

Trainer

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She also tests the dogs and makes recommendations to the owners. The emphasis is on educating the owners "about where they are and how they got there," she said.

A weekly private lesson consists mostly of teaching the owner how to be a trainer, "the dog already knows how to be a dog," she said.

Keroack teaches dogs substitute behavior for undesirable behavior. She trains a puppy to go outside to relieve itself, or not to jump on people by giving them a substitute action, like a sit-stay command.

Things like tone of voice are important, she said. "Most people yell at their dogs too much. People get in the habit of repeating themselves because they don't know how to enforce the command."

Teach the dog he only has to mind when you raise your voice "and you've got nothing left when they're a hundred yards away from you."

Keroack wasn't always this savvy when it came to dogs. She learned by making lots of mistakes with Rowdy, a male Chesapeake. "That dog was born teacher," she said. "He'd growl at me about 18 times a day and body slam me once in awhile."

"As soon as I started using my head ... we made some progress and he turned out to be, probably, the best dog I'm ever going to have."

Keroack, who got involved in hunting because of her dogs' energy, looks for what a dog can teach its owner.

"My dogs aren't afraid to make decisions on their own," she said, often allowing them to work out of her sight retrieving birds.

The dogs have grown to trust her, too.

She works with Chesapeake Bay Retrievers, which are supposed to be difficult but, she said, "It's very unfortunate, because I haven't found them to be anything like their reputation."

Keroack tailors things to the individual dogs instead of a preset program.

Terms like vicious, hard-headed, stubborn, defiant, "I haven't found any of that," she said. "I find these animals to be extremely intelligent, with a very strong sense of dignity and they don't want to be pushed around. The bad reputation comes from people who try to train them like you would a Labrador and bully them into doing things."

She doesn't use a lot of repetition, which some breeds need, nor a lot of correction.

"I find if I do my job properly and show the dog what I want them to do ... they're going to get the reward quicker," she said.

Initially, she puts more responsibility on herself but, "you've got to start with a good dog."

The public doesn't generally realize the commitment in owning a dog or that genetics play a part, Keroack said. "If you don't have good genetics, you're not going to wind up with a very pleasant dog."

She now has three Chesaapeakes, Storm, 4 years old, her daughter, Autumn, 16 months and Storm's sire, Thunder, 8 years old.

Storm has a "tremendous amount of natural talent for the field work," she said. "She is a wonderful dog in the obedience, very flashy and showy."

The pride in her animals, whether her own or those she has bred, comes through in Keroack's voice. She's come a long way from Rodney Farms in Scottsville, where she did general farm work. □