

## TRAINING SHY MASTIFFS

by Jeanne A. Cook

I've been asked to write an article to preface Debbie Condon's "Success With My Shy Mastiff" article, since I worked with Debbie and Muffin. One thing I should point out, is that although many shy Mastiffs can be helped, there are, of course, exceptions. The first requirement is that the dog's mind is basically good (even though it may be acting obnoxious). The second requirement is a dedicated owner who will follow instructions to the letter, and spend a lot of time, effort and patience in training and socializing their dog. Debbie's article explains some of the out-of-class socialization she and Muffin did, which was imperative.

Frankly, when I first walked into the training building to meet Debbie, Muffin was so aggressive and shy that I wasn't so sure this one could be "fixed". But after we talked, and I watched Debbie and Muffin interact a little while, I felt they could be helped.

We began with my basic obedience class to teach Debbie how to get Muffin under control by making corrections, learning when to praise and giving them both more confidence. It was a group class (great for distractions, activity) where they learned sit stay, heeling, down stay, recall, finish to recall, and stand stay. Muffin learned to focus her attention on Debbie, and spent less time worrying about things going on around her. Also, the exercises were done quickly so that Muffin had less time to look around and become fearful. During this phase, everyone (but Debbie) just totally ignored Muffin. No attempts were made to approach her, and no one stared at her, as that would only have challenged her at that point.

Another important addition was the use of noises, distractions, etc. Shy dogs are, of course, startled easily and this helps them become accustomed, and quiets their nerves and reflexes (although it would seem the opposite). For example, a chair is knocked over from a distance while dogs are on "sit-stays". The first time it happens, the dogs usually break the sit stay, but are corrected by the owners. This is repeated over and over, the dogs break their stays less and less, until the point when the dogs hold their stays when the chair falls and the dogs are then praised.

It works the same way when socializing them with other dogs. The dog learns to keep his attention on the owner. Debbie had Muffin on a sit stay, another person and dog came near, and Muffin learned that although that dog may be a threat, it was definite that Debbie would correct her if she moved. So, to Muffin, it was the "lesser of the two evils" to hold her sit stay, and she was praised for holding. Her confidence was then bolstered when nothing "bad" happened.

When Debbie had good control, we started working on teaching Muffin to be approached, just by me. On the stand for exam, I began walking closer and closer to her, with Debbie ready to correct if she growled or broke her stand stay. Then we progressed to my just offering Muffin liver. Then to my giving her liver and touching her back; then to giving her liver, touching her back, and rear; then to giving her liver, touching her head, back and rear. After a while, she had let her guard down, and just expected food when I approached. Then I reversed the order, touched her head, shoulders, rear, and then gave her liver. After awhile, I would examine her as above, but without the treat. Also, during class, every so often I would walk over to Muffin and hand her a treat, expecting nothing more of her.

At this point, Debbie started handing her leash to me, and I took her on 1-minute walks, with a jovial attitude, looking straight ahead and walking briskly, baiting her with food, then returning her to Debbie. We did this over and over, gradually expanding the time. When ready for it, that exercise reassures shy dogs and begins building a trust in you when you return them to their owners.

From this progress, we began transferring my success at approaching Muffin to thorough exams, and people (Muffin knew) approaching in the same way as I had started. When Muffin was comfortable with that, we had those people take her on the 1-minute walks mentioned above. Then we advanced to having strangers approach her in class, to her friends (by that time) and I examining her away from home. Finally we continued to strangers away from class and at fun matches.

Postscript: Prince's Bran Muffin, C.D. earned her obedience title, receiving 2nd, 3rd and 4th place ribbons in consecutive obedience trials, handled by Debbie. Three years later, Muffin is still a steady, well adjusted dog, eager to go places and unafraid to meet people.

A word of caution if you're going to start training your shy dog. Successful training is a matter of gradually building on small successes. Get someone to help you who is experienced. It is knowing when to give a dog some space, or the opposite, when to push him, that's critical. Depending on the severity of the problem, the process should be measured in weeks or months. Trying to short-cut the process may get you through a show or two, but usually won't get you a steady temperament that will last.