

The APDT

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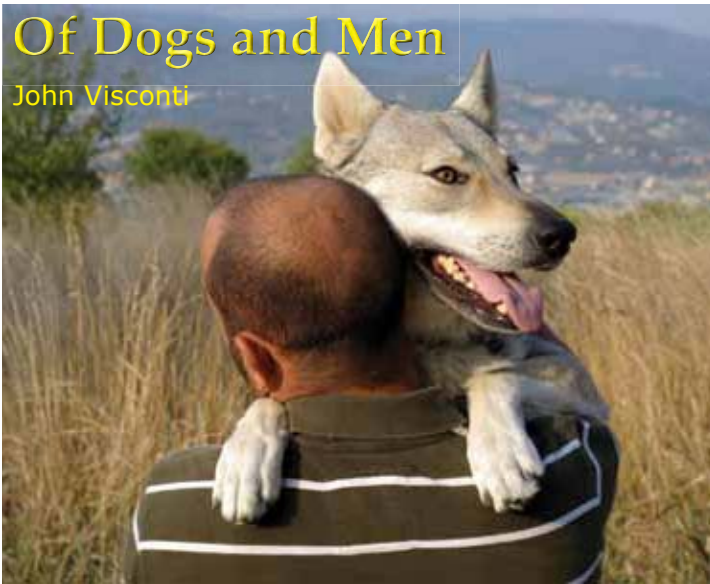
On-Leash Reactivity to Other Dogs
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*What Not to Pair: The Consequences
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Desensitization for Life!
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Of Dogs and Men

John Visconti



Have you ever leaned far back in a chair and caught yourself just as it was about to tip over? I had the same feeling when I was thinking about writing this column.

I considered the inherent dangers of writing a column addressing the gender gap between many positive method female dog trainers and many male dog owners. Just as I reached the tipping point, my mind's eye envisioned the scene from "Frankenstein" when the villagers accost the castle, pounding on the door while carrying pitchforks and torches.

Only in my scene, I clearly pictured clicker-wielding female trainers and men carrying choke collars, pounding on my front door. I vowed, "Not on my life would I ever consider writing such a column." The crashing sound you just heard was me tipping past the proverbial balancing point of no return.

What follows is the column I swore I'd never write. In fact, it is the first in a series of columns addressing why positive-method trainers and men don't always mesh and how we can change that. If after reading this column you decide to descend upon my home, I promise I'll answer the door if you simply ring the bell.

Uncle Joe and Blackie

Not too long ago, I was chatting with my Uncle Joe at a family function. Uncle Joe is an expert regarding dog behavior. He holds the most prestigious dog training certification of all: before he retired, Uncle Joe was a mailman. No one understands dog behavior better than a U.S.P.S. letter carrier.

Our discussion drifted to his childhood family dog. Blackie is a bit of a family legend. My favorite tale recounts how Blackie could be relied on to take a trip to the local grocery store where he'd pick up a package and carry it home. Blackie even knew to cross to the other side of the street if another dog was approaching, lest he get into a tussle over the goods he was carrying.

My uncle fondly recalled a story about Blackie.

"Whenever I was in the neighborhood, if Blackie was out roaming around, I would whistle and wherever he was, he'd come running. When I came home on leave from the service, immediately after I got off the bus a few blocks from home, I began to whistle. Within no time, here came Blackie."

At this point, my uncle stopped and, with his eyes misty, said, "Hang on while I compose myself. He was a great dog."

My uncle is a man who once chased down a dog that snapped at him while he was delivering mail. Energized by a combination of anger and insulted ego, Uncle Joe chased that dog through several neighborhood yards and even over fences. Uncle Joe ain't no wimp. Yet, here he was, relating a story from nearly 65 years earlier and he was moved nearly to tears.

My point in relating this story is to demonstrate that most men, regardless of how they might project, have a soft spot in their hearts for their dogs. After all, isn't the saying "man's best friend" and don't we refer to a "boy and his dog"?

I truly think most men simply need to be shown that just because they, like Uncle Joe, can connect with their soft spot, it doesn't make them soft. My guess is that if you tell my Uncle Joe that he's "soft" he'll chase you through a few backyards.

So What's the Story?

Take a stroll around your neighborhood and observe the way men interact with their dogs. I guarantee you won't see much positive interaction taking place.

At your next group training class, note how many men are in attendance. Typically you'll see a number of women alone (even though they have a spouse or significant other). You'll rarely see a man alone. When a couple attends, men often drop out after a few sessions. Have you experienced the phenomenon of the absentee husband during your private, in-home training sessions? This is not to say that there aren't many male dog owners who are involved; clearly there are. But in my experience, they are not the rule.

I strongly suspect that many dog owners, but particularly men, are uncomfortable about having to employ the services of a trainer. For some, it's a statement that they've lost control of the situation. When that trainer is a woman, those feelings are magnified. I won't go as far as to say that a male dog owner is rooting *against* the female trainer being successful, but for many men, it's easier to say, "See? I knew the dog had issues," rather than to embrace the idea that "she was able to achieve what I wasn't."

Dog training is not like fixing an appliance; we can't just say "trust me, it works" and let the result (a functioning appliance) speak for itself. We must concern ourselves with whether or not customers are embracing our positive methods. After all, if we fix a customer's toaster oven, it doesn't matter if the owner speaks nicely to it each time ➤

he pops in his morning English muffin. But if a client is not plugged into our positive training methods, it's like trying to cook an English muffin without the toaster being plugged in.

Men are from Mars So, It Would Be to Your Benefit to Learn to Speak Martian

One of the strongest criticisms positive method trainers have of aversive trainers is that their methods are simplistic, "one size fits all." They are trainers who haven't spent time learning about the nuances of what makes a dog tick. They haven't spent the time learning about the unique biological, physical and emotional foundations that are the underpinnings of all canine behavior.

Yet how many female trainers have spent time learning about factors which motivate the behavior of male dog owners? (Note: Please put down your pitchforks and torches. The only reason I cite this particular mixed gender relationship is because female trainers are already familiar with the workings of a female dog owner's mind.)

Considering that our success as trainers is directly related to how well we reach the dog owner, being unaware of male motivators is somewhat similar to the aversive trainers not understanding what motivates canines.

Did you know the following?

- Recent studies have shown female and male brains respond differently during stressful situations. Using Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), Dr. Jiongjiong Wang, PhD, was able to determine that during stressful situations, the blood flow in a man's brain tends to increase in the right prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that triggers "fight or flight" response, while in a women, blood flow increases to the limbic system, which is associated with a more nurturing and friendly response.¹ A man is unlikely to engage in flight during stressful moments in a training session. Therefore, fight is the strongest response he feels, which may explain why many men resort to trying to dominate the dog during these moments.
- Men are more single-minded with regard to problem solving and thinking because the male brain is more compartmentalized than a woman's.² This translates into men being more black and white in their thinking. Training often requires us to spend our time in the gray areas and adjust our approach as situational changes occur.
- Because of a higher concentration of connective fibers, the right hemisphere of a woman's brain, which processes emotions, is better connected to the left side which controls verbal abilities and expression.² Therefore, a woman can more easily and effectively express what she feels in verbal terms than a man, whose brain is more compartmentalized. Even if a man wanted to communicate positive emotions to a dog through excited, sweet, happy sounds, his brain structure limits his ability to do so in an effective manner.

- Tests clearly show that boys excel in "spatial relations" such as building something out of blocks. The male brain is constructed to perform more effectively when dealing with objects and visual stimuli. On the other hand, the female brain is better equipped to respond to sensory stimuli and verbal cues.³ Men are better suited to learn from demonstrations than lectures.
- Women are more able to distinguish very subtle changes in sound, emotional expression, movements, and other physical cues.⁴ Training requires us to notice the slightest changes in cues from owners and their dogs; women are better equipped to do so.
- For short time frames, women can more effectively store disconnected and random information than men.² Women can more easily connect the seemingly disconnected dots that appear during training sessions, in order to determine the most effective way to train dogs and coach their owners.

A Better Burger and Beer

There's a reason that aversive technique trainers have captured the attention of many men. These trainers aren't bogged down by science and theoretical discussion. They present simple, direct ideas in pictures and engage in little discussion about scientific theory. Their approach to training is the equivalent of a burger and a beer for dinner. And it's an approach that speaks directly to the male brain structure. No wonder we see so many men embracing this type of training.

But just because positive reinforcement training has scientific underpinnings doesn't mean we can't make these methods accessible to the male brain. In fact, if presented properly, in accessible terms, we can serve a much better burger and beer than the aversive trainers.

So, grab your chef's hat and check back in with the next issue of *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog* when I discuss how to tackle the challenges that face all of us when coaching men in positive reinforcement training methods.

References:

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3. Wilson, E.O. (1992). *Sociobiology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
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