

IACP

International Association of Canine Professionals

THE CANINE PROFESSIONAL JOURNAL



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Ivan Balabanov

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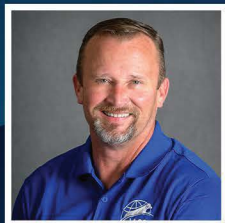
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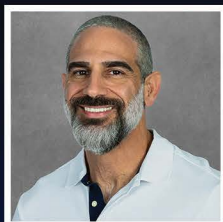
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Hello IACP Members,

The IACP is proud to celebrate another year of growth and progress within our global community of canine professionals. The success of our 2025 Annual Educational Conference demonstrated the incredible passion and dedication of our members, as we came together to share knowledge, strengthen professional connections, and elevate standards in our industry. We're already looking forward to next year's conference in Newport Beach, California, which promises to be an inspiring event filled with cutting-edge education and opportunities to connect.

As part of our ongoing mission to advance professionalism in the canine industry, we are thrilled to see a steady increase in the number of certifications being pursued by our members. These certifications not only raise the bar for excellence and education but also strengthen our ability to influence legislation that supports the rights of dog owners and professionals worldwide.

In addition, we are excited to announce more IACP Pack Meet Ups across the U.S., offering members the chance to network, collaborate, and build strong regional support systems. Alongside these in-person opportunities, we have engaging webinars scheduled with even more to come, ensuring that education and professional development remain accessible no matter where you are in the world.

Thank you for your commitment to growth, education, and advocacy. Together, we are building a stronger, more unified voice for canine professionals everywhere.

-The IACP Board of Directors

Message From the President

Jason Purgason, IACP President

Dear Members,

It is my honor and privilege to extend my warmest greetings to each of you as we continue our shared mission to elevate the standards of professionalism, education, and collaboration within the global canine community. The International Association of Canine Professionals stands as a unified voice for dog professionals worldwide—trainers, behaviorists, handlers, and advocates—each contributing to the advancement of humane and effective practices that strengthen the bond between people and dogs.

To our long-standing members, I offer my sincere gratitude for your continued commitment and support. Your involvement, expertise, and passion remain the cornerstone of our association's success. Through your participation in our committees, conferences, and educational programs, you continue to shape the direction and credibility of our profession.

To our new members joining us from across the globe—welcome to the IACP family. Whether you are just beginning your professional journey or bring decades of experience, your voice and perspective are invaluable to our community. We also encourage all



members to take part in our **PLUS ONE Annual Membership Campaign**, a grassroots initiative designed to grow our organization by having each member recruit at least one new professional into our ranks. By doing so, we expand our influence, strengthen our community, and amplify our collective voice for the betterment of dogs and their owners worldwide. To learn more about the campaign and its potential impact, please visit our website.

We are also pleased to welcome our newest Board Member, **Antonio Diaz**, who has been appointed as the **Director of Oversight for the Education Committee**. Antonio brings a wealth of experience and insight that will further strengthen our

commitment to providing exceptional educational opportunities for our members.

I would also like to take a moment to thank each of you who attended and supported the **IACP Annual Educational Conference** in **Savannah, Georgia**, this past July. Your energy, engagement, and enthusiasm made this year's event an incredible success and a true celebration of our shared profession.

Looking ahead, I encourage everyone to mark their calendars for our **2026 Annual Educational Conference**, taking place **August 18–20, 2026, in beautiful Newport Beach, California**. We have an **exciting announcement**

forthcoming about next year's event—one that will undoubtedly inspire and energize anyone committed to advancing their professional development as a trainer and dog professional. Stay tuned for details in the coming weeks.

This year has also brought a series of **intriguing and informative webinars** throughout the summer, featuring experts from various disciplines in the

canine industry. We are thrilled to share that there are many more webinars and educational opportunities scheduled for the **fall and winter months**, offering even more ways for members to continue learning and engaging with peers from around the world. As we move forward, the IACP remains steadfast in our mission to promote professionalism,



protect the rights of dog professionals, and foster a culture of collaboration and growth. Together, we will continue to build upon the strong foundation laid by those who

came before us, ensuring that our organization remains a trusted leader in the world of canine education and advocacy.

Thank you for being part of this journey. I look forward to the continued progress we will make together as members of this remarkable organization.

TOGETHER, we remain **IN SAFE HANDS**.

Best regards,

Jason Purgason, IACP President





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Beyond the Divide: Building Rescue Partnerships that Save Dogs and Grow Your Business

By: Jenny Nordin

At the IACP conference in Savannah, many folks were surprised when I introduced myself as a Rescue Director. The general ethos is that rescues and “balanced trainers” are at odds — and honestly, that’s fair. The dogma of Force-Free, an obsession with stories of suffering, and the twisted priorities of *No Kill* permeate rescue culture.

But not all rescues believe we can “Save Them All!” with love and patience. Some of us live in reality, where dogs come with teeth, trauma, and a laundry list of quirks that require more than treats. We focus on pragmatic solutions and outcomes, and see competent, compassionate training as an effective alternative to medication or euthanasia. We are not only open to partnering; we will become your allies and advocates.

You may be thinking: Okay, but where are the rescues that don’t idolize Zak George? (They’re not exactly broadcasting an appreciation for e-collars on Instagram.) Or maybe you’ve been burned before, stuck with a dog, no plan and no paycheck.

I get it! But I also know firsthand that when rescues and balanced trainers work well together, it builds businesses, strengthens communities, and saves lives.

The Dog Who Forced Me to Level Up



Enter Brigid, a female bully with severe separation anxiety and dog aggression, impervious to Prozac, Trazodone, or any amount of hot dogs. Not one to give up, I enlisted the help of a new-to-the-area Michael Ellis—educated trainer who offered to “help any rescue dog.”

Even with professional training, Brigid wasn't a magical success story. She was a 0.1% dog, fiercely committed to her particular brand of crazy, and I nearly threw in the towel more than once. (So did my husband, who seriously questioned what he'd signed up for with me.) After more than two years, we were granted the rarest of gifts: a unicorn adopter. But the true fairytale was how the experience shaped me and the entire trajectory of the rescue.

I leveled up my toolbox and realized we needed a *community* of aligned people — fosters and trainers alike. I attended seminars, workshops, and shadow programs, forging connections with trainers and bringing them into the community as partners, not hired guns. And something amazing happened: Our fosters leveled up too, transforming from everyday dog owners into behavior fosters and professionals capable of supporting dogs once



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doomed to meds or death. We were in it together.

Nine years post-Brigid, Dog Gone Seattle has built a foster and trainer network capable of taking in failed dogs and the steady stream of adoptables. This network is invaluable, stepping in quickly to keep dogs safe in their homes. Adoptions don't end with paperwork. Sometimes a trainer flags when a placement isn't safe, or offers just enough support to move a family from overwhelmed to empowered.

Training partnerships haven't just helped the rescue — they've helped trainers thrive. In Seattle (where the Kool-Aid flows strong), we've helped partners break through the noise and build businesses with waitlists. Sure, there was drama: social media storms from keyboard warriors screaming "abuse" at a prong collar while sending death threats. But outcomes speak louder. Our reputation rests on results: hundreds — sometimes over a thousand — dogs placed each year without compromising ethics.

Those of us in the trenches have witnessed beautiful transformations through competent training, and we need qualified trainers willing to stand with us.

More Than a Good Deed

Great trainers find joy in helping dogs and people, and can be the difference between life and death for rescue dogs. But the right partnership isn't just good

for rescue dogs; it's good for business too! Win-win.

Most dog owners are drowning in conflicting information online. When a trusted rescue says, "Here's who we recommend," people listen. Our "Recommended Trainers" page gets thousands of hits monthly, directly translating into clients for our partners.

Rescue work also grows your skills. Gina Cooley of Double Down Dog Training has shared that it was always the foster dogs who sparked her growth, presenting complex and fascinating cases you won't encounter in run-of-the-mill reactivity lessons. With rescue-owned dogs, you also have freedom to explore techniques with curiosity, without the pressure of client timelines. You can also hone communication skills with fosters before expanding new programs to paying clients.

And one more perk: a trusted rescue partner can serve as a safety net for client dogs who need rehoming. Trainers invested in outcomes but not looking to fill their homes with "reject" dogs appreciate having a reliable path to qualified, successful placements.

How to Identify a Good Rescue Partner

Not every rescue is a good fit. Tayah Kiner (To the Point Dog Training) says, "I chose to volunteer with DGS because they value flexibility in training,

transparency with fosters and adopters, and open communication with staff.”

Key factors to consider:

- **Non-Profit Status:** 501(c)(3) allows you to deduct donated expenses.
 - **Financial Stability:** Review 990s to assess financial health and investment with established training partners.
 - **Risk Management:** Contracts for ownership/responsibility; liability insurance.
- **Organizational Support:** Fosters need food, supplies, and vet care.
 - **Timelines & Expectations:** What happens when training ends? Transparency is key.
 - **Difficult Decisions:** Discuss behavioral euthanasia policies early.
 - **Adoption Outcomes:** How will adopters be screened? Will you have input? Is adopter training included? Is it sponsored?



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Finding a rescue that actually wants your help:

If you're eager to partner with a rescue but don't know where to start, reach out to local rescues to volunteer as a foster or trainer and be transparent about your methods. If you're hosting a workshop, invite local rescues to attend with a challenging dog. While attending industry events, note rescues present and introduce yourself.

While some rescues hesitate to collaborate with balanced trainers, many evolve when they see results. Remember, rescues are made up of people who should genuinely care about helping dogs.

Before you hop into bed with a new rescue partner, do a little sleuthing for red flags:

- **Reviews:** Always take with a grain of salt (skim past disgruntled would-be adopters) but beware repeated reports of undisclosed medical or behavior issues.
- **Social Media:** Watch out for dogmatic statements, sugar-coating serious issues, or posts that devalue people.
- **Ask Around:** Community reputation matters.

If in doubt, start small to see firsthand how the rescue operates. A successful partnership is built on clear expectations, transparency, and mutual respect for expertise. When everyone

rows in the same direction, your energy won't just help the dog in front of you; the effects ripple outward, benefiting many more dogs.

Practical Training Tips for Rescues

While you're carefully selecting your rescue partners, a good rescue will also vet you. We've ended partnerships when necessary: our partners represent us in the community and must reflect our values. While we work with trainers from many backgrounds (from self-taught to Nepopo Gold) we look for professionalism, fair handling, and timely communication of behavioral or medical concerns.



The advertisement features a German Shepherd dog standing in a field, looking towards the camera. In the foreground, there is a collection of pet training equipment, including a black harness, a blue and red leash, and several green and blue balls. The background shows a blurred landscape with trees and a blue sky. The text 'PetKORE' and 'Coastal pet products inc.' is visible in the top right corner. Below the dog, the text 'Trusted by Professionals. Designed for Performance.' is displayed. At the bottom, there is a QR code and the text 'Shop Now! www.coastalpet.com'. The bottom right corner lists 'Walking | Training | Grooming | Enrichment'.

We also value flexibility in training for the dog's next chapter. Unlike paying clients, fosters and adopters are not likely to adhere to strict take-home protocols. Trainers who can adapt programs – easing structure over time –

help prepare the dog for success in a more 'normal' home environment. Creativity also matters. Many fosters and adopters won't master advanced tools, so identifying simple solutions (i.e. squirt bottle > e-collar) when possible is a win.

Finally, simple and straight-forward communication is key. Fosters and adopters didn't sign up for a university-level course in learning theory. Save talk of quadrants and stress inoculation for the IACP cocktail hour, and bring clarity with clear, jargon-free instructions.

The Take-Home Lesson

Rescue work doesn't have to be chaotic. If you've been burned before, try again — this time with clear boundaries and careful vetting. The right partnership creates a mutually beneficial ecosystem: trainers grow their skills and business, rescues place more dogs successfully, and dogs get a fair shake.

If you'd like to learn more, reach out! And if you're in the greater Seattle area, we'd (probably) love to work with you.

About the Author

Jenny Nordin is the Director of Dog Gone Seattle, the largest foster-based rescue in the Pacific Northwest and host of the "So You Want to Run a Dog Rescue" podcast. She's worked hands-on with thousands of dogs, including some very challenging cases, and helped place over 6,000 dogs in nine years with only a handful of behavioral euthanasias. Dog Gone Seattle's success is largely credited to its extensive network of trusted trainer partnerships.

From One-Time Sales to Recurring Revenue: Why the "Magic Wand" Model is Failing Dog Trainers

By: Sherry Boyer

The dog training industry has a problem. For years, trainers have been taught to sell "lifetime communication guarantees" or even "lifetime access to classes" as value-adds to their programs. The logic seems sound: offer ongoing support after a program ends, and clients will feel they're getting more value. But this approach is fundamentally flawed, creating what I call the "magic wand" problem: trainers are inadvertently selling the idea that training is a one-time fix while simultaneously telling clients "there's no magic wand in dog training."

This contradiction is killing businesses and shortchanging dogs, owners, and trainers alike. It's time for a fundamental shift from one-time sales to monthly recurring revenue (MRR) models that align with the reality of ongoing behavioral development and create sustainable business growth.

The "Magic Wand" Problem: How Lifetime Guarantees Undermine Success

When trainers offer lifetime "communication" guarantees for "the

behaviors the dog came in with," or unlimited access to classes after a program, they're sending a mixed message. On one hand, they tell clients that dog training requires consistency, patience, and ongoing reinforcement. On the other hand, they structure their services to suggest that after a board and train program or four to twelve private sessions, the dog should be "done" with training.

This creates unrealistic expectations for dog owners. They invest in a program expecting their dog to be permanently "fixed," and when new challenges arise (as they inevitably do with adolescent dogs, life changes, or simply the passage of time) owners feel frustrated or believe the training "didn't work." Meanwhile, trainers find themselves providing ongoing support for free, unable to monetize the expertise that clients continue to need.

The lifetime guarantee model also perpetuates the feast-or-famine cycle that plagues so many dog training businesses. Because the model assumes clients will rarely use ongoing support, trainers must constantly acquire new clients to maintain revenue. This creates an exhausting

focus on lead generation rather than client success and retention.

Understanding Monthly Recurring Revenue for Dog Trainers

Monthly recurring revenue represents a fundamental shift in how dog training services are structured and delivered. Instead of selling training as a finite product with unlimited aftercare (that the trainer hopes the client won't use), MRR models position training as an ongoing service relationship that evolves with the dog and family's needs.

This approach recognizes key truths about dog behavior: dogs continue learning throughout their lives, and their needs change as they mature, encounter new environments, or face life transitions. Consistency and reinforcement are crucial for maintaining trained behaviors. Without ongoing practice, even well-trained dogs can develop new behavioral challenges or lose previously mastered skills.

The Financial Foundation: Predictable Revenue vs. Constant Hustle

The financial benefits of MRR extend beyond predictable income, but that advantage alone can transform a business. Traditional dog training businesses operate on a project-based

model where each client represents a finite revenue opportunity. Once a program ends, that revenue stream stops, requiring constant replacement with new clients.

Consider a trainer who typically charges \$1,500 for a six-week private lesson program. Under the traditional model, they might complete 8-10 programs per month, generating \$12,000-\$15,000 in revenue. However, this requires continuously finding 8-10 new clients monthly, a demanding sales and marketing cycle.



With an MRR model, that same trainer might charge \$197 per month for ongoing training support, group sessions, and behavioral guidance. With 75 monthly members, they generate

\$14,775 in recurring revenue before adding any new clients. New members represent growth on top of this foundation rather than replacement revenue.

The compounding effect becomes powerful over time. Each retained client continues generating revenue month after month, while new acquisitions add to the total rather than simply maintaining it. A client who stays for 18

months at \$197 per month represents over \$5,000 in lifetime value- well more than double a traditional program fee.

Building Deeper Client Relationships and Better Outcomes

MRR models fundamentally change the trainer-client relationship from transactional to partnership-based. Instead of rushing to address all issues

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within a limited timeframe, trainers can work with clients at a pace that matches how dogs actually learn.

This approach often produces superior training outcomes because it eliminates the artificial urgency of traditional programs. Clients can focus on mastering one skill before moving to the next, and trainers can provide support as new challenges naturally arise. The ongoing relationship also allows for better customization as trainers learn more about each dog's personality, triggers, and learning style.

Monthly members typically receive regular group sessions, monthly one-on-one check-ins, access to online resources, priority booking for special workshops, and ongoing communication support. And that's just one model of MRR. Imagine creating multiple touchpoints that strengthen the client relationship, which means more referrals.

Operational Efficiency and Reduced Marketing Pressure

Perhaps the most significant operational benefit of MRR models is the dramatic reduction in marketing pressure. Traditional businesses must continuously replace completed clients, creating a perpetual sales cycle that consumes enormous time and energy. With a stable base of recurring clients, trainers can shift focus from constant



acquisition to retention and gradual growth.

This shift enables more strategic marketing efforts. Instead of desperately pursuing any available business, trainers can focus on attracting ideal clients who align with their methods and values. The result is often higher-quality clients who achieve better outcomes and refer others.

Overcoming Implementation Challenges

The most common concern about transitioning to MRR involves client acceptance. Will dog owners commit to ongoing monthly payments instead of traditional packages? This concern often reflects the trainer's discomfort more than actual client resistance.

In reality, many dog owners prefer ongoing support once they understand the benefits. Pet ownership is inherently ongoing, and most owners recognize that their dogs' needs evolve over time. A monthly membership providing continuous access to expertise often feels more valuable than a finite package that leaves them unsupported.

Successful implementation requires clear communication about the value proposition and careful structuring to deliver genuine ongoing value. The key is ensuring members consistently receive value that justifies their monthly investment.



The Future of Dog Training Business Models

The shift from one-time sales to recurring revenue represents a strategic evolution that aligns dog training businesses with the ongoing nature of pet ownership and behavioral

development. This model creates better outcomes for dogs, more satisfied clients, and more sustainable businesses for trainers.

As the pet industry continues evolving and clients become more sophisticated in their expectations, trainers who embrace MRR models position themselves for long-term success. The question isn't whether this evolution will continue, but how quickly trainers will adapt to capture its benefits.

About the Author

Sherry Boyer is a business strategist specializing in helping dog trainers build sustainable, profitable businesses. Through Thriving Dog Business, Dog Trainer Marketing Pro, and ConnectXperts, she teaches proven strategies for implementing recurring revenue models, optimizing pricing structures, and creating systems that reduce overwhelm while increasing profitability. With extensive experience in the dog industry herself and as a consultant to hundreds of others, Sherry has helped dog training professionals transition from feast-or-famine cycles to predictable, scalable business models.

Fast CAT – More than a 100-yard Dash

Improving Race Times – “The Quest for Caido’s Secret Sauce”

By: Jeff Leavitt, CDT

Introduction – Fast CAT Basics

Fast CAT® (Coursing Ability Test) is a timed, 100-yard dash for dogs where titles can be achieved by accumulating points for each qualifying trial. The titles are:

- BCAT (accumulate 150 points)
- DCAT (accumulate 500 points)
- FCAT (accumulate 1000 points)

Additional FCAT titles (FCAT1, FCAT2, etc.) for each additional 500 points.

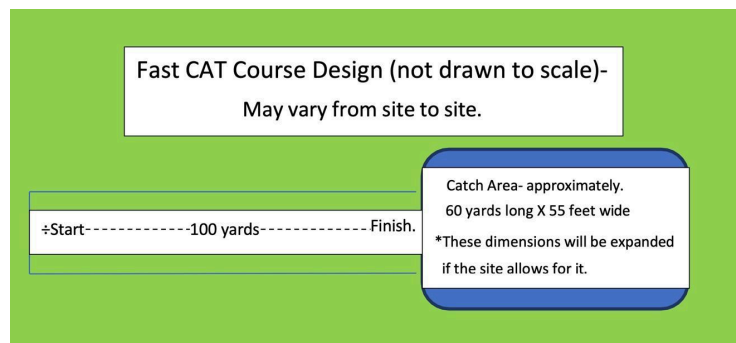
Dogs are run one at a time, and are classified by breed and height at the withers. The handicaps are:

Below 12” has a 2.0 handicap
12” to less than 18” has a 1.5 handicap
Over 18” has a 1.0 handicap

Points (run time is converted to miles per hour, including a provision for the handicap, which is equal to the points earned) are totaled by the AKC and there is a web page where you can check the ranking of your dog.

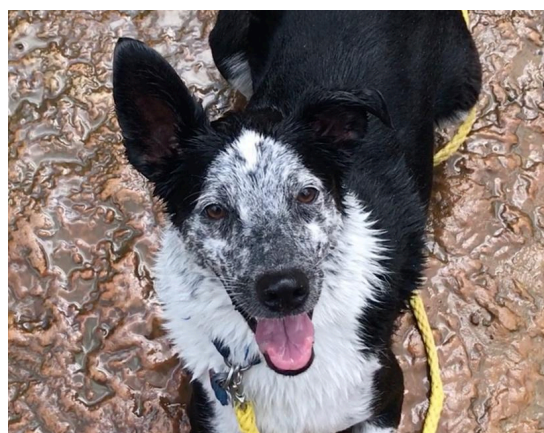
Mixed breeds may also participate, but must be registered with AKC.

This is a course diagram from Time to Fly Performance Dog Sports, LLC:



Two people are required for the run, a releaser in the release area and a catcher in the run-out area. Most of the courses use electronic timing devices, although stop watches may be used.

Caido (pronounced “kīdo”) is my personal dog and trainee for Fast CAT. In Brazilian Portuguese, the word, caído, means “droopy.” You can see from the photo that his left ear is just that: droopy. Hence, the name Caido. I had a DNA test run and these were the results:





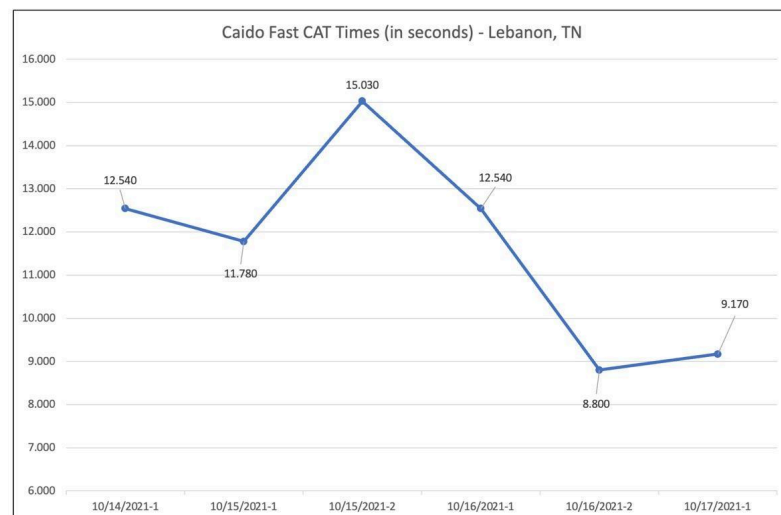
With over 60% herding, it made sense that he might be interested in “the chase.” This became even more apparent with his insatiable desire to “herd” a large ball, chase the lure on a flirt pole, and terrorize squirrels in the yard. Because of this, I thought that he would be a natural for Fast CAT, so I entered him in his first event in October of 2021 in the “All American” category.

ROUND 1: Inaugural Fast CAT Runs – Lebanon, TN

I fully expected him to take off like a rocket, possibly outrunning the lure

with explosive and lightning-fast speed. Of course, reality does not always match expectations. His first run and subsequent runs, although gradually improving, were less than spectacular. On the very first run, he seemed a little confused as to what he was supposed to do, and he did not even complete the run. I was the releaser and my wife Karen was the catcher. The Huntmaster (the person in charge of the releasing area and the release – communicates with lure operator) indicated that the person Caído loves most should be the catcher. With that tip, Karen and I switched positions and his performance improved a little.

The run chart of his times from Lebanon shows his progress through six runs.

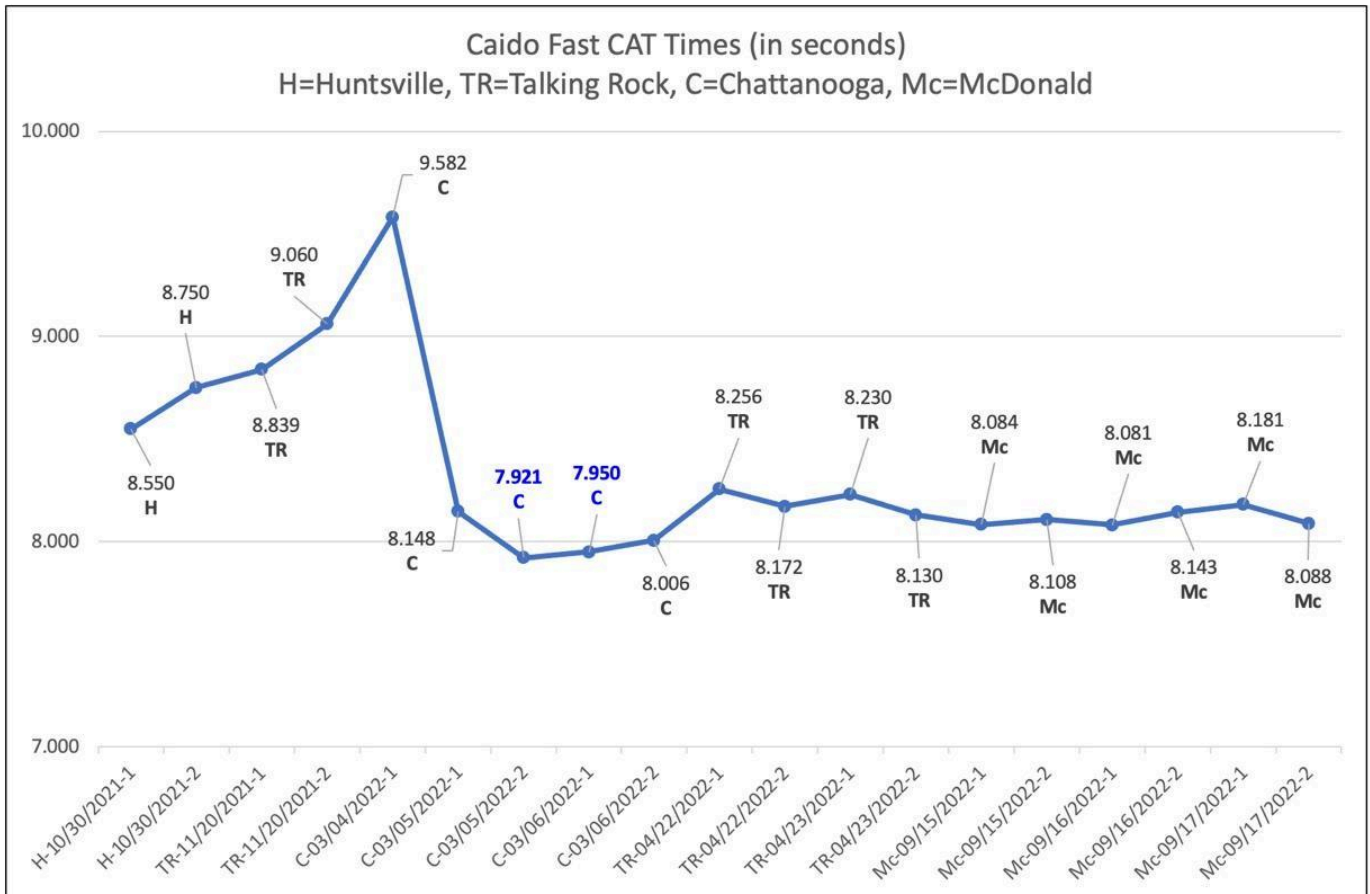


The first four runs were well below my expectations, based on how I had seen him run at home. The last two runs were more acceptable, but I felt he could still run faster.

I began to analyze why the times were so much slower than what I had anticipated, and I concluded that the new environment played the biggest part in the slower times. Caído had never run in a fenced area, chasing two, white plastic bags being pulled on a string. The pulley system and the bags themselves made a very unfamiliar noise, adding to the uniqueness of the environment. But by the end of the Lebanon event, Caído did start to get much more interested in the game.

ROUND 2: Huntsville, AL; Talking Rock, GA (2X); Chattanooga, TN; McDonald, TN

Although I knew that the race times could be improved, my approach remained primarily the same as it had been leading up to Lebanon. I thought that playing fetch and utilizing a flirt pole, though more regularly, would be enough to make a significant impact on the race times. The run chart of his times for Round 2 is shown below.



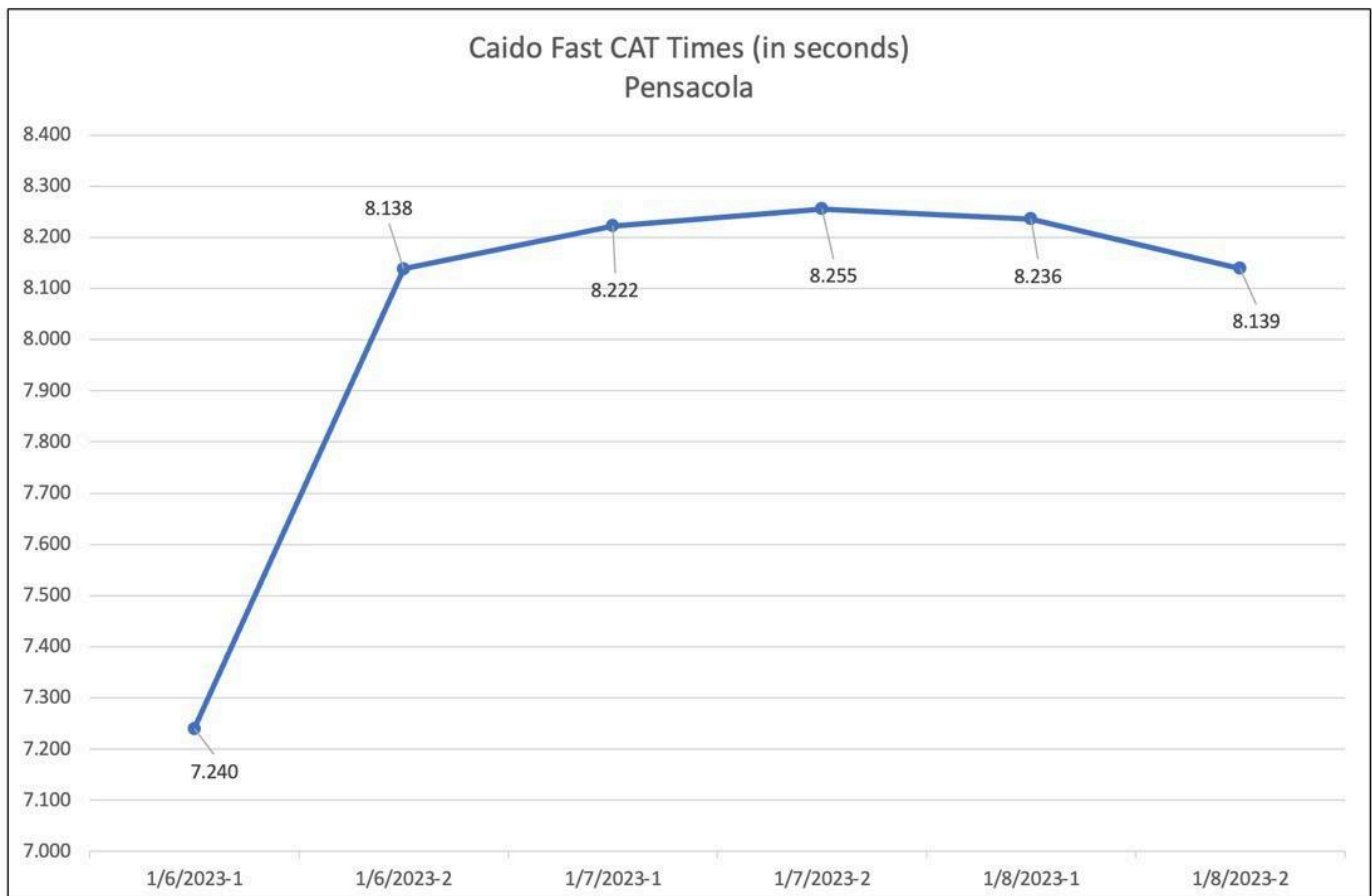
Caído basically continued in Huntsville, Talking Rock, and the first Chattanooga run where he had left off in Lebanon with the exception of two sub-eight second performances in Chattanooga. With very consistent race times hovering at about 8.1 and 8.2 seconds, I decided to make the following changes to his training (including video links):

1. Uphill repeats
<https://youtu.be/N7yM1489ezw>
2. Balance disk for core strengthening
https://youtu.be/Q_GZnwJAZiU
(Front paws)
<https://youtu.be/FypKzITFM68>
(Sit Stand)

3. Walking with a weight vest
4. Swimming short distances
<https://youtu.be/VujnINBFJF4>
5. Vertical jumps
<https://youtu.be/MCOX3y7qHFk>
6. 1 – 2 mile runs with 30-second pickups (faster run) – then switched to walking

ROUND 3: Pensacola, FL

After the first run at Pensacola, I thought that we had discovered Caído's secret sauce – finally! But then we had the remaining five consecutive runs all above 8.1 seconds, which were only slightly better than the previous runs at Knoxville/Talking Rock. There were no changes to the training routine after Pensacola, but B-complex vitamins were added to his diet.

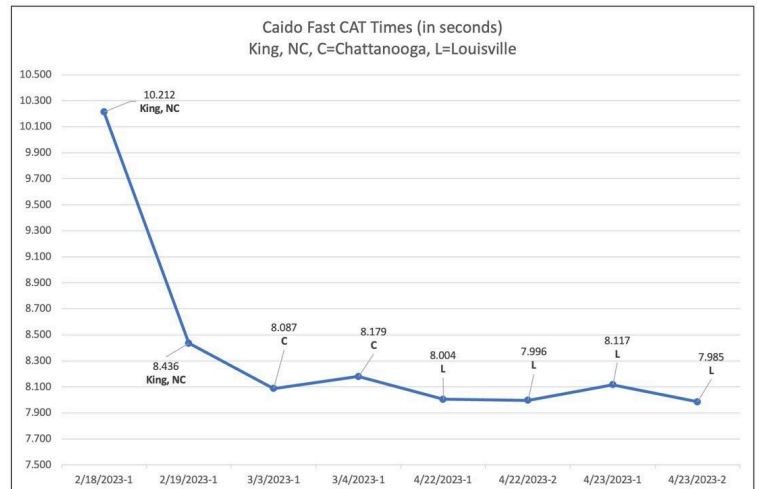


ROUND 4: King, NC; Chattanooga, TN; Louisville, KY

The two results for King were unusually poor, and it was almost like going back in time to Lebanon, 2021. I attributed the slow times to several assignable causes which made these runs outliers. We were getting closer to consistent sub-8 second times, so a few more changes were made:

- 1) Began to incorporate the weight vest into the core training
- 2) Walked longer – from 20 minutes to 1 hour

- 3) Began tracking his weight –
ROUND 1 weight was about
55-56 pounds, ROUND 4 weight
was about 49-50 pounds
(through diet modification)

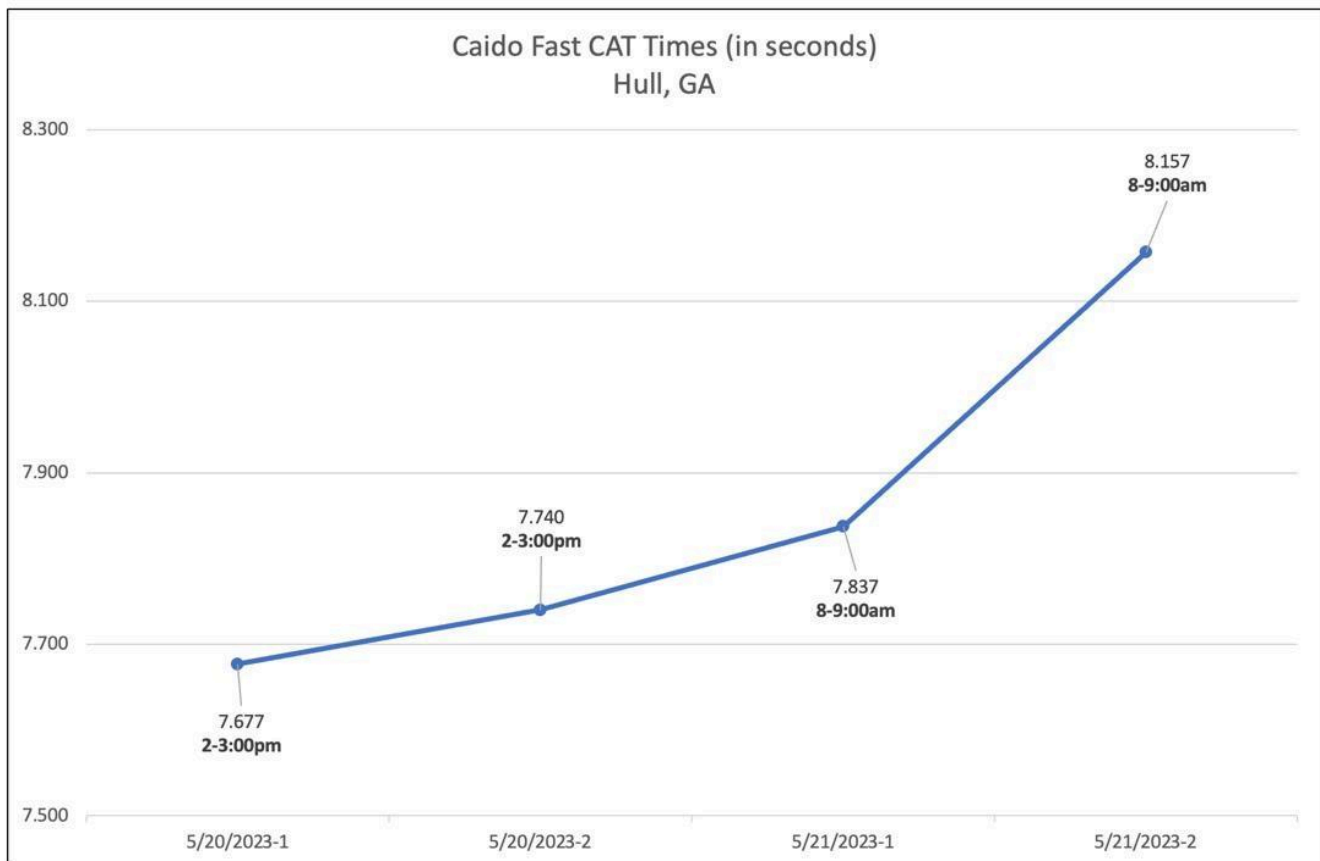


ROUND 5: Hull, GA

Considering the results at King, Chattanooga, and Louisville, the goal for Hull was four runs all under 8.0 seconds. Even though he did not hit the goal of all four runs under 8.0 seconds, I considered 3 out of 4 to be a great success in “the quest for Caído’s



secret sauce.” As additional evidence of improvement, though anecdotal, are these photos from Louisville and Hull. Although the lighting and camera angles are not exactly the same, Caído appears to have more muscle definition and forward power than he did at the Lebanon event.



Final Thoughts and Next Steps

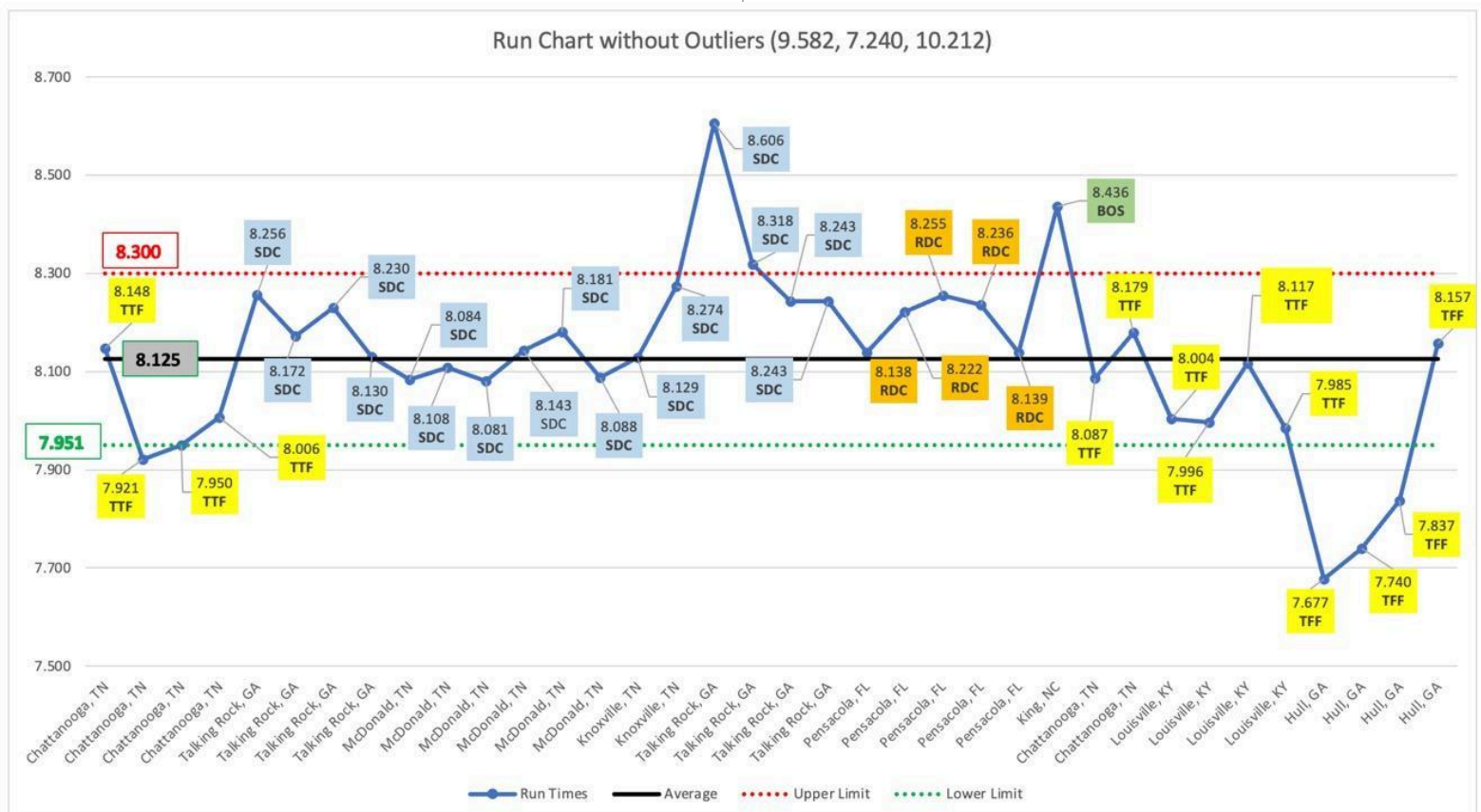
One variable to take into consideration is the lure operator at the event. Of all the lure operators, Time to Fly, LLC produced lower times overall throughout all Rounds.

So, what are the next steps?

- 1) Continue with the current training program, with an emphasis on including weights for strength.
- 2) If possible, attend events that have Time to Fly, LLC as the lure course operator.
- 3) MOST IMPORTANTLY: Regardless of Caído's times, fast or slow, the time spent with him is priceless. This has been and will continue to be a great relationship building process!

About the Author

Jeff Leavitt, IACP-CDT is the owner of Blue Bridge Dog Training in Chattanooga, TN. His primary focus is obedience training and behavior modification for the family dog, with this mission: "To help dog owners and their canine companions achieve that relational sweet spot by providing effective training, clear communication, and relentless pursuit of the desired vision, with honesty, integrity, creativity, and results that deliver happiness." He holds a Master of Project Management degree, is certified as a Project Management Professional (Project Management Institute), and as a Quality Engineer (American Society for Quality). He can be reached by email (jeff@bluebridgedogtraining.com), or phone/text (423-991-8655).



How Veterans, Shelter Dogs, and Trainers Can Work Together

By: Rebecca Pasko

As a Marine Corps veteran, I understand firsthand how hard the transition to civilian life can be—especially when PTSD is part of the picture. For many of us, returning home doesn't mean returning to normal.

When I served in the Marine Corps—first deployed with the Female Engagement Team in Afghanistan and later to Djibouti, Africa—I learned the value of calm under pressure, building trust in unpredictable situations, and the power of connection when words fall short. I didn't know it then, but those same skills would shape another chapter of my life: helping veterans heal with dogs.

Today, I run *Happy With Dogs*, a multi-state training company that partners with Florida Atlantic University (FAU) and the Humane Society of Broward County through a powerful program called CPAWW. We connect veterans living with PTSD to shelter dogs, and we help turn those dogs into their new best friends—or occasionally their service animals.

It's not always clean or easy. But it's some of the most meaningful work I've ever done.



The CPAWW Model: Partnering Shelter Dogs With Veterans

This program starts by identifying shelter dogs who have the potential to thrive with a veteran, not just perform tasks. That means evaluating for temperament, flexibility, environmental stability, and connection—not perfection. A rare few dogs go on to be fully task-trained service dogs. But in most cases, the dog provides emotional support, companionship, and a daily sense of structure and purpose.

Happy With Dogs leads the matching and training process, while FAU oversees ongoing research to study how these partnerships impact PTSD symptoms and overall quality of life for

veterans. It's a rare collaboration between applied training and academic study—and the results speak volumes.

Each case is deeply individualized. Some veterans are in transitional housing, dealing with long-standing trauma, or rebuilding after isolation. Some dogs have never lived in a home, some end up having severe anxiety and phobias.

None of it is simple—but when it works, it changes lives.

Our team trains both ends of the leash. That means helping the dog develop the foundational behaviors needed for home life, task training, and public access (if applicable). But more importantly, it means meeting the veteran where they're at—emotionally, mentally, logistically. It means we adapt training plans constantly. It means we emphasize relationship-building over rigid protocols.

This work takes patience. Flexibility. And a deep respect for the human-animal bond.

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You don't need to be part of a university research team or a nonprofit to support this kind of work. You just need the mindset, the willingness to adapt, and a skill set rooted in empathy and behavior science.

Here's how you can start making an impact:

1. Understand Why Trauma-Informed Training Is Essential for This Work

Working with veterans and shelter dogs means working with individuals who may carry invisible wounds. Trauma-informed training is a framework that emphasizes safety, choice, collaboration, trust, and empowerment. It's about recognizing that both humans and dogs may carry unseen experiences that shape how they respond to stress, structure, or even praise.

This might mean pausing obedience drills to focus on decompression—walking, talking, or even doing nothing. If you planned to teach recall, but the veteran is having a hard time coping with the environment, you need to scrap your training plans and help get the veteran to a location where they feel safe and

secure (probably far away, with nothing at their back). It might mean replacing traditional lesson plans with short, manageable steps tailored to how a veteran processes information.

This approach prevents shutdown, increases resilience, and builds trust that translates to lasting behavioral change.

2. Make Yourself a Resource to Local Veterans and Shelters

Many veteran organizations want to help but don't know where to start when it comes to training. Shelters may have dogs with potential but no pathway for pairing them with veterans.

You can become that bridge—offering evaluations, fostering partnerships, or simply showing up as a trainer who gets it. Sometimes, one well-matched dog and one committed trainer can open a door that's been shut for years.

3. Adapt Your Services to Fit Real-Life Needs

Not every veteran can attend weekly private lessons. Some don't have transportation. Some are juggling appointments, work, or therapy. Offer flexible formats—hybrid training, remote support, sliding-scale sessions, or programs that blend emotional support and foundational obedience.

Be prepared to shift timelines, meet people where they are, and build



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sustainable training plans that allow for stops and restarts without judgment.

4. Redefine What Success Looks Like

Success isn't always a task-trained dog with perfect public access behavior. Sometimes, it's a dog who gets their person out of bed. A leash that becomes a lifeline. A moment of calm in a panic spiral.

If we only measure outcomes by certification or titles, we miss the deeper impact of this work. Emotional support is a valid, powerful outcome.

This work is about more than training—it's about trust. It's about giving people and dogs the tools they need to navigate a world that hasn't always been kind to them.

When veterans are matched with the right dogs, and supported by trainers who understand trauma, patience, and

behavior, the result is a quiet kind of transformation. Not always flashy. Not always fast. But real.

If you're a trainer looking for deeper impact, I hope you'll consider stepping into this space. There's a massive need, and a powerful opportunity, for those of us willing to blend empathy with expertise.

Because sometimes, saving a dog really does save a person too.

Author Bio

Rebecca Pasko is the Owner and Founder of Happy With Dogs in Miami & Michigan. Rebecca has been

professionally training dogs since 2012, with over 25+ years of overall experience in animal behavior, starting from her childhood passion. Rebecca holds numerous certifications, including Training Without Conflict Certified, Aggression in Dogs Master Course, AKC CGC Evaluator, and more.. Rebecca is a Marine Corps Veteran; her dedication to education and innovation is evident through her ongoing professional development, including mentorships, seminars, and annual conferences. As the founder of the C-P.A.W.W. program collaboration, Rebecca continues to empower Veterans and their pets to thrive together.

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The Learning Curve

Previously published in Volume 1, Issue 2 (2000) of
The Safe Hands Professionals

By: Dick Russell

Dogs, like all higher animals, can learn from the consequences of their actions. When a dog does something that causes a result he finds desirable, he will continue doing that thing. When he does something that causes a result he finds undesirable, he will tend to quit doing that thing. The closer the timing between the thing the dog does and the good or bad result, the more strongly he makes the association between the two and the sooner he learns. The lapse between a dog's action and the resultant reward or punishment must not exceed two seconds. He will always associate the reward or punishment with the last thing he did. If within two seconds the dog does anything else, he won't make the desired connection.

That said, there are times when it is desirable to delay a reward to extend the length of time that he will continue performing a particular behavior, such as a sit-stay. If he doesn't continue performing for the required time span, he won't be rewarded. On the other hand, punishment should never occur more than two seconds after a transgression.

Over time a dog learns through repetition, and from the moment when you first teach



a new command until you can be sure he will always remember its meaning takes about 33 days. Any day during this learning period when he does not have an opportunity to practice the lesson, he not only doesn't learn anything, he loses some of what he has learned.

The first time that you show your dog how to do something, he can remember it for only about five seconds. It's in his short-term memory. This is similar to what happens when we first look up a telephone number: If we have to call again a half hour later, we have to look up the number again.

Most people go home from their first obedience class feeling pretty good. They were able to get their pet to do a number of things. They feel hopeful. What they usually find the next day, however, is that they have to teach him all over again. This is because the things they taught were in his short-term memory. Learning psychologists have confirmed that dogs must be re-taught on five consecutive days before they can retain a word's meaning from one day to the next. They label this medium-term memory. When you move a command from your dog's short-term memory to his medium-term memory, you lengthen his memory of the word from a few seconds to 24 hours. This does not mean that the dog can or should be expected to remember the word 48 hours later. From the time that he can remember a word for 24 hours, he must

hear that word and respond to it daily for 30 more days, when the word will become locked into his long-term memory. So when teaching your dog something, show him how to do it and give him the opportunity to practice it daily for 33 days. It's that simple. And anybody who will do that can train a dog.

About the Author:

Dick Russell (1938–2011) was a prominent and highly respected dog trainer known for his humane, rational, and gentle approach to training. Over more than five decades, he worked with dogs and owners to foster better understanding, mutual respect, and effective behavior change. Dick was an influential member of the IACP and was posthumously inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2011.



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