



DANCES WITH DOGS

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The dance of a willing partnership between handler and dog is a joy

By Suzanne Clothier

Linda Tellington-Jones uses a beautiful analogy to describe her approach to working with animals: she sees the interaction between human and animal as a dance. For me, a good working relationship with any animal is like a wonderful dance - smooth, joyful and the result of two partners who clearly understand each other.

Of the two choices presented below, consider which "dancing partner" you would prefer.

Partner A has high hopes for you as a dancing partner. As the music begins, you are not sure of what is expected, but you're willing to try. You make a few mistakes, and begin to hesitate. Your partner growls and roughly grabs your arm, telling you in an increasingly louder voice what you are supposed to do. Your arm hurts, and you are beginning to be afraid. You make more mistakes, and your partner becomes angry and frustrated. You are desperately hoping for the music to stop. When the dance finally ends, he stalks off, muttering about your stupidity. You are upset, and not sure you want to dance again.

Partner B has high hopes for you as a dancing partner. As the music begins, you are not sure of what's expected but you're willing to try. You make a few mistakes, and begin to hesitate. Ignoring the music, your partner slows down, and with a smile, explains the basic steps again. He takes it very slow, until you've got it right. He cheers your success, and shows you the next few steps. Each time you succeed, your confidence soars. By the time the music stops, you're eager to learn more, and look forward to your next dancing lessons. Your partner is very pleased with your progress, and comments on what a bright student you are.

None of us would willingly choose Partner A. But what makes Partner B so wonderful? He knows the value of a willing partner, and is able to help you become a willing partner through the use of some basic techniques:

- Recognizing your hesitation as confusion, not stupidity, stubbornness or defiance
- Being flexible as a trainer. Although his initial goal might have been a flawless dance in perfect rhythm to the music, he sees that you are not yet up to that, so he changes his goal in order to help you learn.
- "Chunking down" the steps for you so that it is easy for you to learn and succeed at each step
- Encouraging you by making it pleasant for you to work and learn

These techniques are the hallmarks of any skilled trainer or teacher. A willing dance partner is neither dominant nor submissive, but relaxed, confident and able to follow a clear lead. Within the dog-human relationship, the human usually takes

the lead. After all, he's the one who knows which dance is being danced, i.e. that the focus is on the tango and not the cha-cha. (Notable exceptions are tracking and Search & Rescue work, where a clear understanding of subtle signals and body language helps the human follow the dog's lead.)

The thrill of a great performance, whether by a horse and rider, a dog and handler, or two dance partners, is the unison of two into a smooth and effective team. The dictionary defines teamwork as "work done by a number of associates, all subordinating personal prominence to the efficiency of the whole." This is achieved by clarity in communication, response to the subtlest of signals and a willing partnership.

There is no joy in dancing with a reluctant partner, or dancing at the command of an imperious partner. While compromise is a necessary part of partnership, handlers should be very clear about the level of enjoyment expressed by their dog. If you are looking for the utmost in willingness in any activity, your dog must enjoy the activity as much as you do. Almost any dog can be trained to perform the basic mechanics of any exercise. Joyful participation in an exercise comes from the dog's spirit, pride in his work, delight in showing what he knows. And your enjoyment and excitement about an activity can be contagious. If your dog does not naturally find an activity enjoyable, you must be willing to find a way to make it so, or accept the level of performance offered by a reluctant performer.

I find it incomprehensible when handlers complain about their dogs' performance (or lack thereof) while readily admitting that the dog hates the particular activity. Invariably, the sentence ends with, "But I really want this title. All I need is for the dog to do it three times successfully, and then I'll be happy." Focused on a goal that is meaningless to the dog, the handler fails to understand that sometimes the greatest act of love is to let go of personal goals for the sake of the relationship.

Equally incomprehensible is the handler who willingly acknowledges that they lose their patience, or get easily frustrated, or choke under the pressure of competition, or tense up and stop breathing in the ring BUT are unwilling to do anything about it! Critical to any partnership is the ability and willingness to work on yourself, outside of the demands of any activity or partnership. This is particularly true in the dog/human partnership.

Whatever your individual issues may be, if they are negatively affecting on your canine partner, you owe it to yourself, your dog and the partnership to work to resolve or at least minimize the effects. Try hypnosis, counseling, Tai Chi, meditation, yoga, biofeedback or whatever suits you to learn how to control and improve yourself, but be realistic about your responsibility to the partnership. Dogs are generous, forgiv-

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ing spirits, but they can't always give more to make up for shortcomings on your side.

Whether it's ice skating, ballroom dancing, doubles tennis, barrel racing, kayaking or dog sports, choosing a dance partner requires some basic information. In my mind, the dog/human partnership is very similar to a human/human partnership with one very important exception: the dog cannot make an informed decision to participate and thus is always a draftee, not a volunteer. This puts greater responsibility on the handler to be fair.

Awareness of your skills and limitations as well as your partner's

What do you do best? What do you enjoy? What do you find less enjoyable? What emotional/physical/intellectual assets and liabilities do you bring to the partnership? Do you choke under pressure or thrive on competition?

Accurate assessment of the kind of partner you need

Are you compulsive about training and need a partner who knows when to say "enough"? Are you reluctant to train fre-

quently, and need a partner who urges you on to practicing as you should? Do you want to reach the pinnacles of achievement, or will you be happy with an adequate performance?

Honest assessment of your goals as a team

What will be required to achieve those goals? Do both you and your partner have the necessary skills? Are both of you equally committed to the hard work necessary? What happens if you fall short of those goals? How will that impact the partnership? What happens if the partnership does not work? How will you alter your goals? How will that impact the relationship?

The pursuit of excellence is a wonderful idea. At its best, any partnership seeks to find the indefinable spot where each partner has given their best, and together, the highest abilities of the partnership are brought to bear on a given goal. It may not be Olympic level performance. It may even seem laughable to those looking on. But excellence is not always judged by external measures. Hold tight to the excellence within your heart, for when it exists, free of ego and outside pressures, the joy of the dance itself shines through.