

Finding a Dog Trainer
When you have a rarer breed
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Finding a good dog trainer is difficult enough when you have a common breed of dog. When you own a rarer breed or type of dog, finding a good trainer can be a struggle. The stories I have heard from their owners regarding finding a trainer were disturbing. One thing I have learned over the years is to varying degrees, all dogs have similarities. What the breed was developed for that makes the difference. Knowledge of what drives breeds and the work they were originally developed for gives insight as to what to expect with different breeds. Dog language is generally universal; it is the breed nuances making the difference. A Fila should not greet strangers with the enthusiasm a Golden will. A Dogo Argentino is not a giant pit bull. A Tibetan Mastiff is not like an “English” Mastiff. Sadly, too many trainers are not familiar with rarer breeds and can do an owner a great disservice. I hope that this will help you, as rarer breed owners, find a trainer who can better assist you with your dog.

Periodically, I will get an email or call from a rare breed dog owner. The contact will often go like this: “Hi, I own an XYZ and am looking for a trainer. I called several and none will take my dog into class. He is not having issues and I want to keep it that way.” “I have called a bunch of trainers regarding XYZ and I was asked why did I even bother to get this dog.” “I came out of ABC classes and they were managing my dog in a way I did not like, based solely on what they heard about the breed. I do not want a shock or prong collar on my pet. He has no need for one”

Many years ago, I stumbled upon a group of people who all shared a love for the rarer Mastiff family; I was intrigued. At that time, I owned a cross of a common mastiff-type dog (a Newfoundland). Most of these people owned Central Asian Shepherd Dogs, Filas, Cane Corsi (plural for Corso), Dogo Argentinos, Presa Canarios, American Bulldogs, Bandogs, etc. I hung around, started talking with some of these people over the phone, have met some in person and started learning. Why do I do this? It is my obligation as a trainer to learn as much about as many types of dog from the common to the rare and even the more common “designer mutts.” At any point in time, I may encounter one. If I am not constantly learning about various breeds, I cannot effectively assist owners.

As rare breed dog owners, you have a challenge. There are trainers who will refuse your dogs based solely on breed reputation. Often, that breed reputation is unwarranted: look what has happened to Presas after that tragedy in California several years back. A good trainer will know that it is less the breed to be worried about. Instead, the source of the dog and the abilities and desires of the owner are the issues. A good Tosa from a reputable breeder or rescue in a suited home is less of a risk than a poorly bred German Shepherd in a less than suitable home. No trainer should base a breed’s risk level based on media hype or interactions with a bad example or less than desirable owner. However, many do. Therefore, you have to be willing to carefully interview trainers and work with

them to educate as well as possible. A good trainer, serious about helping owners, should jump at the chance to work with some of these wonderful dogs.

When you are choosing a trainer, remember that with well over 400 recognized breeds worldwide, other working strains like Curs, Fiests and Alaskan Huskies, etc., it is impossible for a trainer to own one of every breed. However, you should expect a trainer to be willing to research your breed before working with you or have worked with similar breeds. Before you contact a trainer, compile a list of questions and interview the trainer. Your questions should include:

- 1) What is you feeling on rare breed dogs/my breed of dog?
- 2) What are your training philosophies with my kind of dog?
- 3) Are you willing to work with an XYZ?
- 4) Have you ever worked with one or with similar breeds? (Give a few similar breeds).
- 5) Are you willing to learn about the breed prior to my coming into class?
- 6) Can I have you meet my dog prior to starting your classes?
- 7) Can I observe a class without my dog?

Listen to the trainer, voice tone, etc. The ability to learn about and work with a rare breed or less common one should be jumped on enthusiastically. It is as much of a growth experience for us as for the dog owner.

Avoid a trainer who feels certain breeds must have chokes, prongs or shock collars, be trained using rolls, hanging, hitting, etc. Some may need a more confident and no-nonsense (but not cruel) trainer and handler. Many of these rare breeds can be confident and in need of clear and confident handling. No breed that I have worked with requires abusive training and yes this goes for rare breeds as well known for confidence. A trainer who immediately wants to throw a prong on a dog based only on breed is one to avoid.

Avoid trainers who use only one method of training. Dogs motivate differently. Some can be trained easily using food lures while others could care less for treats. Some dogs motivate for play, others for the ability to stop working. Ask the trainer how they would motivate a dog who is not food motivated. Some may resort to forceful methods to compel a dog to train as opposed to taking the time and finding a motivation. Not all dogs will clicker train. Not all owners want to clicker train. Not all dogs will wear a head halter. Not all dogs will care for a chunk of liver. A good trainer, regardless of the kind of dog, will know you cannot put all dogs in the same cubby hole.

Watch the trainer, how does he/she react around your dog based on breed. For example, a trainer who has done homework will not stride up to a Fila as they may a Bloodhound. A good trainer will have learned it can take time for a Fila to warm up and not to push things. Is the trainer comfortable or acting nervous? Does the trainer ask you about your particular dog's behavior within the scope of the breed? Does the trainer spend time before or after class learning from you about your breed as much as you learn from

him/her about general dog behavior? Does the trainer seem excited about the opportunity to work with your breed or apprehensive? How do you feel about the trainer?

The trainer you choose will be a factor in how successfully you and your dog begin working together. It does not matter if you are just searching for a basic manners class (where all activities should begin) or an advanced class for some form of competition, the trainer needs to be one you feel confident can help you meet your goals without having a negative effect on your dog due to your choice of canine companion.

I love working with rare and less common breeds. I jump at the chance to further my education regarding the dog breed world. Not all dogs are Labs, Poodles, Shepherds and Shelties.