

Chapter 1

The Hyper Dog

A curse or a blessing?

Shaker was the first puppy I brought home after I'd grown up and moved from my parents' house to a place of my own. An American Staffordshire Terrier, she was not beautiful, brilliant, or particularly excited about learning. But she was a decent dog and I was by then an experienced professional trainer. When it came to obedience and household training, we should have had our act together.

Sadly, she was like the shoemaker's barefoot children.

One day, for instance, I was hanging up some clothes in my bedroom when the phone rang. It was a call I'd been waiting for and I raced to answer it, leaving my sweet young Shaker alone in the bedroom.

An hour later, I hung up and went back to my room to finish putting my clothes away—and found every surface in the room, from floor to bed to bureau, covered with white dust. Shaker had discovered my economy-size container of baby powder.

My error was overconfidence, combined with a good dollop of plain old laziness. I'd given her too much freedom too soon.

It took me so long to clean up that mess, you would think I would've learned my lesson. But no: We lived in a rural community, my roommate and I, and when my puppy and her equally adorable baby Labrador Retriever wanted to go outside, it was much easier to open the door and let them out than it was to don jackets and boots and give them a proper escort.

I'm ashamed to admit that, more than once, they took full advantage of their freedom and checked out a neighboring pig farm—coming home only after they'd both enjoyed a good roll in the sty.

These weren't the only incidents. Together or alone, these puppies managed to wreak havoc on our home—making messes, noise, and pests out of themselves, and leaving a path of destruction in their wake.

THE COMMON DENOMINATOR: HYPER-DOGDOM

There was nothing wrong with these puppies. *I* was the problem, especially given my growing experience in counseling exasperated dog owners. I should have known better than to let these little critters run wild.

After all, as puppies they were, by definition, hyper dogs, fun-loving and easily stimulated. And because they were also undertrained, they had no concept of right and wrong; they were totally out of control.

If that sounds familiar, then you already know how very challenging these dogs can be. Perhaps the thought of getting rid of yours has already crossed your mind a time or two; maybe you've even checked out the web site for his breed's rescue group or your local Humane Society, just to see what it would take to find him a more appropriate home.

Hyper or Neurotic?

Is your dog hyper, or is he full-blown neurotic?

Don't answer too quickly. Both hyper and neurotic dogs can exhibit a range of behaviors from merely annoying to bordering on the intolerable. A few common examples:

- Whining
- Barking
- Terrorizing others, from husbands to guests to other pets
- Separation anxiety

In many cases—perhaps most—these behavioral issues can be rectified with the techniques described in this book. But that won't always be the case.

How far you're able to get with your dog will tell you whether he is simply a hyper dog who is ready to become a great companion for you, or a true neurotic who will be a never-ending project.

Generally speaking, the best course of action is to make as much headway as you can on your own, following the suggestions we offer here. When you and your pooch have reached a plateau and you're not yet satisfied with his behavior, it's time to seek professional help.

It's not always smart to wait, though. Occasionally, bad habits can make the dog a threat to himself or to others who happen to cross his path. A dog who licks his legs obsessively, chews holes in his flesh, or bites off the tip of his tail needs to see his veterinarian and also needs appropriate deterrents, comforts, and distractions. One who bites strangers or jumps through windows when Mom leaves the house needs the immediate and intensive professional intervention of an experienced trainer.

But then . . . you watch your dog sleeping peacefully and get a glimpse once again of the beautiful companion you imagined when you brought him home. Or you tell him to sit or lie down or come, and—miracle of miracles—he does, and you know that you’ve just witnessed a flash of the brilliance that could one day make this pooch the very best thing that has ever happened to you. Or (admit it!) you picture yourself saying goodbye as you hand him over to his new owner, and your heart begins to break.

My Shaker was a perfect example of a dog whose potential was hidden beneath a veneer of naughtiness. But once I started training her, she not only became a splendid companion, she also became one of America’s top-ranked obedience terriers and was the first American Staffordshire Terrier to have earned AKC Champion and Obedience Trial Champion titles.

So if your dog’s behavior has you just about at your wit’s end, don’t throw in the towel. Instead, get ready to harness the potential of your hyperactive canine work-in-progress.

REAP THE REWARDS

Just about every hyper dog seems to have too much of what we ordinarily consider a very good thing: energy! In fact, most of us would like to have a little more of that elusive quality.

Still, smart dog owners don’t lament this fact of hyper-canine life. Instead, they learn to harness and redirect all that energy. And in the process, they reap substantial rewards.

Physical Health

When your dog has more energy than you do, you’ll have to find some mutually acceptable way of dissipating his. The good news is that in the process you’ll probably find that you’ve picked up some extra energy. You may even find that working with your high-energy dog burns off extra calories and gets you in shape even more reliably and pleurably than a membership at an expensive fitness center ever could.

Katherine Koetting is a great example of a handler whose association with a hyper dog has led to greatly enhanced health. She showed up at Amiable Dog Training’s Brookfield studio one Wednesday night with a 10-year-old German Shepherd–Doberman Pinscher mix named Brandy.

Brandy wasn’t hers; she belonged to Katherine’s neighbors. Interested in getting some exercise for herself, for 18 months Katherine

10 Hip Ideas for Hyper Dogs

had been walking the dog every day. Their walks were uneventful—unless they happened to run into certain dogs along the way. Then, Brandy showed her aggressive side, barking, lunging, and generally demonstrating her eagerness to get into a fight.

Katherine could easily have given up on Brandy, but she knew that without this canine incentive, she'd also give up on her own exercise.

At first, she tried managing the situation by changing the time of their walks, by altering their route, and by crossing her fingers. But there was never a guarantee that they wouldn't run into another "unacceptable" dog.

Finally, Katherine decided to give training a whirl. It worked: Basic obedience training has enabled her to take charge of the situation. What was once an almost daily ordeal has become pleasurable for woman and dog alike. And Katherine has already lost a full dress size without changing her diet one bit.

Her experience is not at all surprising. Over the years, dozens of my students have reported losing significant amounts of weight—including pounds that had stubbornly resisted all their previous efforts at dieting.

This effect has not gone unnoticed by the medical community. For instance, researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia recently followed the progress of a group of people who added dog-walking to their daily routines. The participants lost an average of 14 pounds each over the course of a year—more than the average loss reported by major weight-loss programs.

Mental Health

Perhaps even more important, working with a hyper dog can do wonders for your attitude toward life. One reason is laughter. It's pretty difficult to keep a straight face when you're watching a dog tearing around the backyard, his back end tucked in and an expression on his face that can only be described as a grin. And, truth be told, hyper dogs sometimes get themselves in situations that are impossibly funny—even if they *have* made a mess of things.

But that's hardly a hyper dog's only contribution to your mental health. Consider what he can do for your self-esteem. The ability to give unconditional love seems to be part of any dog's genetic footprint, but hyper dogs are poised to deliver new levels of affection and devotion if you'll only give them the chance.

Hyper dogs can also put your mind to work; you have to be clever to stay one step ahead of a super-energetic canine. In fact, a very wise owner once told me that training her dog did more for her mental

sharpness than working the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. I have to agree. Helping a dog reach his full potential takes careful preparation, planning, implementation, and follow-through.

Some years ago, I visited my friend Gail, a great hostess who set plates of beautiful hors d'oeuvres out on her coffee table almost before I had a chance to sit down. I wasn't the only one who noticed, though. Australian Shepherd Chelsea hovered nearby, just waiting for her chance to sample her mistress's work.

She didn't get that opportunity, because Gail kept an eye on her and delivered continual warnings and threats. But Gail could have made it much easier on herself by preparing for the situation. If she had attached a leash to Chelsea's collar before setting out the food, she could have given the leash a quick jerk the moment the dog wiggled her nostrils—and that would probably have been the end of the issue.

What I've just described is a standard correction that simply requires planning ahead. But there may be times when a standard approach doesn't work on your hyper dog and you'll have to put on your thinking cap.

Sometimes a dog's background or breed can be a factor. For example, it can be difficult to teach a Greyhound to sit on command. When you try to use the normal pull up/push down technique, you encounter amazing resistance. It's not that he's being defiant; Greyhounds (as well as a few other breeds, including Dachshunds and Dobermans) just tend to lock their legs when they stand. It took a little thought to come up with a solution for this idiosyncrasy: Quickly walk the dog forward several steps while using your hands to fold him into the sit position.

Out-of-the-ordinary situations can also arise with a hyper dog, challenging your ability to quickly think your way to a solution. Not long ago, I was working with a moderately trained dog on a light line in a busy park, only to have the line somehow slip off his collar. My temptation, of course, was to run after the dog in a panic. Instead, I caught his attention for a split second by barking out, "Hey!" At the same time, I bent down to grasp an imaginary line and ran away saying, "Good, good, *good!*" It worked; the dog responded as if he and I were still securely attached to one another.

The need for great timing, as you monitor your dog's every glance and twitch, will also help keep you sharp. If he's even thinking about getting into some mischief or losing control of his emotions, a timely intervention can have a profound effect. It will not only nip this particular episode in the bud, but it can also keep him from going there the next time this particular combination of stimuli arises.

Social Health

A highly energetic dog can also help you make new friends. He's usually friendlier than calm dogs and more eager to introduce himself to strangers. And his antics can attract the attention of passersby. In some neighborhoods, this attention can qualify you instantly and automatically for membership in the local canine social circle.

An outgoing dog can also play Cupid. Not long ago, one of my girlfriends was walking her 85-pound female black Lab when she spotted a very attractive man coming around the corner. The dog didn't hesitate; she made a dash for him, yanking the leash right out of my friend's hand and greeting the fellow with great enthusiasm. He was new to town, they were both available, and they've been dating ever since.

A Healthier Home

Finally, the best motivation for keeping your house neat and your valuables put away has four legs. There's nothing like a hyper dog to force you to pick up your shoes and socks, put your laundry in the hamper, take out the trash, and keep everything from treasured books to disposable writing instruments tucked away, safely out of reach.

And it's an effort that requires constant vigilance. Happily for our homes, we can't afford to let our guard down no matter how well-trained our hyper dogs are.

I learned that lesson well with my treasured Chihuahua mix, Able—an amazing dog who is my constant companion and is my formal dance partner at events like the Wisconsin State Fair. This dog is well trained and willing—surely safe in any circumstance, right?

Wrong. A few years ago, I left the door to my walk-in closet cracked open and Able let himself in. I discovered him gnawing at the heel of a Via Spiga shoe carelessly left on the floor.

Fortunately for Able, a prospective employee phoned just as I caught him in the act. So he was spared my misdirected retribution. At the same time, he taught me an important lesson: No dog is ever 100 percent foolproof, and it's best to keep valuables out of his reach. A corollary: When you do let down your guard and your dog takes advantage of the opportunity, don't be too harsh on him; after all, dogs will be dogs no matter how well trained they may be. In the expensive lesson of the Via Spiga, I was the one at fault—not Able.