

## CHAPTER 1

# A DOG STORY

I am a professional dog trainer and have been one since 1980. I started my business by drawing a flyer (I always fancied myself a bit of an artist), making copies and posting them on bulletin boards in local markets around the San Fernando Valley in North Los Angeles. The first month in business I got 10 customers using this technique, and from that day forward I worked as a full-time trainer. Looking back, I cringe at what I thought I knew and, with the perspective of time, what I didn't know.

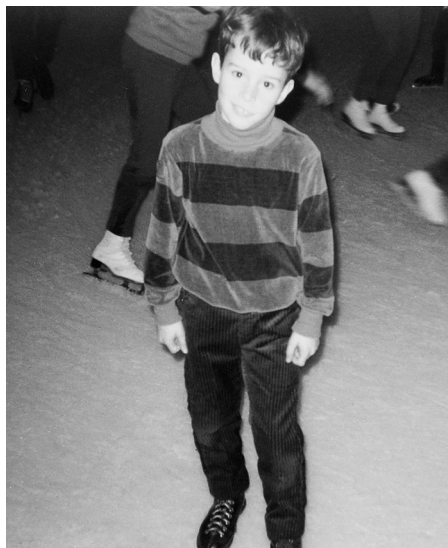
Like most of you reading this book, I've always had a deep, passionate love of animals in general and dogs in particular. This was true at a very young age. One of my earliest memories is walking down the street and having a large German Shepherd Dog come running up to me. The dog, whose face was just about even with mine (I was six at the time), sniffed me, and I happily let him while I scratched his side. Thirty-seven years later, I can still see his leg going thump, thump, thump on the sidewalk as I scratched a nice, sensitive spot on his body. He then proceeded to lick my face. I have always loved doggie kisses and I was just out there enough, even then, that I probably licked him back.

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Our beginning love affair was interrupted by the dog's owner, who came running out of the house shouting at me, "Don't move!," while he grabbed his dog. He sternly ordered me to stay where I was and disappeared into the backyard, dog in tow. A minute or so later he came back out and carefully checked me to make sure his dog hadn't bitten or injured me in any way. He asked me if I was all right. I was scared at this point and only remember nodding yes. He asked my name and told me to go home. That evening he called my parents and suggested that I ought to learn not to pet strange dogs. My parents talked to me about this and I recall saying, "But the dog came up and petted me." I remember my mom looking at me a bit strangely (not the first time or the last), and the matter was dropped.

I learned later that this dog had bitten half a dozen people, including a small girl. The dog was later euthanized. I didn't hear of this for several years, but I vividly recall the feeling of absolute sadness when I heard this news. In truth, as I write this I still feel a little sad. Dogs and I have always had a special kind of bond.

As a child growing up on Long Island, New York, we had a large female Weimaraner named Misty. She was sweet, hyper, totally



*Steve at age six.*

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*I enjoyed rubbing Misty's belly  
almost as much as I liked chasing  
her around the neighborhood.*

disobedient and liked nothing better than to blast out of the house and run around the neighborhood, often with half a dozen kids trying to catch her. One day a few friends and I had the brilliant idea that we could lasso her. We had to test this, and unbeknownst to my parents, on a couple of occasions I deliberately let her out so that we could chase her on our bicycles, throwing ropes in her direction. Given that there weren't a lot of people in the late 1960s on Long Island with roping experience, or at least none who offered to teach my friends and me, we never did succeed in catching her that way. This was undoubtedly a good thing.

When Misty was about a year and a half old, my mom finally convinced my dad to take Misty to obedience school. The classes took place on Saturday mornings at 10 a.m. at a local park. I remember going to class the second week. There were 10 or 12 other dog owners

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with a variety of dogs. I don't recall all the breeds, although I do distinctly remember a couple of German Shepherds, a Cocker Spaniel and at least two Irish Setters. All of the handlers were men, and there were three other kids about my age in attendance, as well. The instructor, a man who seemed ancient at the time but was probably in his early 40s, had a crew cut and a very well trained Boxer. All the dogs were at least six months old, with most closer to a year or older. All the dogs were on choke chains, except for one who was on what I later learned was a pinch collar.

The trainer was working on teaching the class how to properly "heel" their dogs. I learned that "heel" meant the dog walked next to you at your left side, even if you sped up, slowed down or turned around. Most dogs in this class tended to pull ahead, which the trainer called "forging." To correct the forging behavior, the trainer instructed the handlers to immediately turn in the opposite direction and literally run the other way. Since most of the dogs were big, the kids couldn't participate in this exercise. I will never forget seeing what happened when a 60-pound dog wearing a metal choke chain attached to a leash held by a 180-pound man goes in one direction and the man runs in the other. I saw dogs completely flipped off their feet, screaming, yelping and, to be honest, more than a few learning very quickly not to forge ahead.

After "teaching" this for about 15 minutes, the trainer separated the class and had half walk about 50 feet away and face the other half. The trainer then instructed the first group to heel their dogs toward the second group, which was ordered to remain still. Any forgers were quickly dealt with. When the moving group got about 15 feet from the stationary group, a man's dog in the stationary group started barking at one of the dogs moving toward them. This dog then lunged forward, dragging his handler toward the other dogs.

The trainer moved quickly to the offending dog, took the leash and sharply jerked it in an attempt to correct the barking, lunging behavior. When this had no effect, the trainer shouted "No" and repeated the correction more strongly. It's funny what things become etched in your mind. I remember like it was yesterday watching the dog's paws leave the ground as the trainer yanked the leash. The dog turned toward the

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*Dad at 35.*

trainer, and the trainer, perhaps thinking this dog was going to bite him, completely lifted the animal off the ground and held him dangling in the air. The dog's barks became strangled yelps, and after 10 or 15 seconds of struggling, the dog just kind of went limp. The trainer then put the dog back on the ground, snapped the leash once more for good measure and handed the leash back to his owner. The dog just kind of stood there, still conscious but clearly dazed. I vividly remember wishing I were old enough and strong enough to put the trainer on a leash and collar and treat him exactly the same way. Great lessons for a kid to learn, huh?

To his credit, my dad was sensitive enough to recognize that this type of "training experience" was not appropriate for his 10-year-old son. This was my first introduction to the world of dog training. My dad and dog went back for a few more classes without me and then they both became doggie school dropouts. We never did get Misty trained, which never bothered me in the least. I liked chasing her.

As I grew older, my interest in animals grew, as did my passion for dogs. I know I must have watched *The Incredible Journey* at least a hundred times before I was 12. I started reading about dogs and about training. Most books on the subject were tough going for a kid, but a few stood out. One in particular, a book written in the early 1960s

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called *Family Dog* by Richard Wolters, was a favorite. This book advocated some things considered very radical at the time, including doing a good deal of obedience training with puppies much younger than six months of age. Wolters' methods were also considerably gentler than a lot of others out there at the time—although still fairly rough by today's standards. In fact, many of the pictures in this book showed the author's young daughter doing a lot of the training. He also discussed canine developmental periods and suggested many of the ideas that are taken for granted now, 40 years later. I often wondered whatever happened to his daughter and whether the author ever knew how many people his books influenced.

For many years I considered becoming a veterinarian, but was very unsure that I would ever be able to euthanize a single animal. By the time I was 20, I had probably read 80 or 90 books on the subject of behavior and training. I also attended a number of training schools and had decided to become a professional trainer. My reasons were varied, but certainly included the fact that I could help dogs, as well as play with them, and get paid for it. Imagine getting paid to be with puppies. How cool is that? I thought it was extremely cool, and although the trials and tribulations of building, managing and promoting two nationally recognized training organizations can, at times, be anything but cool, the truth is I still get paid to play with puppies!

I have always maintained a pragmatic and open mind toward training methods, recognizing that truly open-minded people don't think they know it all. I've always been aware that the day I felt I knew it all would be the day I would cease to learn. Since I've always wanted to learn about dogs, I've always been very clear that I don't come close to knowing all there is. What I do know is that I would never be like the trainer I remembered from my youth. Not ever!

In my travels, I learned that positive reward-based training is almost always more effective than training based on punishment. However, correction does have a place, as does reward, good timing and excellent communication in the training process. Very critically, I've learned to remain sensitive and loving toward my four-legged students, and even most of my two-legged ones.

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In my 20-plus years as a professional trainer, I have found that my clients want specific things when dealing with behavior problems in their pets:

- ◆ First, they want methods that do not cause harm to the dog.
- ◆ Second, they want methods that **WORK**.

This last point is a key one. If a method doesn't work, the problem continues. Often if a problem continues, owners will abandon or rehome their dogs. I have heard veterinarians say untreated behavior problems are the largest preventable cause of death of companion dogs in the United States. I believe this, and any trip to a local animal shelter will confirm the fact that a large percentage of dogs in shelters are there due to untreated behavior problems. The tragic part is that most behavior problems can be dealt with, especially if you start right away.

Using modern, scientific methods, trainers and owners can now more effectively and humanely address behavioral challenges than ever before. Unfortunately, many trainers and owners have fallen victim to a type of thinking that, in my opinion, lessens their effectiveness. This is just my opinion, but in my two decades of training, I have seen the specter of political correctness (PC) invade the training world.

PC is a funny thing. It often starts as an understandable reaction to insensitivity and conditions that most reasonable people agree need to change. My training experience as a 10-year-old boy is just one example of the type of situation that untold numbers of people experienced and wanted to change. Thirty years ago, many training techniques were based on what is called "compulsion training." This means dogs were taught to respond in order to avoid punishment.

For example, a common method in those days to teach a dog not to jump up on people was to sharply say "No" and knee the dog in the chest. Almost no one was suggesting that clients physically injure their dogs, but clearly, training techniques based primarily on physical punishment run the risk of doing just that.

Additionally, some trainers really did take physical correction to very severe levels. Other "methods" from those days included such



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gems as stopping a dog from digging by filling the hole with water, taking the dog over to the hole and sticking the dog's head in the water-filled crater. Nipping—not aggression, but the common nibbling on fingers that puppies often engage in—was routinely addressed by “chucking the dog under the chin.” This is a polite way of saying slapping the dog. Obviously, methods like these needed to change. And to a large degree, thanks in part to several new generations of trainers (myself included), they did. But then, because it's probably human nature, the pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction.

Nowadays, there are people who consider the use of *any* correction or punishment to be “cruel.” Today, there are those who object to the use of terms like “problem solving” or “problem dogs.” Their logic is: Who's to say what is or isn't a problem? They go on to say that most problem dog behaviors are only problematic for humans. Dogs naturally chew. Many naturally dig, bark and engage in numerous other doggie behaviors. It is arrogant for humans to arbitrarily decide that certain behaviors are unacceptable or bad. I have been told that any attempt to train and discipline a dog smacks of “species-ism!” That is, one species (humans) dominating another (canines). I swear, I'm not making this up. Some of these same people object to the use of the term “owner.”

For example, I use the word “owner” in this book. I say things like “dog owners should remember” or a “good owner tries to understand why their dog does what it does.” Fifteen years ago this wouldn't have even drawn a comment, but today there are people who object to the idea that one species should own another. There have been successful attempts in some communities to legally change the term “owner” to “guardian.” People have suggested that ownership smacks of slavery, as though owning a dog is the same as one person owning another. In my mind there is a huge difference between owning a person, which neither I nor (I hope) anyone in this country supports, and owning a dog!

I think a word about definitions is in order here. Words have meaning, and over the last decade or so, the definitions of many words have been changing. I don't mean how they are defined in the *Oxford* or *Webster's Dictionary*, but about how everyday people use certain



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words. Often, those who control what words mean can control a debate.

When trainers are afraid to say things like “dog owner,” when owners are confused after being told that any type of correction is cruel, when people spend months trying to modify their dog’s behaviors using any method as long as no correction is involved (lest they be labeled “abusive”), when devices like slip collars, commonly called “choke chains,” are labeled cruel under any circumstances and there is talk of outlawing them, I have to stand up and shout, “ENOUGH!”

Some people might be wondering why I’m even bringing this up. This is the main reason I wrote this book. Specifically, I wrote it to share many of the advances in training that have occurred in the last 30 years, while at the same time publicly stating that not everything trainers did 30 years ago, and for hundreds of years before that, was wrong, backwards or cruel; and to state that punishment exists in nature and has a place in training. I do this not to enhance my reputation among trainers, but to help owners (there’s that word) effectively train their pets, so that both can enjoy better lives together.

So, now that you have a little background about me and why I wrote this book, I hope you’re intrigued enough to read on!

I will begin by talking about when training should start (hint: right away), then move on to a chapter about how your dog learns. From there, we’ll discuss the proper way to make your dog a comfortable member of your family. The focus will then shift to addressing common behavior problems, obedience and ways to screen and locate a professional trainer. For those of you who are interested, there is even a section on how to become a trainer, as well as a resource guide showing you where to find a ton of information about dogs on the Internet. I sincerely hope all of you find this book as rewarding to read as I found it to write. So let’s get started. Let’s get training.

