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Putting Dog Trainers Through the Paces

Private Sessions Come Out on Top; Bosco Turns Docile

By SUZANNE BARLYN

It's easy, of course, to adore your pets when they actually sit at your command. For the rest of the time, hiring a trainer is a tempting option.

Pet services, including training, boarding and grooming, are a \$15.1 billion industry, the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. pet business, according to market researcher Packaged Facts. Americans will spend \$1.1 billion in dog training alone this year.



Alexander Robinson

Bosco, one of the dogs in our test, obeys the 'place' command.

Choosing a trainer is no easy task, however, since the profession is unregulated. For our test, we found four trainers through a national organization, the Web and national retailers. They took on problem areas for four dogs, ranging from obedience to house training. We then watched a DVD of the National Geographic Channel series "Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan" to glean a bit of wisdom.

Overall, we preferred private, at-home dog training, since trainers see pets behaving badly at home, such as dogs nipping at our heels while we carried laundry. But it isn't cheap -- about \$110 an hour (an eight-week group puppy-training class at a local PetSmart cost \$119). Results can take months and depend on strictly adhering to the advice. Positive reinforcement is key, and some other methods made us uneasy. In the test we had excellent private trainers, but next time we might first observe a trainer's session before spending the money. We'd also call our local kennel club and veterinarian for referrals to

group and private trainers.

The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers, a national nonprofit group, certifies dog trainers who take an exam. We found Puppergarten, a dog-training school in Pennington, N.J., through the organization's Web site. The owner visited our home for house-training issues with two pugs. The hourlong sessions were packed with tips, such as tethering a dog to our waist, so he would be constantly visible. The trainer taught them to sit within the first session. We realized our failure to enforce basic obedience commands led to our dogs thinking they could do whatever they please.

At a [PetSmart](#) Inc. store, we attended a free consultation to determine if our mutt, Riley, was a candidate for a group intermediate training class. He barked incessantly at men. The trainer asked male employees to stroll past the ring, attempting to prompt Riley's barking. But he just panted. She concluded he was anxious and ineligible for the class, saying he might bite customers. She suggested not feeding him for a day, then asking men to give him food, to improve Riley's behavior around men. But we were uncomfortable with that approach. A PetSmart training executive said its programs address basic behavioral problems. PetSmart requires trainers to complete a 96-hour instructional program.

We hit the Internet to find a trainer in Austin, Texas. Our dog, Bosco, a medium-size mixed breed we adopted at age nine months, jumped on people and nipped them, and raced hyperactively through the house. Two trainers from Fidelio Dog Works came to our house for an emergency session (\$110). They were able to transform Bosco into a docile dog -- at least for the hourlong session. We learned the "place" command, which required Bosco to remain on a bed for a long period. It's an invaluable tool, especially when dinner guests arrive. One technique -- using a metal pinch collar when he was hyperactive -- was effective but made us uncomfortable.



Pablo, one of the dogs in our test, scavenges for dinner scraps in the trash.

Invisible Fence Brand, an electronic pet-containment system, successfully stopped Riley from running into a busy road. The dog's collar emits a warning sound if it strays past a perimeter, delineated by an underground wire. A shock (the company prefers "correction") follows if the dog doesn't retreat within about two seconds. Shocking Riley made us wince, so we hesitated to train Pringle, a docile pug, on the system. But, figuring they'd be safer with training, we bought a four-session package from Canine Fence Co., an Invisible Fence distributor.

Our trainer reviewed how to acclimate Pringle to the system. We then leash-walked the dog along the perimeter. He got a shock during the second session and yelped, making us cringe. It was hard to subject Pringle to the correction without the trainer's assistance. We decided against the system for Pringle, obtaining a refund for unused sessions.

"We all cringe, but it's really protecting them," an Invisible Fence spokesman said, adding that trainers take several months of courses. The company introduced a puppy containment system last year that uses vibration instead of shocks.

We bought the first season of "Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan" on DVD. It isn't instructional but was a good complement to our pricey private sessions. Mr. Millan's interaction with his clients reminded us of critical training concepts in an entertaining way, such as consistency, and establishing ourselves as the rulers of our household kingdoms. We were relieved that our dogs were not as troublesome as some of the vicious canine guests on his show, and motivated by the owners who loved them. At \$39, it was inexpensive insurance for adhering to the lessons from our costlier and more time-intensive efforts.

—Rachel Emma Silverman contributed to this article.

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TRAINERS/HOW WE FOUND THEM COST

REASON FOR TRAINING COMMENT

<p>"Dog Whisperer With Cesar Millan -- The Complete First Season" DVD Bookstore* Fidelio Dog Works, Austin, Texas www.fideliodogs.com Web-surfed for local trainer.* Invisible Fence Brand (training via Canine Fence Co., Wilton, Conn.) www.invisiblefence.com</p>	<p>\$39</p> <p>\$110/hour for single session; \$290 for package of three sessions. Prices subject to change.</p> <p>Fence and collar packages starting at \$799. System training starting at \$249 (two sessions).**</p> <p>Free private consultation; \$119 for eight-session group puppy class (one hour each). Price varies by location.</p> <p>\$200 for two-session package. Discounts for larger packages. Multiple dogs extra.</p>	<p>We wanted inexpensive advice from a national canine behavioral expert.*</p> <p>Hyperactive nine-month-old rescue dog jumped and nipped.</p> <p>First dog ran into busy road; trained second dog because we already had system.</p> <p>Three-year-old rescue dog barked at men.</p> <p>Two pugs had house-training problems.</p>	<p>Millan reminded us of important training principles, such as consistency and discipline, in an entertaining manner. It's an inexpensive way to maintain skills we learned from pricey trainers.</p> <p>Dog behaved for trainer during first visit. We learned the commands "place," "leave it" and "off." It's easier to handle our dog now but it requires practice and consistency.</p> <p>Our trainer was thorough when teaching us to use the system. The fence saves our big dog from running into traffic. But we stopped training a docile pug because we couldn't bear the yelp after he is shocked. We got a refund for unused sessions.</p> <p>The parking lot and exotic birds made our dog nervous. We couldn't get him to bark at men in the store. The trainer said he wasn't a candidate for a group class.</p> <p>We learned we're partly to blame for the house-training problem, by not being authoritative and consistent. Best tip: We place plastic carpet runner, pointy side up, where the dogs mark. It bothers their paws so they stay away.</p>
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* *Not intended as formal training program.*

** *Pricing specific to Canine Fence Co. Varies depending on distributor, location and property size.*

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