

Reality TV versus Real Life

Have you seen the program “The Biggest Loser”? This is a reality TV program where overweight people vie to lose the most weight and win huge cash prizes. Week after week, the program depicts the competitors running, lifting, sweating, climbing and pushing away from the dinner table, with each episode ending at a weigh-in to let us know how much progress has been made. Many of us can relate to the trials these folks go through, as they carefully consider everything they do and its impact on their success, and we cheer for them as they achieve their goals. No one would expect it to take less effort to get those amazing results.

So why are so many people willing to believe that dog training and behavior problems as long-standing and complex as the ones people face in “The Biggest Loser” can be solved in a single television episode?



Gone In 60 Seconds?

The reality is that good dog training takes work, a lot of consistency and tons of commitment. As with any other improvement program, it takes some time and effort to practice the behaviors to fluency in order to get the desired results. While some problems can be improved with only a few minor changes in management or handling, most training and behavior programs take a bit more effort.

You’ll see many TV dog training programs where very intense problems are seemingly ‘cured’ in just a few minutes by the change of body posture on the part of the owner or by uttering a particular syllable in a certain way. But in reality, long-term training and behavior problems are just not going to go away in minutes!

Be A Critical Thinker

Every TV dog training program has some good and not-so-good points mixed in there. It’s really up to you to decide what to keep, what to toss in the way of advice, and what “tips” you’ll pick up from these shows. Here are a few points to consider as you evaluate each episode:

- **Don’t Try This At Home.** If your TV dog-training program starts out with a disclaimer, take it seriously! Some TV-personality trainers have good dog-handling skills that may not transfer successfully to you through the airwaves, so you’re probably not going to be able to successfully replicate their results at home. Ask yourself if you’d feel comfortable doing this yourself or having your children do it. Also, note if the TV trainer or owner is bitten or injured during the session; if so, this is NOT a technique you’ll want to implement on your own.
- **One Size Does Not Fit All!** The same apparent behavior problem or training challenge may have many different causes, and therefore many different solutions. So if you’re not a trained dog trainer, you can’t assume that the miracle cure you observed on TV will apply to your dog, and you can’t assume that your execution of that technique will be as effective as what you observed on the (heavily-edited) TV program. How many ‘takes’ do you get in real life?
- **Sounds of Silence.** As you watch your TV dog training program, turn off the sound so you’re not influenced by voice-overs, dramatic music and other sounds that may influence your judgment. Then just watch the dogs. Do they seem to be willing participants in the process or are they stressed, frightened or worse, being hurt? Is the end result a happy, engaged and friendly dog or has the dog just shut down and

“given up?” By observing these signals this way, you can make some better decisions about whether this method you’re watching is the one for you.

- **It’s All About Me!** Most folks are amazed at how much their dog’s behavior is influenced by their own. So watch your TV dog-training program carefully to see how much training the dog’s owners are getting. With proper instructions, whatever results are achieved can be maintained once the trainer has left and the credits roll. Embarrassing and reprimanding the humans doesn’t count, either! A good trainer or behavior consultant will educate the humans in a judgment-free environment without engendering guilt or other bad feelings.
- **There’s Some Good Stuff in There!** Most American companion dogs don’t get enough exercise, so encouraging people to get their dogs out for more activities is a good thing. Just remember that huge amounts of exercise doesn’t really cure problems by itself but can tend to mask problems by simply exhausting the poor creature!

Many companion dogs don’t have enough structure in their lives, either, at least not in a way they can comprehend. Not knowing where he fits in the family and household can result in unwanted behaviors on the part of your dog. Working with a qualified trainer, you can understand how to convey this message to your dog in a way that’s meaningful to him. Better communication makes everyone happier!

Just as with everything else we see on TV, be sure to keep in mind that those programs are there for the entertainment value. While watching them, it’s important to keep your eyes, ears and mind open. Regular viewing of the National Geographic Channel or PBS really wouldn’t be a good substitute for a solid education for your kids, and so it goes with TV dog training. Watch those programs with a critical eye and make sure to discuss what you see with your favorite dog trainer; you and your dog will be happy you did.

For more information on the Association of Pet Dog Trainers,
visit our Web site at www.apdt.com or call 1-800-PET-DOGS (738-3647) or email information@apdt.com.