said he was and devoured every book he could find on the subject. At 12 years old, he began teaching dog-training classes

to adults. His poodle Mindy was soon trained to the highest level (Utility) and Woods began apprenticing under a top professional dog handler. He continued training dogs and their people, and showing whippets, Dobermans, and boxers at the national level. In 1999, at 20 years old, Woods moved to California, and two years later, he founded Santa Barbara Pet Services.

Woods offers two types of training. One is an individual, self-paced series of eight or 12 one-hour sessions in which the dog and its person work with Woods. This option is offered at four levels: Puppy, Novice (eight sessions), Open, and Utility (12 sessions). He also offers VIP training in which he picks up your dog and works with it for two hours a day, five days a week, for four weeks. In the VIP training, Woods does all of the training and provides owners with a written overview of the dog’s progress. He encourages these owners to tag along at least once a week in order to learn proper handling techniques.

Woods mostly trains puppies, but he’s also mastered the considerably more difficult work of training adult dogs in which, he said, the main focus is on replacing bad habits with good ones. Most behavioral problems are a result of what Woods calls miscommunication. “I believe dogs have a nature of wanting to do the right

thing, but sometimes, the owner’s body language and gestures encourage the dog to do otherwise,” he said.

Case in point: He tells a story about a Labrador he worked with, whose owners had unwittingly taught the dog that the word “come” actually meant “run in the other direction.” The owners would say “come,” and then proceed to chase the dog; by the time Woods was called in, the very word sent the dog bolting in the opposite direction. “The dog was absolutely convinced it was doing the right thing,” Woods said with a smile. Though the dog’s owners were bewildered by the behavior, to Woods, it was only logical considering their body language.

He also noted that oftentimes bad behavior is unconsciously reinforced by the owner’s actions. “When a little dog misbehaves, its owner will usually pick it up,” he said. Unfortunately, because dogs interpret any form of touch as praise and most words as “blah blah blah,” they believe they are being praised for the behavior. An owner who puts his or her hands on a dog to restrain it or pull it back after the dog lunges or barks is also, in the dog’s mind, reinforcing the behavior.

Woods has found that certain dogs are far easier to train than others: Australian shepherds, border collies, shelties, and golden retrievers, referred to as “push-button dogs” in the dog-training world, are easy, as they have been “genetically bred to work in direct contact with the handler and to focus only on what they are asked to do”; terriers and hounds are more difficult, as they have been bred to “kill vermin and chase game—to focus mainly on the target, not the handler.” And, Wood said, indicating my cohort’s Chihuahua, “Some dogs are genetically bred to serve, and some, like the toy breeds, are bred to be served,” and tend to behave accordingly.

Woods uses a modified version of the Keohlor method in his training, a method that has been used successfully on more than 100,000 dogs; he does not rely on treats, clickers, or other kinds of “bribery,” saying he finds them unreliable. Instead, he uses a training collar and lots of praise.

To correct undesirable behavior Woods believes a dog should be put in the situation that is the most problematic as much as possible until the dog “refuses to do the wrong thing.” “I’m equally trying to set the dog up to have success and to do it right,” Woods said. For a dog that barks at or chases skateboarders, Woods might spend several sessions at the Cabrillo Skate Park, giving the dog corrections—a quick jerk of the lead—until the dog stops misbehaving.

While some of what he says seems counterintuitive, it becomes clear that he has become very skilled at thinking like a dog. For example, the owner of a dog that pulls incessantly while on walks might deal with it by giving the dog little or no slack on the leash. But, Woods said this is the opposite of what the owner should do.

“Never restrain the dog—always offer the dog the situation. Proper lead control is important. ... If you’re constantly holding it too tightly, what’s the motivation for a dog to walk by your side? You’re choking the dog for being right beside you.” Instead, he recommends giving the dog a “j-loop” of slack, and giving a quick jerk of the leash whenever the dog veers too far ahead, behind, or in any direction other than right beside you, and a healthy dose of praise whenever it happens into that “heel” position. He demonstrated the technique with an 85-pound, four-month-old Irish Wolfhound he’s currently training, and the enormous puppy heels perfectly. He then applied the same technique on a four-year-old Chihuahua, who takes a couple corrections to get it right, but then trots easily alongside him. “Consistency is key,” he said. “Dogs are creatures of habit; they’re very predictable, which makes them very easy to train.”

Although he said that at the novice level of training “it is 70 percent training the owner, and 30 percent the dog,” witnessing one of his sessions suggests that he’s being diplomatic. And when asked if he believes that all dogs are trainable, he answered, “Yes, dogs are the easy part; the owners are usually much harder to train.” It’s not magic; Woods simply speaks their language, which sadly, many dog owners do not. But if you’re in need of a translator, Woods is just a phone call away. ■

by Shannon Kelley

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