



Aug, 16, 2017

There are plenty of techniques to teach a wild and woolly wolfhound how to fit in the human world, but I know of only one that gives them the freedom to make the right choice while deepening your bond — positive, force-free training.

I know, train a wolfhound, he said. Do I *know* any wolfhounds? I do, and I admit they can be stubborn as a rock. Oisín develops tactical hearing lapses and Oona snorts with amusement when I ask her for a place on the couch. The same independence and



intelligence wolfhounds once used hunting distantly from their masters makes them a tough sell today when you want them to do something and...they do not.

But plenty of wolfhounds pass their Canine Good Citizen tests, many are used as therapy dogs and I've even seen videos of them doing agility. Something motivated them to train for hundreds of hours. Probably the same thing I use with Oona and Oisin—rewards. Cheese, vienna sausage and even rotisserie chicken. Sounds like bribery, you say? I'm sure they see it as a paycheck. Wolfhounds are gentle and polite but nobody's fool. When training these two, I motivate them and reward them well.

I've worked with dogs since I was 13 and got my first German shepherd. We trained with the local AKC chapter, choke collars and snaps of the leash. Loud, curt commands. My dog, King, put up with it, but where we bonded was in the woods and hills, rambling and becoming best friends.

That lesson came back to me years later when I put Cuchulain, our wolfhound/deerhound mix, in a traditional snap-the-leash obedience class. The first pop of that leash and Cuchulain gave me a withering look of betrayal I'll never forget. Who'd replaced his friend and provider with a bully? It was the end of aversion training for me.

I heard about positive training when I was waiting to bring Finn, our first wolfhound, home. Specifically, I read how Karen Pryor used a clicker and treats training killer whales for seaworld where you can't use a leash and choke chain...and if you could, you wouldn't do it more than once. Since my puppy would be more than 100 pounds at six months, I liked the sound of it. At 13 weeks, he was in his first class, eager to respond to my cues for a pinch of cheese.

Over time I saw that training is a kind of conversation between us and our dogs. With positive training, the dog's mind comes alive.



There's no fear of punishment for mistakes, no shutting down. They enthusiastically try to do what you ask for that piece of cheese or chicken. They become problem solvers and partners with you. One kind of training leaves your dog sullen and resentful, another deepens your relationship. It's not a tough choice.

Our dogs are entirely at our mercy. We decide when and what they'll eat and when and where they'll go outside. We decide when they get their shots and whether they'll have babies. Why not give them the gift of choice when we can? Sure, we have to leash them on walks to keep them from following a squirrel into traffic. The human world is a little crazy to them and we have to help them stay safe. But it's crazier still when the person they love starts barking commands and yanking on that leash.

I'm positive now I can get the results I want speaking softly, asking Oona or Oisin to sit or spit the cat out, and rewarding them for it. It takes a little more patience. I always have cheese in my pockets. Wolfhounds don't like a lot of mindless repetition, so we keep the sessions short. But seeing the love in their eyes grow day by day tells me I'm on the right track here.