

Who leads the pack? You or your dog? Time for canine analysis

By JENNIFER ERICKSON

Wouldn't it be helpful to see things from your dog's perspective in order to better manipulate his or her behavior?

That's what Bark Busters, a home dog training company, is banking on. Bark Busters was founded in Australia by Sylvia and Danny Wilson in 1989 with the goal of creating an effective training program to reduce incidents of maltreatment, abandonment and euthanasia. Their program is based on methods that appeal to the canine psyche.

In July of 2000, Bark Busters came to the U.S. and now has more than 100 franchised offices in 30 states. One of the newest is one that has recently been opened in Laguna Beach by Lisa and Nelson Neyer.

Nelson Neyer is a franchise consultant and his wife, Lisa, used to teach developmentally challenged children. As luck would have it, Bark Busters was one of the franchises that came across Nelson's desk. They were both so impressed by the Bark Busters methodology that successfully trained their own dog, they decided to buy a franchise for themselves. Now the Neyers are both "licensed behavioral therapists" working as a team and loving it.

When I read about their new Bark Busters franchise, I called them up to find out more about it. They explained their premise that dogs follow a pack mentality and that the owner needs to be, literally, the leader of the pack. I have to admit I remained skeptical, but was intrigued.

I have gone through a certain amount of training with my own dog, Elie, a two-year old English setter – some self-taught with the aid of books and some with a professional trainer. And the result? Let's just say that while Elie knew what "sit" and "come" meant, she was only ready to demonstrate that understanding when a treat was involved. Otherwise, the requested behavior didn't much interest her.

Sound familiar?

And then there was the barking at just about anything that moved.

The best I can say of my efforts to quiet Elie whilst in the throes of a barking frenzy is that at least my cries of "No barking!" accompanied by my frantic attempts to catch her and haul her off the deck as she deftly maneuvered out of my reach, let my neighbors know that I was sincere, if unsuccessful, in my desire to curb the offensive behavior.

Of course Lisa Neyer was convinced Bark Busters' approach would succeed with Elie where previous efforts had failed. She offered to show me that it works.

As I hung up the phone, Elie tore out onto the deck to harangue a cat that had had the nerve to make an appearance across the street. Running around screaming, "No barking! No barking!" I wondered at Neyer's confidence in her training – and prayed she had the wherewithal to back it up.

On the fateful "show me" day, Lisa Neyer appeared right on time and we immediately got down to business. We began by discussing Elie and the behaviors, such as barking, that I hoped to correct. But then a strange thing happened. The more we talked about Elie, the more we also talked about me and my behavior. For the most part, Elie was taking her cues, or lack thereof, from me.

Neyer explained that wherever I wasn't providing leadership, Elie jumped in and took over. She also helped me to see that training is a two-way street. Elie was training me as much, if not more, than I was training her.

What did I do when Elie put her head in my lap? I pet her, of course. And what did I do when, after accepting one pat, she got up and walked over to the treat cabinet? Well, she was so cute

and sweet I gave her a treat! For her part, what did Elie do when I told her not to bark? She kept barking. And when I called her without a treat in my hand? She remained in a prone position as if unaware my voice had ever pierced the air. It was suddenly clear to me who the leader was in MY pack!

But what's a doting dog owner to do? "Dogs need our leadership, not our pity," Neyer said. It was time for me to "think canine" and assume my leadership position. She proceeded to go through an organized presentation about the specific training methods used by Bark Busters, covering not only the what, but also the why and the how of it. Neyer also elaborated more on the areas that were of specific concern to me and Elie, and patiently addressed all of my questions and concerns.

Hey – training aside – what a great chance to talk endlessly about all of your dog's cute little quirks and annoying habits! Not only was Neyer a great listener, but she almost always had something constructive and instructive to say about my anecdotes. For example, who knew that Elie's leaping onto park benches was a sign of dominant behavior? Height, it turns out, is an important element when it comes to establishing one's rank in the pack.

In the end, the training was as much about teaching me to be the leader as it was about correcting Elie's bad behavior. Once she accepted my role as leader, her role as follower would come quite naturally. In the early days of training there is still a need to correct instances of bad behavior (through voice and gesture – never through physical contact). But over time, as the training evolves into the establishment of your authority as a norm, there is less and less bad behavior to correct.

It sounds impossibly simple. Yet I am here to say that it works for me! By using voice control (not barking, but definitely noise made for canine ears) and body language, and by modifying my own inappropriate behavior, I am now the boss. Or at least I'm the front runner for the slot, which is not bad at all for four days' work!

Matthew Wheaton, born and raised in Laguna Beach and currently living in Arch Beach Heights, had an equally positive experience. "It is very smart training," he said. "The things they taught us are definitely helping with our situation." This is certainly positive feedback considering that Wheaton is a veterinarian. His practice is Alicia Pet Clinic in Laguna Hills. The Wheaton family has three dogs, which had some barking issues that Bark Busters (like the name says, folks) was able to help them resolve.

One of the best things about Bark Busters is that they have a lifetime guarantee. This means that you pay for the initial training. But once you have properly completed the training, the behavioral therapist will return free of charge any time thereafter during the life of the dog to help with any problems that may arise. So if you think it's a done deal and then your dog suddenly exhibits unacceptable behavior that you're not sure how to handle, you just give your old trainer a call and they'll come on over and help you address the problem – gratis!

You can contact Lisa and Nelson Neyer by phone at 361-0077.