

# A Chorus of Dog Whisperers

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

WHEN Doug Finley of Sparta, N.J., contemplated leaving commercial photography two years ago, he considered the standard advice given to those at a professional crossroads: do what you love.



Bill Marino/Bark Busters USA

**WELL, HELLO!** Peter Plourde, a trainer at Bark Busters.



Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times

**COMMAND ACT** Noelle Fischer, left, who gave up her \$80,000-a-year job to train dogs, with Carla S. Freitag and her dog, Rio.

That made him think of Elle, the well-mannered cockapoo he and his wife got in 1993.

“I was in love with her,” said Mr. Finley, who is 54. “I figured I’d done so well training her that maybe I should become a dog trainer.”

Join the club.

Finding a dog owner nursing daydreams of becoming a trainer has become about as difficult as finding a waiter with a headshot.

In recent years, more people than ever have started teaching dogs their p’s and q’s. One reason is that dog training has received its close-up on at least a half-dozen television shows, including “It’s Me or the Dog” on the Animal Planet network and Cesar Millan’s hugely popular “Dog Whisperer” on the National Geographic Channel.

Another reason is that today’s dog owners have higher expectations for their pets and so enlist professional help more readily than in yesteryear. In some cases, they do so to tame a behaviorally challenged animal adopted from a shelter; in others, because they want their expensive pure-bred dogs to have manners Emily Post would approve of.

Dogs, once bred for herding and hunting, are now more valued for their ability to stay quiet, fit in a pocketbook and be emotionally-available fuzzy ersatz children.

“This morning alone I had three people writing me to say, ‘How do I become a trainer?’” said Martin Deeley, the executive director of the International Association of

Canine Professionals. “It’s because need has grown. People are treating their dogs like children and want them to be well-behaved like any member of the family would, but you can’t teach a dog like you teach a child, and that leads people to trainers.”

Rookie trainers are lured by the perks, like spending time outside in the company of puppies, as well as flexible work hours for decent pay without having to spend years being educated. But they soon learn that the occupation entails odd hours, emotional entanglements with distraught families and, occasionally, decisions that could end a troubled dog’s life.

These concerns have not slowed the growth in the ranks of people wanting to become dog trainers, especially as many in the industry have moved away from rolled-up newspapers, choke collars and other harsh training methods that were once the norm.

In 2006, there were 43,000 animal trainers, at least 50 percent of whom work with dogs, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), a number that has almost tripled since 2000.

Henry Kasper, an employment projection analyst at the bureau, estimated that the animal training industry is growing at twice the pace of average industry.

Brian Kurth, the founder of VocationVacations, a company that sets up apprenticeships for those interested in a potential career change, said that dog training is one of the top professions people want to try, right up there with sportscasting and winemaking.

Surprisingly, plenty of new trainers have left white-collar jobs to teach dogs and their masters, those in the industry said.

Two years ago, David Ryan, then 42, shadowed a dog trainer during a VocationVacations apprenticeship. At the time, Mr. Ryan said, he made roughly \$800,000 a year as an international banker with HSBC.

But Mr. Ryan said he made up his mind to train puppies on that first day of instruction.

“It immediately felt right,” he said. “I spent the rest of the days really looking at whether this could be made into a business for me. Would the numbers work? It certainly looked encouraging because there’s been this huge explosion of expenditure in the pet-care industry.”

Some colleagues find such career changes hard to grasp. After years of planning, Noelle

Fischer of Huntington, on Long Island, left her \$80,000-a-year job as a bankruptcy lawyer to cajole dogs to behave. When she announced a year ago that she was leaving, said Ms. Fischer, 35, “everyone thought it was a joke.”

Few entering the profession realize that the most onerous part is no different than most jobs: dealing with other people.

“The classic thing that happens? Someone goes into dog training because they really love dogs and don’t really get on with people, but in reality, the job is 90 percent people training,” said Dr. Ian Dunbar, a veterinarian and the founder of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, a networking group of 6,000 trainers.

More than a quarter of the association’s members have been training for fewer than five years.

Renee Payne, who has been a dog trainer in Brooklyn for a decade, is quick to point out that the job is not all cuddling and doling out Liv-A-Snaps.

Ms. Payne fields client concerns at all hours: Should we get a shock collar for our pup who keeps sniffing our cat? Could cutting our dog’s hair mess with its chi?

After frustrating experiences with hardheaded dog owners, some of Ms. Payne’s interns decamp, never to return.

“Sometimes trainers take it personally when they tell the owner over and over what to do and they don’t do it,” she said.

Not so long ago, few people had heard of behavior modification for dogs, let alone considered working in the industry.

“Twenty years ago when you told someone you were a dog trainer they’d go ‘huh?’” said Brian Kilcommons, a dog behavior expert in Auburn, N.H. who, with his partner Sarah Wilson, has written several books on dog training.

Mr. Kilcommons said that today 10 times as many people call him as five years ago to ask how to enter the field.

Television shows about dog training have also raised the profile of the industry. In the last few months, six producers have contacted Dr. Dunbar of the Association of Pet Dog

Trainers to consult with him about dog-trainer series that are in the pipeline, he said.

Many new shows are a response to the success of Mr. Millan, arguably the first dog trainer to become a household name (with all due respect to Charlie Brown). Mr. Millan has a seemingly magic touch, taming one difficult dog after the other.

“When you do it well, it seems effortless,” Mr. Kilcommons said. “People think: ‘Oh, that’s easy. I could do that.’”

DEMAND for trainers has also grown now as polishing a dog’s manners has become part of a routine for a new puppy owner — like a new mother getting a doula.

“It’s become the automatic thing to do,” Ms. Payne said. “Like going to yoga.”

There are many schools of thought on how to treat common but sometimes extreme problems such as chewing, anxiety and aggression. Such debates are not trivial to owners or concerned trainers.

“This is a profession where you are making life and death calls,” Mr. Kilcommons said. “The dog who isn’t euthanized and needs to be could hurt a person. On the other hand, a dog that has solvable problems but proves beyond the skill set of a trainer might end up in a shelter.”

The industry has no officially regulated business practices, so many veteran trainers, who did prolonged apprenticeships under established dog trainers, worry about the influx of less-educated newcomers.

SO how can a dog owner gauge a potential trainer’s skill set?

Finding a trainer that has passed the exam offered by the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers is one way. Trainers need to have at least 300 hours of training before taking the test, which covers animal husbandry and applied behavior analysis, said Parvene Farhody, the president of the council, which has certified 1,500 trainers since 2001. There are many ways for trainers to enter the field, from correspondence courses to bachelor’s or master’s degrees in zoology or animal behavior.

Ms. Fischer, who now makes up to \$140 an hour, took the path most esteemed by old-timers: she spent five years apprenticing every weekend with seasoned professionals before hanging her shingle.

Mr. Ryan, the former HBSC banker, matriculated in a six-month program at the Tom Rose School for Professional Dog Trainers in High Ridge, Mo., and then attended seminars on training methods. He now charges \$90 an hour in Rye, N.H.

Doug Rountree of Louisville, Ky., chose a much faster route. Two years ago, Mr. Rountree, then an information-technology manager, bought into Bark Busters, an international franchise with 245 trainers nationwide. The company gave him three weeks of intensive training, about 40 hours of homework, suggested he give a few free lessons, and then allowed him to open shop.

Bark Busters boasts trainers who have given up careers as Fortune 500 executives, human genome scientists and stockbrokers to join their ranks. But their method doesn't involve the animal-behavior modification theories favored by many trainers. Instead, it is based on understanding what they call the "canine psyche" and communicating with a dog as a pack leader would.

"People can be too cerebral about it all," said Liam Crowe, the president of Bark Busters in the United States. "Dogs are one of the most simple creatures on the earth."

Mr. Finley, the photographer, didn't think so, when he spent time as a trainer at VacationVacations in 2005.

"I was sort of naïve and idealistic," he said. "You need to have a tremendous amount of patience, which I really don't have."

He is now considering a career in tire repair.

**[More Articles in Fashion & Style »](#)**