



Puppy Love

... or how I learned to stop worrying and love the dog.

Article from Urban Dog Magazine.
By John Sykes Jr.

It began with a phone call. My wife, her voice small and scratchy, sounded hesitant, uneasy. "Uh, well, I, we ..." she began. It didn't sound like a real emergency thing, more like an embarrassed sort of thing, like a fender bender in a parking lot or forgetting to make the house payment for a couple of months. She hem-hawed around a little more, then blurted it out: "We found a dog!"

Ah yes, a dog. As a married couple we'd always been dogless. The wife and I had considered getting a pooch for quite a while, but always ended up swerving away

from the subject. We have always had cats, which are low maintenance, and thought of dogs as impossible, whiny beasts that would be like having a newborn child with a biting problem in the house. Talk about getting a dog would usually trail off into mumbling about doggy bodily functions, dog hair, dug-up flower beds and eaten homework; the next thing we knew, it was 15 years later and still no dog.

When I grew up in the sticks of north-central Arkansas, dogs were omnipresent at our house. I say at our house, because dogs were not allowed in the house. People whose dogs stayed in the house were considered, well, wimpy. These sorts of people put sweaters on their dog, painted their dog's toenails and had their dog's fur trimmed into odd shapes. Our dogs were noble beasts, watchdogs, guardians of our out-in-the-woods home. These weren't lap dogs. They were blue collar dogs. They had jobs.

Once in a great while they were allowed into the house, but they knew they didn't belong, walking around nervously, their nails clicking a staccato, snare-drum beat on the wood floors, stiff-legged and shaking. Usually they made a lightning quick grab for any food they could find lying about and dashed back outside.

Their names are canine legend: Puddles, George, Dusty and Fritz, among others. Dusty was really the first dog I fell in love with. She was a light brown German shepherd mixture and we would spend hours rolling around in the yard, wrestling and chasing each other, hiking the woods together. We were pals.

But when I was 10 years old, Dusty was hit by a car and died. I'm not a mental-health professional, but this might have something to do with not owning a dog

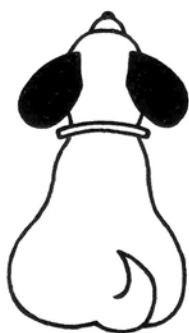
later in life. Let us not forget Sigmund, the last dog we had before I left home for college. He was a goofy dog, one that some might call ... strange. A pure-bred, high-strung German shepherd, he weighed about 100 pounds, and one of his favorite things, besides vigorously killing snakes, was digging up rocks. These were big rocks, the size of footballs, that he would frantically dig up, clutch in his straining jaws and trot off with into the distance. We weren't sure what he did with these rocks, theorizing that he was building some sort of Stonehenge-like structure in the woods, but worried that the rocks were grinding his teeth down. However, while wrestling with Sigmund one day I painfully discovered that his teeth had been filed to a knife-like edge.

Soon the physical wounds healed, years passed and dogs weren't important anymore. It was away to college, then to marriage, then to cats. I became a cat person.

Cats are fine. Cats are generally trouble-free. Cats lie in your lap and purr. Cats sleep a lot. But in the back of my mind lay a sleeping dog. My wife's phone call awakened that sleeping dog, who began to bark. I could, perhaps, let myself love a dog again.

I listened as she described the beast, "He's ... yes he's ... short-haired, brown, floppy-eared, kind of looks like a ... pit bull." Oh great, a pit bull. While pit bulls aren't innately evil beasts, they do turn up far too often in disturbing newspaper articles. I blame slaving owners for making the dogs mean, but it does give one pause. So of course the puppy my wife lugged up the steps was an angel straight from heaven. I almost immediately began speaking with the baby-puppy-voice. "Oh, isn't he the sweetest little doggie, yes he is, yes he is ... " Done in that grating, exaggerated saccharin tone that makes you want to slap someone on the back of his

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head. I did this for about 10 more minutes, until even the dog rolled his eyes. But what a beast! A tawny beauty, he lay on the carpet, sleek and muscled, his black and white-tinged muzzle held aloft, his sabre-like tail cutting a mighty swath, his ample paws curled neatly beneath him. In other words, a brown dog with a black nose, pointy tail and big feet. He was a friendly little bugger, obligingly rolling onto his back for belly rubs and giving us painful love bites on all exposed flesh. He rolled smartly back onto his belly, dropped his head between his outstretched front paws and gave us a mournful, furrowed-brow look. "Awwwww!" we all gushed in unison. It was sickening and glorious.

We would keep him. We were excited.

Picking a name was first on the agenda, and as all pet owners know, is vitally important to your dogs' mental health. Our cat Orangey was named for the color of his coat, which is what you get for letting a 4-year-old name a cat. So we needed to be more careful this time. We had an excited family huddle, and lacking a baby-name book, we grabbed a handy encyclopedia as a source.

Of course, the military encyclopedia was handiest, so the list of names had a martial ring to them. I briefly considered Gustavus Adolphus, a militarily innovative Swedish king, but quickly moved on to Winston Churchill. It eventually came down to Gus and Winston; but the bulldog-esque Churchill more closely resembled our new dog, so Winston it was.

Winston became Win, which became Winnie, which became Winner, which later morphed into "that stupid dog." He also answers to "get the heck off the couch," "get your fat head out of the garbage," and "leave the cat alone."

With the name issue behind us, next was becoming a proper pet product consumer. Let me add this up ... at last count we spent around \$3.4 million on dog items for a mutt seemingly assembled from spare dog parts. An initial visit to the vet further muddied the pedigree waters. The vet acknowledged a bit of pit bull, but also saw chow, Labrador and even mastiff. We then bought a doghouse, a leash, a collar, a bowl and a tag and, through our largesse during veterinarian visits, enabled the vet to purchase a nice personal watercraft.

Forget about Enron or Worldcom, the biggest scam in the world is rawhide. Why does a rawhide bone cost \$4? Are these things made from cloned cattle? On the other hand, they are cheaper than shoes. These wet, slimy, ragged objects persist in littering our home, providing for a disturbing late night walking experience.

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He was housebroken quickly enough, so like any proud parent I thought of him as a doggie genius, able to pick things up quickly. Unfortunately the only things he picked up quickly were shoes and books and combs and newspapers. Fortunately he preferred my wife's and daughter's shoes, but he did manage to chew up one of my Raymond Carver short story collections, at least proving his taste in literature.

Doggedly, we moved on to training. To the untrained eye, my methods might appear to consist solely of chasing after the animal, begging him in a stern voice to sit or stay or heel, followed by more chasing. It also appears this way to the trained eye.

Basically he knows the word "no." That's about it. If I catch him chewing on a shoe, I bark the word "no" and he drops the shoe, looks guilty and slinks away. After I slink away, he finds another shoe. Or book, or comb, or newspaper. Everything chewable in our home is now on a shelf, including the furniture.

The chewing means that when we're not home, Winston must spend work hours outdoors. His cunning canine mind knows that when the sliding door opens, during morning hours, he's being tossed outside. He'll stand warily near the door, his eyes wide, but when a move is made toward him, he bolts and leads his pursuer on a wild, high speed chase through the house.

Eventually tiring of the game, allowing himself to be trapped, he must sometimes be carried outside, his 60-plus pounds straining the frame of my petite wife. The wife doesn't allow me to put him out before I leave, unable to bear his forlorn look.

Outside, on his own, he digs and chews and sleeps. And other, more nasty things. He found a route to the neighbor's back yard by burrowing under the fence. Large chunks of treated lumber were brought in at great expense to line the bottom of the fence. This eased the fence burrowing, but increased the flower bed digging. This we resolved by simply giving up flowers.

He has nearly doubled in size since he loped into our lives, eating, when so inclined, the cat's food and his own. The bags of dry dog food have gotten bigger each month, now requiring a team of husky Tibetan Sherpas to get them up our front steps. Still, he's a bit of a finicky eater, and I came home one night to see my wife sitting on the floor, feeding the beast with a fork. Yes, actually putting the food into his mouth.

"He won't eat unless he thinks it's people food," she said, pretending to take a bite, then letting the dog slurp the mealy morsels from the fork. I shook my



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head in wonder, then, like someone possessed, began talking in the baby puppy voice again. The dog rolled his eyes, then took another bite.

We have become those people I sneered at while growing up. We have become a house that allows the dog to sleep indoors. But not just indoors, wherever he wants. This 60-pound shedding, slobbering, scratching animal who now sleeps on my bed, who rises up in the middle of the night with a piercing mournful yawn, then falls back down with a bed-shaking whomp, has become everything we feared he would become.

The house must be vacuumed every 10 minutes. The aforementioned rawhide toys appear mysteriously underfoot with sickening regularity. The newspaper, if left unattended, is devoured word for word. Literally. The back yard looks like a gopher village. His bark rattles the windows whenever he spies a squirrel. Sometimes he smells. Bad.

But sometimes, when he dashes into the house after a long day alone, his ears laid back on his head, wiggling with joy at our arrival, you don't mind the shedding. Or when he gives me an odd, jowly look of anticipation when he hears the phrase "go for a walk," a look that makes me laugh out loud. That sweet face prevents me from teasing him with the word "walk," just to see that look. You don't mind the barking then.

He sometimes has crazy running fits, darting about the house, bouncing off furniture, sliding across the linoleum, barking at nothing in particular. I love that.

What I have discovered, staring into his brown, doggy eyes, is that it's OK to let go sometimes and love without conditions. It's OK to talk in the goofy baby voice and it's OK to hug the stupid dog.

And I've started wondering what sort of sweater he'd like.

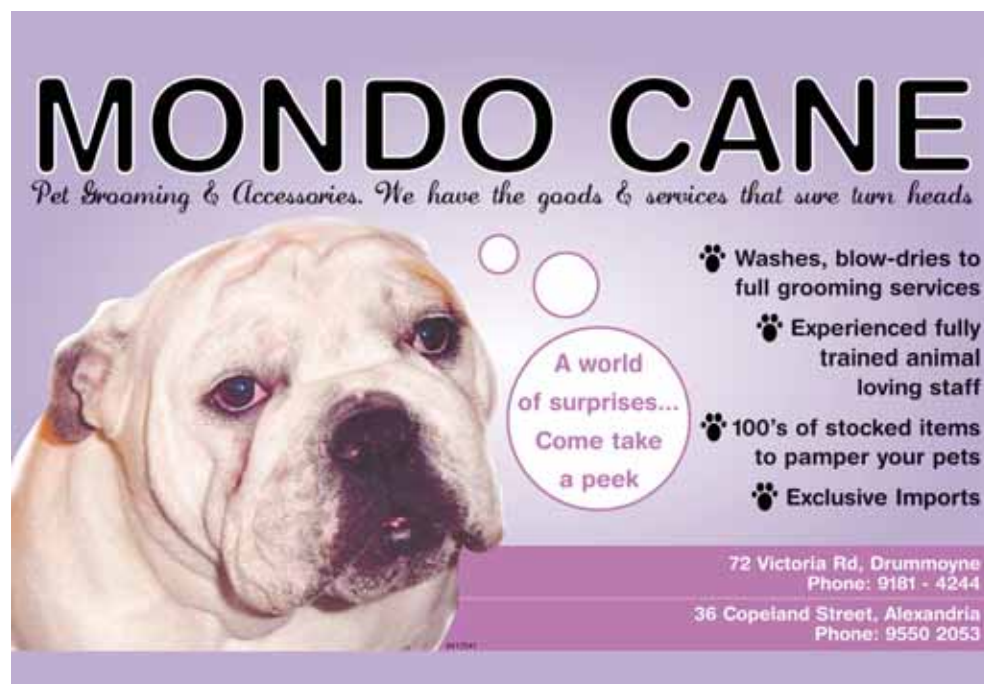


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