

A Little Dog Treat

by

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When I first started racing pigeons back in the early 1970's, my teacher Don Falkenberg recommended that I when it came to racing techniques, I should follow the advice of a gentleman by the name of Frank Scott, so I called him and asked him if he might be able to stop by. The next day, there he was at our door step with a carefully planned out calendar in hand. For the next several hours we discussed every possible training technique, most of which, he had outlined on this calendar. The man knew his stuff, and everything he said made sense, at least to me.

I must say that Frank seemed a little overzealous on the subject, and he often referred to his use of bottled water in his care program, which back when he flew in the 1960's might have been seen as a little obsessive. He also explained how he took his pigeons across the yard and put them in a giant play pen with balls, mirrors, and bells that they could play with. Again, a little obsessive and nothing that you would want to tell an equally obsessive 12 year old kid about. Soon my pigeons were playing with balls, mirrors, and bells, as well, and I was quite settled into his methods.

One day, I was talking to my teacher Don when I said, "You know, I really like Frank." He laughed and said, "Yah, I thought you might. I have known Frank for a number of years, and the two of you are a lot alike." Then I asked, "Why doesn't he race any more." Don furrowed his brow and was thoughtful for a while, and then said, "Frank had some very good success when he raced, but between giving his pigeon's bottled water; carting them off to their little play pen so that they could play with balls, mirrors, and bells; and, eventually, when he started peering at them for hours from around the corner of his house, his wife convinced him that he might need help. Given his numerous obsessions with the pigeons, a psychologist suggested that he might have an obsessive-compulsive disorder (sometimes referred to as pigeon disease), and that maybe he shouldn't keep pigeons anymore. I mean you can't really blame her considering the level he was at; I mean balls, mirrors and bells? "

I said, "Oh..., well I need to go now," and I raced home just as fast as my bike would take me. By that evening, the play pen, balls, and mirrors were all gone from my loft, and, since that day, I don't look at pigeons from around the corner any more. It is a good thing that Don told me about Frank, because it has

allowed me to lead a fairly normal life, with the exception of those repressed twitches at the corner of my left eye and my obsession with sharp objects.

It wasn't until toward the end of last year, when I bred much later than usual, traveled to Europe, wrote too many articles for Winning Magazine, and devoting a great deal of my time to a number of changes in the stock loft, that I once again began to feel a little over obsessed with this sport. Therefore, today, I am going to discuss something other than pigeons for a while. In fact, what better topic than my two dogs, which loyally follow me to the pigeon loft every morning when I feed and care for my wonderful pigeons. By the way, have I ever told you about my pigeons? Oh, I see what you are doing! Nope, no matter how clever you are, we are not going to talk about pigeons today... unless you want to talk about...No, no pigeons and that is final!

Too bad that dogs don't have feathers... As I have mentioned in the past, I own two Australian Shepherds, a smart one and a stupid one. They are about five years old now, and we are still trying to figure out which one is which (smart and stupid)! Because these are dignified dogs of quality with parents from good neighborhoods (not the peasantry that you are probably used to dealing with), they have regal names such as Fosters (after the Australian beer) and Outback (after the bar where I sit and drink that beer). Yes, they are brothers, and they get along about like my two sons, not at all.

While I have mentioned that we are not totally sure which one is the smart one and which one is the stupid one, according to the breeder, Fosters (A.K.A. Puddles, Fossy, and even sometimes "Fossy you idiot") is rumored to be the stupid one and Outback (Booty) is supposed to be the smart one. If you have any sense at all, never buy a male dog that the breeder has named Puddles, because, as my son once found out when the dog peed on his pillow, there is probably going to be something to the name.

I thought maybe the breeder named Outback "Booty" because he has white feet; however, I am now convinced that his name was given to him in anticipation of his ever growing posterior. In fact, the other morning as I was going out to feed my wonderful pigeons...Oh..., he was barking at the coyotes as they returned up the wash after a night of hunting. While still growling and with hackle raised he came running toward me. Even though he is a larger dog, it was hard to take him too seriously when the hair on his butt and hackle on his neck were at least four inches higher than the small of his back. He looked like a swayback horse! He's definitely got "Booty."

In truth, when we bought these male dogs, we got horn-waggled and hoodwinked. As a side note, have you even noticed that when there is credit to be had, I always use the word "I" and where there is blame to be had I always

use the word "We"? I was just wondering, because it is a little something that I have picked up from my boss, and, for it to work properly, you don't want your audience to notice the subtle difference. In this case, I do have to attribute some of the blame to my dear wife, as she is the one that selected these mutts in the first place. In this case, the credit/blame game is slightly different because I have now established that this selection was not my fault and specifically her fault, so instead of the word "We", I can now use the word "she". "She" won't like that but let her write her own story. Once when I pointed this poor selection out to her, she replied simply, "I have no idea what a good male is because I have nothing to go by." Rather harsh wouldn't you agree?

Sure these dogs looked cute and cuddly when they were pups, but I have been brainwashed by my wife into believing that the male of any species doesn't exactly get better with age. In fact, my wife said to me just last night, "You know, you just haven't gotten any better with age." Again, this statement was rather brutal when you consider that it implies that I was never any good in the first place. If you don't believe my wife on this, just ask your own wife, but try not to burp while you are doing it! I think this is where I might have gone wrong last night!

At one point my wife forced me to call the dog breeder for some information about the dogs. The breeder, who reminded me a lot of my wife, gloatingly alluded to the fact that we might have gotten both the alpha dog and the runt of the litter, which explains the 25 pound difference between the two of them.

Later, in the conversation, she also let slip that dog trainers rarely work with the alpha dog, because they are harder to train, and runts, which can be trained, but who in their right mind would want to see a runt do anything? Either my wife put her up to this or all women are just evil. I was about to ask my wife about that last night, but I got nervous and involuntarily burped while in the midst of the whole selection process discussion.

So after \$800, and, a large welt on my pride of ownership, I now was just smart enough to realize that "we" had bought one dog that couldn't be trained because he was so stupid, and one dog that wouldn't be trained because he was so stubborn. Not bad for a day's work.

As you may have discovered, being smart is a relative term because to derive that something is smarter than something else, you must have a something to compare it to in the first place. In this case we only have Outback and Fossy to compare, so the cupboard is about bare. I think that this is sort of like what my wife was getting at when she said "I have no idea what a good male is because I have nothing to go by."

Anyway, in this case, we are comparing Outback to Fossy, and Fossy is exactly as smart as a suitcase. While this makes Outback seem more intelligent, in neither case are we working with the sharpest tools in the shed, so it is quite possible that Outback isn't even of average intelligence (I have evidence), and, since my wife can no longer remember "her" role in purchasing these mutts, this only leaves "we" to shoulder the blame.

In fact, the other day when I came storming into the house (looking for some sympathy [what a strange place to go looking for sympathy]) screaming that the stupid dogs had chewed the cord off the table saw, she cut me off at the knees by saying, "Well "you" bought those "stupid dogs," so where does that place you in the grand scheme of things?" I opened my mouth to respond, but thought better of it and went right back outside, because once history has been revised by my wife or, for that matter any woman, it is difficult to impossible to get it unrevised!

Now, I could be wrong about this, but, to my defense, Outback eats buckets. That's right, buckets! I don't know if they have any Home Depots in your area yet, but if they do, then you have seen those bright orange plastic 5 gallon buckets that say Home Depot on the side. Well, at our house, it is not uncommon to see Outback devour one of these every week or two. Of course he is bright enough not to eat the handles, so should you even need a handle, we have ten or twenty handles lying around the yard at all times! I know this to be factual because I caught and tore my pant leg on one of them the other day, so they are out there like little landmines just waiting for the unsuspecting visitor. However, like all dogs, he also leaves another type of little landmine, but unlike those of other dogs where their landmines go squish when you step on them, his go crunch. Let me explain.

I know that some of you are thinking that I mean that he chews these buckets instead of eating them; however, this is not the case. He actually eats them as is evidenced by the combination of black/orange landmines that he leaves in his wake. After all, buckets are an excellent source of roughage! I ask you, would an intelligent dog sit and eat buckets day after day?

Well, if you had to spend the day in the back yard with Fossy, the perpetual motion machine, you just might be eating buckets yourself. For Fossy, every day is a totally new adventure, and I do mean "totally new" because there is no way that he could possibly remember anything from as far back as the day before! He is just not that smart. In fact, there are times when I am surprised that he can even find the water bucket (sometimes this is not his fault because his brother has occasionally eaten it). Sometimes, because I am afraid that he will forget, I just open the window and scream out, "Breathe stupid breathe."

Fossy pees more often than any dog alive; in fact, he may even pee more often than all dogs alive. Either there is a leak in their water bucket, or this dog drinks about four gallons of water a day. On the way to feed the pigeons...sorry I got distracted, I have seen him hopping along behind me with one leg raised and peeing on nothing in particular. One time, my son and I were carrying a piece of plywood across the yard, when I saw a yellow line of liquid come squirting under the plywood. When I looked on the other side, there was Fossy hopping along trying to pee on the plywood. Once my youngest son was picking up the remains of a bush that he had just cut up in pieces, and, when he bent over and scooped the pieces together, Fossy came running over and peed on them and my son's hand.

The dog has pissed on my leg and in my shoe; one time he even pissed on my prized Milwaukee Hole Shooter (drill for you commoners). I had placed this prize possession on the ground while I was in the process of moving some plywood along the rafters of a new loft I was constructing, and I happened to look down just as he was looking up. When our eyes locked, as if on command and without hesitation, his hind leg sprang straight out and, while staring me down and panting happily, he pissed on my beautiful drill. Of course I screamed at him, but this only increased his sadistic satisfaction. Not that the whole situation is out of control, (I realize that as a family unit we might be considered dysfunctional) but, whenever I begin yelling at Fossy, which is too often to be considered normal, Outback stops chewing his bucket pieces and stares at me with that "do you mind, I'm eating here" expression like all the stress might be giving him heartburn or something. He would never stop to think that his heartburn might be caused by the excess bucket parts that are undoubtedly lodged in his system.

Certainly no description of mangy mongrels of fine breeding would be complete without covering the dog wars. As I have mentioned, Fossy and Outback are brothers, and occasionally they have been known to throw down in the middle of the backyard, in the house or even in the back of the truck. As you may remember from earlier, old bucket ass is the dominate dog of the two, and he is always exerting his authority over his brother. However, what he fails to understand is that his brother is too stupid to comprehend Outback's authority, so once or twice a week, they have it out. Many times, during one of these altercations, I have seen the air so choked with flying dust that you can't even see them fighting, which tends to diminish the experience, but you can see little tufts of fur flying up out of the dust. I have come to realize that this is how Australian Shepherds shed.

Back when the dogs were younger and even less wise, my wife, who was also younger (and possibly less wise as well), decided that it would be great fun to let them into the house so that they could learn to be house dogs. Imagine!

Clearly she was/is delusional. We were remodeling our house at the time (We are still in that process. Is this a great country or what?) and besides freshly painted walls, there was really nothing that they could destroy.

Things were going along splendidly, until I heard snarling and screaming. At first I thought my wife might have attacked the dogs because the snarling sound reminded me of an argument that we had had the night before. No, this argument was not the one where I burped nervously. This one was over peanut butter and gingersnaps that gave me the excess gas so that I could burp nervously during the second argument (don't go there). Still, that left screaming, and of course I quickly deduced that dogs can't scream, so I surmised that a Macaw (those big blue parrots) must have gotten into the house, and it, and my wife, were mauling the dogs together.

However, much to my surprise when I rounded the corner, there wasn't even a Macaw involved in the situation which was a relief because you know how mean they can be! Instead, what I really had on my hands was a high magnitude dog fight. What had I been thinking? It should be obvious that Macaws don't live in the desert because they just don't like the heat!

Instead, my wife (who sometimes sounds like a Macaw when she isn't snarling) was screaming because, during this altercation, one of the dogs had cut its lip, and, the other now had a split ear, so blood was freely flying up onto my freshly painted walls in patterns that would have made Leroy Neiman proud. You see, Leroy Neiman is a famous painter that splashes various colors of paint on giant canvases. (Now if you go back and read this again, that still might not be funny, but at least you will know who Leroy Neiman is, and, if you were charitable, you would say that you possibly learned something from this article).

Well, it was clear that I was already going to have to repaint the walls, and good dog fights are always enjoyable, so there was nothing to do but watch and let them wind down. After about the usual five minutes, the house looked and smelled like a slaughter house. There was matted fur stuck in puddles of blood on the floors, splatter marks on the walls and ceiling (again, this would have made Leroy Neiman quite proud). As a side note about this whole adventure, I guess I should mention that if you ever experience a similar circumstance, wipe down the walls before you begin repainting it, because as any crime scene investigator will tell you (or now even I will tell you) one coat of paint won't cover heavy dried blood splatter!

Because we live in the desert where there are no Macaws, there is always a lot of dust and dirt flying around. Unfortunately, some of that dirt tends to end up in the track of the sliding glass door, and so it often doesn't shut properly. Somehow, Fossy has learned to hook his paws in the crack and pull the door

open, at which time both dogs run into the house. To get them back out of the house, I have to throw treats out the door, which, when it doesn't lead to fights, only reinforces their bad behavior.

On one of these occasions, I was able to get them out the door quicker than usual, so I still had a treat in my hand. Because it would be more work to put the treat away than it would be to throw it at them, I decided to do the latter. As Fossy caused the problem by opening the door, I selected him out as the target for the treat. However, when I threw it at him, much to my surprise, he caught it in his mouth.

This got me to thinking. Maybe this dog had some hidden talent that I could somehow exploit. After all, I see these fruitcakes on Jay Leno all the time. The next morning while feeding Fossy, I brought out one of his little treat bones. Now feeding Fossy has never been exactly what you would call a pleasant experience. When he hears you fumbling around filling his feed can, he starts spinning around in circles outside the sliding glass door. On about every third spin, he slams himself into the glass, bounces off, and falls to the ground, springs up and starts spinning again. Now this wouldn't be so bad, but, because he is excited, he starts salivating, so when he spins, long streams of spit go everywhere including all over the sliding glass door.

When I open the door, I have learned to protect my lower level speed bag, because if I don't Fossy will jump up and hit me there. Unfortunately, he is too quick to kick when he is doing this, and like his peeing on everything, the madder I get, the better he likes it. To add to the pleasantries, from the door to the food bowl the dog makes a series of about 50 left handed spins with snot flying everywhere.

Once at the feed bowl, I now hold one half of his little bone treat up over my head, and drop it. I was amazed when I first started doing this because he caught it on the first attempt! Fossy and I have had several discussions about form and posture, and I have now gotten him to sit in a specific manner and wait for the drop. As I explained to him, over time, improved form and posture, will increase his completion percentage.

On his own, he actually has learned that if he misses the first drop, he can let that bone sit until after the second drop. This is advanced stuff when you have a brain the size of a peanut, which is already mostly consumed with making slobber. However, in return, he has been teaching me to be quicker with the second drop, because if I start criticizing his technique on the first drop, he gives up on me and finds the bone that is on the ground. The other day, I made a bad drop and he got very upset and glared at me with a big spit bubble on the side of his mouth. Now he is demanding a big dollar contract that is at least equal to

those Frisbee catching dogs. For Christmas, he wants matching head and wrist bands with the Nike logo on them. I have talked to his newly appointed agent (Outback) and he is demanding bucket seating for the audience (those orange buckets from Home Depot are his preference).

I was going to schedule Fossy for the Leno show, but there was a setback. One day while I was in my pigeon loft taking care of my wonderful pigeons...I know but let me finish, I was going to throw out some eggs. Not that he tastes them, but Fossy always likes eggs. However, he once ate a dead rat, so he is not very discerning. As my breeding loft is about four feet off the ground, I thought that if I tossed the egg in the air it would give him plenty of time to lock on visually and catch them in mid air. However, when I threw it up into the air, he intently watched it the whole way, or at least right up until it hit him in the eye and broke all over his face. He may need some more work before Leno.

While this article may not have been as enjoyable for you as it was therapeutic for me, that nervous tick by my left eye has once again gone into remission, however, I need to go because I just cut myself with a sharp object.

Until next time!

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