

Teaching a young dog NEW TRICKS

Clare Mackintosh has a one-to-one dog training session with Rebecca Boydell - and five-month-old Maddie - and finds the experience surprisingly like parenting

PICTURES BY EVIE NORMAN

I hold a tiny piece of chicken between my thumb and forefinger and try to remember the correct order for everything. The last time I was this confused I was learning to drive. Mirror, signal, manoeuvre...

"Down!" I say. Maddie cocks her head to one side and looks at me. "Down?" Nothing. "Down?" I change my inflection and contemplate trying a different regional accent. After several minutes, Maddie yawns and drops to the floor. I give her the chicken and pat her enthusiastically.

"There you are," Rebecca says, "you just have to be patient."

I am in my back garden with Rebecca Boydell of RB Dog Training,

who has come to give me a one-to-one session with Maddie, my five-month-old Springer Spaniel.

"Remember to give praise first, treat second," Rebecca says, "otherwise she'll only do what you say when there's food on offer."

Dog training is remarkably like parenting, it seems.

After working as an accountant for thirty years, Rebecca set up RB Dog Training in 2009 as "something to do" when she retired. It seems an unusual career change, but Rebecca tells me it's the ideal choice for someone who is fanatical about detail. "Obedience work is very nit-picky," she says, "so it suits accountants very well."

Rebecca always had dogs as a child, but it was in her thirties when she first became interested in obedience.

"I used to see a woman training her dogs near where I lived," she says. "She would step into a phone box and her dogs would sit in a line outside and wait for her. It was fascinating." A trip to Crufts sealed the deal, and Rebecca made a vow then and there that she would one day compete to that standard. In 2006 her Working Sheepdog Jeeves won the Inter-Regional Obedience Class B at Crufts. "It was exciting, noisy and terrifying," Rebecca tells me. "On our way out poor Jeeves completely froze, and I had to carry him out over my shoulder."

She continued competing, and over the years she has trained a series of championship dogs. Rebecca's beloved Bertie was put to sleep just a few days before we meet, and her bottom lip trembles when I offer my condolences. "I can't talk about him," she says. We move on swiftly to talk about the rest of the RB dogs, of which there are currently six: Wooster, Rosie and Tuppy Glossup, all Working Sheepdogs; Golly Gosh, a working Cocker Spaniel trained in agility; Jessica the gun dog Springer Spaniel; and Babe, a 10-year-old Staffordshire Bull Terrier who came from a rescue centre.

Rebecca has a soft spot for rescue dogs, who often need support with behavioural issues. "I like to get into their heads," she explains, "and it's incredibly rewarding seeing them get better." She certainly knows her stuff: before setting up her own business, Rebecca was an instructor at the Cheltenham and District Dog

Above: Maddie
Left: Rebecca Boydell with Maddie



Teaching 'seek'

Teaching a dog to find an object is not only handy (Rebecca's dogs can fetch her car keys for her) but mentally stimulating. Twenty minutes of 'seeking' is the equivalent to an hour's walk, so it's great for busy or rainy days.

Throw a handful of food on the floor in front of you and say 'seek'. Repeat 'seek' every time the dog eats a piece of food. Throw a handful again, a little further, and continue to say 'seek' when the dog finds and eats a piece of food. Once the dog is 'seeking' food thrown a few feet away, throw a handkerchief with a treat wrapped inside. Say 'seek' as soon as the dog picks up the handkerchief. Now start putting the handkerchief further and further away, until you can hide it somewhere in the garden and the dog will 'seek' it out. Finally take the treat away, and let the dog find it through scent alone.

Rebecca's training methods are simple to understand, and she has a great sense of humour - a far cry from the Barbara-Woodhouse-type I had envisaged. After an hour Maddie is still living up to the Springer Spaniel stereotype, but it's clear she loves to learn and can pick things up incredibly quickly. I promise Rebecca I'll do a few minutes of training with Maddie every day. You never know, maybe one day it'll be us in that ring at Crufts. ■

RB Dog Training offers a range of classes, including puppy courses, advanced Good Citizen Dog Scheme classes, and one-to-ones. Lessons are held at Highbury Congregational Church Hall, Cheltenham. For prices and dates, visit www.rbdogtraining.co.uk

Training Club, later completing a degree in Canine Behaviour. "You need endless patience and tolerance as a trainer," she says, "although more so for the people than the pets." I give her a side-long glance, but I don't think she's referring to me. Yet.

I have asked Rebecca to come over today to help me take our training to the next level. I've been working with Maddie for a couple of months now, and we've mastered 'sit', 'stay' and 'come', but not a great deal more. Walking to heel seems an impossible task for such a bouncy dog, and I'm at a loss as to how to tackle the excitement which causes her to wee over people's feet when she meets them.

Fortunately, Rebecca tells me Maddie will grow out of the bladder issue without any need for training, although it would be a good idea to put her in her crate at home when visitors arrive, to allow her to calm down before meeting them. We decide to concentrate on our heel

work, and I dutifully trot up and down the garden with my piece of chicken, Maddie following - for the most part - beside me with her nose in the air. Every few seconds she is overcome with excitement and leaps two feet in the air.

"Great," Rebecca enthuses (although I think she's being generous), "now what happens when you try that on the lead?"

She tells me to keep the lead loose, and to hold a treat just high enough and forward enough for Maddie to keep moving forward, but not so far away that she loses interest. Whilst all that is going on, I need to keep up a constant stream of "Heel, good girl. Heel, good girl. Heel, good girl." Oh, and look where I'm going. It's like rubbing my stomach and patting my head, and our first few attempts go horribly wrong. But we persevere, and after a few rounds of the garden, Maddie is walking nicely to heel, not taking her eyes off me. It might be cupboard love, but it'll do for now.