



Meeting Dogs Off Leash

— by Jeff Drier

If you take your dog for walks, the chances are good that sooner or later you're going to meet a dog off leash. This can be scary. Your heart starts racing, your muscles tense and your body prepares to run or fight. This is a natural survival instinct, common to both people and dogs. This instinct often causes us to freeze, stare at the dog and tighten our grip on the leash. If it's a big dog or a breed that has a bad reputation, it is even more likely this is how we'll react. Run, and the dog will chase and most likely catch you. If you fight, bad things are certain to happen.

In the past few weeks, **Rover** and I have encountered dogs off leash three times. Nothing happened, in part because I was able to overcome my fight or flight instincts, and in part because of Rover.

introductions. I just stood quietly and calmly keeping an eye on the situation without staring at or making eye contact with the German Shepherd.

The German Shepherd approached Rover and they sniffed each other. Then he came over and sniffed me. I didn't talk to him, I didn't reach out or even move; I just stood calmly like I wasn't at all interested in him. Satisfied with whatever he found out, he went on his way. The entire encounter took about 30 to 45 seconds.

Dogs typically don't want to fight and as long as they see the signals each displays and they respond accordingly, most of the time they just do a quick meet and greet. I let Rover "speak" for us because he does not bark, get protective or defensive when he sees other dogs, even if they are



The first incident was in my neighborhood, a couple of blocks from home. A big German Shepherd came running from between two houses. He was barking loudly and certainly startled us.

My instinct was to shorten the leash to get Rover next to me and tell him to sit. I fought the instinct and instead made sure that the leash was loose and that Rover could move.

Dogs all speak a common language. While dogs don't always get along with other dogs, rarely are there misunderstandings between them. There are often misunderstandings between people and dogs. Rover doesn't get overly excited or defensive when he sees dogs so I let him handle the

barking. I can trust him to remain calm and take his cues from me. If I did not trust Rover however, I might react differently.

The next dogs we met were at Lake Park. Rover and I were walking around the lake and a Beagle and Pit Bull came out of the bushes. We repeated our procedure. I gave Rover the entire length of leash and let him "talk" to the two of them first. Again, I didn't move, but remained as uninteresting as possible. The Beagle approached immediately, but the Pit remained back and showed some signs of being a little nervous. He looked at us then looked around to see if there were others coming, or to make sure he had a clear escape route.

Above photos, left to right: Bark in the Park June 7, George M. Steinbrenner Field, Tampa – Representing Florida Boxer Rescue – five year-old Brute and one year-old Baine McNiff with their little pal, nine month-old NCAA Darst, all of Tampa. Eli, a Parson Russell, enjoys the sights, sounds and aroma at Brady's Backyard BBQ 2nd Anniversary Bash, July 26, Safety Harbor. You Dirty Dog Dog Wash Fundraiser – June 21, Pets on the Patio, Gaspar's Grotto, Ybor City.

Rover and the Beagle sniffed, greeted and then the Beagle came and sniffed me. I again did not react, but remained aloof. The Beagle decided we weren't very interesting and decided that another scent he found promised a more interesting encounter. As the Beagle started off, the Pit decided that he wanted to know what the Beagle knew. He shyly approached, gave me a "drive by" sniff and then did the meet and greet with Rover. Satisfied, he went on his way following the Beagle.

Some people I've spoken with have told me they carry sticks, mace or other items with which to defend themselves and their dogs. While I can understand the fear behind carrying these things, they actually increase the chances of trouble happening. If you make threatening gestures or actually use those items, the dog(s) learn that we are creatures to be wary of.

A much better tactic would be to carry some smelly tasty treats and toss them to give the dog something else to get interested in. Don't toss them right at the dog but off to the side away from the direction you want to go.

The third encounter was back in our neighborhood. A young Rottweiler and an older German Shepherd spotted us a couple blocks from home. The Rottie immediately charged and wanted to play with Rover. The Shepherd stood back and barked a few times at us. I did not let Rover play but we stood calm and relaxed. I again gave Rover the full length of leash. I

watched but didn't make eye contact. The Shepherd made a couple of runs at us, veering off as it got close. He did this a few times while the Rottie bounced at Rover still trying to elicit play. We started walking again and the Shepherd would run and then turn to see if we were following. The running, stopping, looking at us and then running again lasted a couple of blocks before the two of them turned and went in a different direction.

Our natural instinct to tighten the leash and make Rover sit could escalate the situation. If Rover's sitting, his tail won't be visible to the other dog so his body language may not be as clear as when he's standing. Tightening the leash may also make Rover think something is wrong and may trigger his protective instincts.

By remaining calm and letting Rover "talk" to the dogs, the tension stayed low and everyone met and then went on their way. Dogs typically do not want to fight. Usually they fight only if they don't see a way to avoid it or if they view you and your dog as a threat.

You have to know your dog in order to figure out what course of action will be the safest for both of you. If your dog tends to get worked up when he sees another dog, you might want to think about working on his behavior. It may sometimes take a while but with patience and guidance, this behavior can be changed. It's not too late to change that stressful walk into a pleasant one, even when you meet dogs off leash. 🐾



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TESTIMONIAL: The trainers were so patient and thorough with us and our dogs. Our personal dogs (2) and our foster dogs (3) now have much better attitudes once my husband and I regained "control" of the house. I was thrilled to learn that the Bark Busters method was absolutely "hands off." I learned so much about my dogs and myself. I was excited to see the changes in all of us throughout the session, and would recommend Bark Busters to everyone, for every type of dog. If they can help us with three pits, a hound and a shepherd mix under one roof, they can help anyone.

- Anne Marie & Christian P, Tampa, FL

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