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# THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

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THE GOOD LIFE PETS

## Training the Untrainable Dog

A *Post* staffer discovers the secret to a well-behaved pooch: learning to growl back. BY Alyssa Yano

**WHEN I PICTURED MY LIFE,** I always imagined a dog by my side: my family, the dog, and me—all relaxing while watching TV. The dog sleeping peacefully on my feet, keeping them warm while I scratch behind her ears. So when my husband suggested getting a dog the week before Christmas 2008, I didn't say no. Nala, named by our son after a character in *The Lion King*, is part pug, part beagle, and completely cute. She smiled sweetly at us and lay in our laps as she slept.

That was the first day ...

Once she settled into her new home, Nala became insanely high-strung. Fast and agile, she could jump over the couch in a single bound. If she stole a toy, a towel, or the remote—good luck catching her. Nala barked at anything she didn't like, jumped and nipped at guests, and had only the most notional sense of what it meant to be housebroken. No matter how frequently we walked her, she would immediately relieve herself upon entering the house, and even while confined to her kennel. Isn't rule No. 1 dogs will not go to the bathroom where they sleep?

We were at our wit's end when a co-worker mentioned a dog training service he used to rein in his unruly mutt: Bark Busters, a company that promises it can train the most untrainable dogs. Some might balk at the price—on average, the training costs around \$500. But it was a one-time fee, including a lifetime guarantee and unlimited follow-up training visits for the dog, even if I were to move away from the original trainer (there are 250 Bark Busters throughout the U.S.) or if my family (for whatever reason) had to give ►



Alyssa turned to Bark Busters in an effort to help tame her unruly pug-beagle mix, Nala.

PHOTO BY JANE MAHONEY

## 4 Training Tips

**1. Set aside time for training.** Spend about 10 to 15 minutes every day.

**2. Time corrections appropriately.** Initially, correct behaviors immediately after they happen, and in time, you'll

be able to sense when your dog is about to stray and prevent unwanted behavior.

**3. Be consistent with rules and expectations.** Don't allow jumping, barking, or nipping just because you are tired or distracted.

**4. Only act on your terms.** Correct aggressive behaviors and ignore more passive forms of control, like nudging. Wait until the dog walks away and then call her back for a pet, so it's clear you will give attention when you want to, not when she demands it.

Nala to another, more patient family. But I would soon learn the core of the Bark Busters philosophy: Owners need training as much as the dog. The pet owner practices communication techniques in a way the animal can understand, with both body language and voice control. I decided to consider the experience couples therapy—for Nala and me—and gave Bark Busters a try.

When Liam, the trainer, arrived, he could immediately tell Nala thought she was top dog. At this point, she was 18 months old and had successfully controlled our family for more than a year. She was fast and agile as ever and could still squeeze around the couch to escape us. She still jumped, barked, and dominated. Liam said the key to our success was to show her we were the pack leaders. Convince her we were in charge and she would start to listen.

First, Liam focused on how to “talk” to Nala. Yelling, screaming, and pleading are not effective. Instead, the trainer instructed me to exert my authority by talking in a calm, clear voice, giving commands in normal tones while remaining unruffled. The leader always leads, he said, so don't move toward your dog. Stand tall and do not get down to her level. Use light, happy tones to encourage or praise, and correct misbehavior with a growl, like the lead dog of the pack would do. This growl, or “BAHHHH,” sounds like a cross between gargling and gagging after accidentally swallowing a bug. But it seemed to work, and the more I practiced, the quicker Nala responded.

But sometimes growling only gets you so far, and then you have to step it up. The last resort when your dog doesn't listen is to replicate the sounds a pack leader makes when snapping his teeth at other dogs. The snap should not replace other forms of communication, but it helps reinforce the new behaviors quicker. Liam handed me mesh bags filled with small links of chain that when shaken or thrown (on the floor, not at the dog) mimic that snapping sound (at least to a dog's ears). We tested the technique while Nala was out on our patio, her favorite spot for barking at every

car, every person, every other dog that passes. I tossed the mesh bag against the edge of the door and she froze. “Good girl, Nala,” I said in a soothing, steady voice. The mail truck pulled up, and as Nala started to open her mouth, I tossed another mesh bag and growled. She stopped again. We continued the exercise for 15 minutes, and Nala finally got the hint. Liam explained that's how to change any behavior. Start by correcting her when she misbehaves. Then, as you learn signs that precede the behavior, you start correcting and preventing them. Once the dog starts to respond, you eliminate the mesh bag and just use the growl.

I'd like to say that one training session did the job and that when Liam left, Nala was an angel forever after. But sadly, no. Training takes practice, both on my part and Nala's. Consistency is key. I slacked off around the holidays. After all,

was it really such a big deal when she greeted holiday guests with her signature jump-bark combo? Within a couple of months, Nala reverted to her old ways. I could have stepped up our practice sessions to compensate, but I decided to take advantage of that lifetime guarantee. This time, Deb, another trainer, came to visit. My growling was horribly out of practice, so we reviewed the proper techniques. And since the weather was nice, we focused on other areas, like getting Nala to come when called, and walking on a leash without pulling me. This session was much faster—but a welcome refresher for the pup and me.

So far, so good.

Nala is still high-energy, but in a way that is now fun and playful, not a nuisance. She still isn't big on sleeping on my feet, but I have socks for that. And we enjoy a good pet and scratch session. I guess you can teach an old dog new tricks—but in this case, the old dog was me. 🐾

**For more information, call 877-500-BARK (2275) or visit [BarkBusters.com](http://BarkBusters.com).**

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