

# Drama-Free Dogs: Coaching the Canine Actor

Business

Learning: Animal

Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA, and Perry DeWitt, CPDT-KA

**M**arisa Scully and Perry DeWitt, of Philly Dog Training, recently had their dogs Super (a Yorkie/Jack Russell Terrier) and Billy (a Shepherd/Husky mix), hired to star in a commercial for their local ABC affiliate\*. After seeing the video, I became curious about the process of training a canine actor for a photo or film shoot: What was it like for them and their dogs? What kind of preparation was involved? Would they recommend the experience to other trainers? It turns out this was not the first canine acting experience for either Marisa or Perry. Here's what they had to say on the subject.

One of the first shoots I (Marisa) did with one of my own dogs was for a national television channel. When we arrived at the shoot there was a long waiting period before going on set, and when we (myself and my dog, along with nine other dogs and handlers) arrived on set, the agent immediately told us to “keep the cookies to a minimum,” as she did not want handlers returning to reinforce their dogs getting in the way of the film crew.

Everyone was instructed to set their dog up on set in a Stay and then walk away. Because my dog is seasoned at performing a variety of behaviors in a variety of environments filled with distractions, I was confident he would perform nicely, but I still hurriedly walked away from him, ran back and rewarded, repeated twice, released him, and then reset him, while everyone else asked their dogs to get into position. When everyone else finally got their dogs set up in their designated spots, they told their dogs to stay and we all walked off stage. Every single dog, except for mine, followed their handler off set, confused and stressed. The handlers immediately became embarrassed and frantic, resetting their dogs and repeating “stay” in louder tones, and then attempting to walk away. What followed was a super-long, super-unsuccessful shoot where the dogs were not performing, the handlers were frazzled, and the film crew was not getting footage. This brings us to the first rule of handling a canine actor: **Advocate for your dog.**

Had the agent said to the film crew, “OK, we are going to need five to ten minutes of time on set before rolling to warm the dogs up,” the crew could have taken a quick break and come back to a group of dogs who had already begun understanding their tasks and building confidence and comfort with the new application in which they were being asked to perform. Perhaps a few of the dogs would not have been ready regardless, but a warm-up with at least a few repetitions that were generously reinforced would have given everyone a better start. Is five to ten minutes of warm-up time really that much to ask for? I think the film crew, studio, and customer would all



prefer that time be taken for preparation, rather than what ensued, which was hours of unsuccessful attempts.

I advocated for my dog, directly going against the instructions of the agent, and yet I wound up pleasing the agent more than any of the other handlers. In order to do any kind of high-pressure work with a dog, it is imperative that you speak up for the needs of your dog. Not only will it increase the chances of success, it is the only way to make this kind of work fair to the animal whose emotional well-being you are responsible for. Which brings us to the second rule of handling a show biz dog: **The emotional well-being of the animal is the first priority.**

Despite the fact that my dog was the star of the shoot, the whole scenario was quite discouraging, as I saw every person and dog feel like a failure, continuing to attempt the same things over and over again with only worsening results. As trainers, we should all be sensitive to the emotional well-being of our animals at all times, but especially when they are being used for the purpose of human benefit. It is extremely unethical to put animals through stress for something like a commercial or TV show.

This doesn't mean that animals can't be used for our entertainment, but the animal *must* be happy and cheerfully cooperative, and this is quite possible as long as necessary steps are taken to ensure that the dog is prepared and comfortable in the context of performing for film or print work.

## Does Your Dog Have What It Takes?

Not every dog is cut out for media work, just as not every person is suited to be an actor. Some dogs fit the Hollywood bill better than others. Since our dogs do not have much say in the activities we enroll them in, it is important to evaluate whether a specific dog is right for the job before pursuing a career in animal acting. There are a few key factors to keep in mind when evaluating whether your dog is right for this kind of work. The three things that are the most important to consider are temperament, working endurance, and adaptability.

In order to be successful on set a dog must be social with people and other dogs, and must not be sensitive to new and different environments. As a canine actor, your dog will encounter a number of different people, many of whom will be wearing uniforms and equipment. Dogs who are uncomfortable or who may lose focus in the presence of large numbers of people, or people who look different than the people they are accustomed to, may not make successful actors. Many times your dog will be asked to work side by side with other dogs or animals, or will have to share space with other animals during down times. If canine actors are not comfortable doing so, it may be hard for them to find many jobs and unfair to ask them to perform this kind of work.

While it is proven that dogs work and learn best in short spurts, this is rarely an option on set. Often the days are long, the set is hot, and the dog must maintain peak performance for long periods of time. Overweight dogs, older dogs, or dogs who otherwise are not able to work for long durations or multiple times throughout a day may not be appropriate candidates for media work.

When working on set things often do not go as planned. Dogs must be able to adapt quickly to new people, new environments, and new skills in order to be highly successful actors. Preparation will only take you so far, and if your dog is unable to cope with a sudden environmental change, a new person, or a new task, he may not be best suited for acting. My (Perry's) Border Collie, Goose, is a good example of a dog who is naturally suited for commercial/media work. He can work for long periods at a time, recovers quickly after working, will perform for anyone who has his reinforcer, and is quick to pick up new skills or behaviors. In a Pep Boys commercial shoot, he worked all day (with breaks, of course) sometimes taking a scene over 10 to 15 times in a row. He is a dog who is not sensitive about his performance and can repeat the same task over and over with unwavering enthusiasm.

It is unfair to ask a dog who does not have this kind of confidence in his performance to work at this level of intensity for such a duration. Remember that the proof is often in the pudding. If the shots come out after numerous takes, and the dog continues to appear happy and confident, then he is likely suited for the job. Unlike human actors, dogs cannot "put a smile on" when they

are not actually happy. If the dog clearly enjoys the work (you know your dog best) and can stay focused for long periods, he will likely make a great actor.

## Foundation Behaviors for Aspiring Canine Actors

If you think your dog has what it takes to be an animal actor, there are a number of foundation skills that will help him to be successful and give him a leg up over other dogs competing for jobs. Often there is not a long period of time between finding out your dog got the job and the shoot itself. If the tasks are complex, you will not have much time to teach your dog his new behaviors, and proof them well enough to be performed in a new location in front of a lot of people, and potentially to perform these behaviors for others. Having good acting foundation skills will make learning most new behaviors a breeze, so you will be able to focus on fine-tuning and proofing the behaviors rather than teaching them from scratch. The foundation skills we recommend teaching are:

- Sit
- Down
- Stand
- Stay
- Nose target an object
- Paw target an object
- Go to a mark
- Look at me
- Look at someone/something else
- Hold/carry something in your mouth.

All of these are relatively simple behaviors that, when combined in different fashions, make many rather complex and diverse tricks that will make your dog the talent agent's number one pick.

If you are only going to teach one thing to your aspiring canine actor, it should be a bomb-proof Stay. Especially for print work, in many cases this is all your dog needs to be able to reliably do. A rock-solid Stay, trained positively so the dog enjoys it, will allow you to leave your dog and get behind the camera so that shots can be more quickly and easily set up. Your dog should be able to stay in a Sit, Down, and Stand position, and bonus points if he can hold a Beg position. Without this skill, both you and your dog will become incredibly frustrated quickly on set.

Having good body awareness, especially of his nose and front paws, will make learning many new behaviors a cinch. Billy had to learn how to "turn on a TV" for the ABC commercial, and because he already knew how to nose target different objects, we only had to work on getting more distance and nose targeting from a Stay rather than learning the whole behavior from the ground up. Because I only had about two weeks to teach and proof this behavior (along with a few others), I saved a lot of time and stress by having already built the nose targeting foundation.

*Continued on next page*

The same goes for paw targeting and holding and carrying objects. Instead of scrambling to teach complex behaviors to your dog in a short period of time, you can work on fine-tuning behaviors like opening or closing doors, digging, pawing at keys, putting toys away, or bringing a needed object. Even behaviors as complex as painting a picture or getting a drink from a fridge can be taught relatively quickly to a dog who already knows how to target with his nose and paws and carry an object.

An important behavior for an aspiring star is going to a mark. Teach your dog to front-foot target a small flat object on the ground (such as a small piece of paper, Post-it, Tupperware lid, etc.). If this behavior is solid and properly proofed, your dog should be able to move away from you to virtually any other place on set. Your dog should be able to perform other well-known behaviors from his mark, like Sit, Down, Speak, or covering his eyes.

Teaching your dog to focus on you is simple, and will generally make things much easier on set. There are times, however, when your dog must look at someone or something else. This is often easily resolved if the dog is able to work for someone else and can easily shift his focus. Many dogs are not able to easily do this and must be taught to work for other people with confidence. It is also helpful to teach your dog to look at and focus toward an object instead of toward you.

### Teamwork Improves Everything: Two Trainers Are Better Than One

Having a training partner is ideal, not only in training the dog ahead of time, but also on set. Because dogs are often expected to perform for an actor who is a stranger to them, practicing with many different people is great. Moreover, if there is someone else who works regularly with your dog, it can also be helpful, as there are more sources of information, and more minds to go into brainstorming how to achieve results if creativity on set is needed. For example, if you need the dog to look in one direction and then another, or move toward one side of the shot and then the other, and it's hard because of the location to set up marks (or there are limits for any number of reasons), having one handler call the dog and then the other handler call the dog gives you many options. In our last commercial we even used a restrained recall to build extra enthusiasm toward the end of the day when the dogs were beginning to get a bit tired. The more familiar faces that the dog has a rewarding working history with, the better, and we certainly didn't mind having each other there for support either.

### Pre-Shoot Prep and Generalization

In order to properly prepare your dog for his job, there are a number of things you can do to help him give his best performance. Make sure your dog gets enough sleep the night before a shoot, has a healthy meal, and is properly exercised. Every dog is different and you will

have to find a balance for how much exercise is too much or too little for your particular dog. Some may need to save every ounce of energy they have, while others may need a walk or a run to take the edge off before going on set. Make sure you bring a variety of reinforcers, including both food and toys if your dog likes toys.

Above all, the most important thing you can do to prepare your dog is generalize his behaviors extremely well. I (Perry) do agility with my dogs and find that the level of performance a dog should have for a given behavior should be comparable to how well a dog understands his agility obstacles. My dog understands that weave poles are weave poles, and it doesn't matter if we are at Nationals in California on thick green grass in front of hundreds of people or if we are in Pennsylvania by ourselves in a dirt barn. The performance is always the same, and he is 100 percent sure of his job. Of course, this didn't happen overnight. My dog had to learn how to weave first in my backyard with no distractions and then learn that the weave poles at our training club required the same performance. After he started trialing, it took him a few months to learn that no matter where we were or who was around the performance was always the same. Ideally my dog has this level of competence for the behaviors he will be asked to perform in front of the camera. This can require a great deal of training, which should always include practicing behaviors in new environments, for different people, at different times of day, and with varying objects if that applies. I can teach my dogs a new trick in a session or two but it takes a lot more work to make these new behaviors reliable in almost any circumstance.

### On-Set Prep and Warm-up

Ideally you have practiced any behaviors that will be required for a shoot in so many locations with your dog prior to filming that location will barely matter and your dog will be confident picking up with training in any environment. Even so, giving your dog some prep time on set is still important, although just how much prep time will depend on the dog. You want to be careful not use all of your dog's energy before the cameras are rolling, while also making sure not to rush, as the stress of instructions from film crew, cameras, and additional people moving through the environment should only be added once the dog is comfortable with the space.

### Rates: No, Not Money! Effective Frequency of Reinforcers and Breaks

All dogs have different needs for frequency of reinforcement and frequency of breaks. It is ideal to have proofed the behaviors to where extremely frequent reinforcement is not needed so that it does not interfere with the function of the performance. But if the behavior seems to be breaking down or the dog needs more feedback, often even temporarily increasing the rate of reinforcement can get you back on track, and then you may be able to increase duration or number of

behaviors in between reinforcers. Just like with taking the prep time, it is better to go through a brief period of higher than ideal rate of reinforcement and have a dog eager to perform than leave a dog high and dry and have him wind up discouraged and distressed.

### Communicate Clearly, Not Only with Actors, but Also with Directors

It's important to remember that the director is not a dog handler or trainer, and so the way s/he talks about animal behavior may be different from what we as trainers are used to. It's important to be extremely clear about exactly what behaviors, in what order, for how long, etc., the dog will be expected to do. Changing a behavior from "cock head while sitting" to "cock head while standing" could be a no-brainer for certain dogs, even without much practice, or it could render you completely unable to come through for the vision of the director. Don't hesitate to literally get on all fours and try to act out the particulars of what the dog will be expected to do in the planning phases. Make sure you are aware of when there will be opportunities to reward and when there will not, and how far away you will need to stay to avoid getting in the shot. No matter how well prepared you are, there is still the chance of misunderstandings or last-minute changes to the script, but communicating clearly from the start will get everyone on the same page so as to minimize tweaking, since what seems like a small change to a person can be a huge change to a dog. Of course, the better trained, generalized, and proofed an individual behavior is, the easier it will be to accommodate last-minute changes. A dog who has already learned to cock his head while standing, sitting, and lying down in a variety of environments will be much more able to adapt and continue to perform.

### Stay Cool

It is easy to feel pressure when working in front of a camera. The easiest way to avoid getting frustrated with your dog is to make sure he is 100 percent sure of his job. There can be a great deal of stress in this industry, and people often find that they tend to put more pressure on themselves and their dogs any time they are in front of a camera, even in their living rooms recording a YouTube video. Being in front of the camera is hard, and it is important to keep in mind that getting frustrated or angry with your dog for not performing how you wish he would will not help the matter. Give your dog a break if you think he needs one, offer him plenty of water, take him for a walk, or do a quick training session if he needs something brushed up. The more frustrated you get, the more frustrated your dog will get, and his behavior will likely fall further apart. Take the time you need to help him feel comfortable and happy, and things will end up going more quickly and smoothly. Remember that you know your dog best, and it is up to you to make sure he gets what he needs during a long day of work.

\*You can see Super and Billy (as Roxy and Buster) in the 6ABC commercial here: [youtu.be/RPfkJKHW0C4](http://youtu.be/RPfkJKHW0C4). In addition, the interns at 6ABC shot a behind-the-scenes look at the making of the ad, which you can watch here: [youtu.be/xT1xbvcr8lo](http://youtu.be/xT1xbvcr8lo). For more information about additional canine acting work Marisa and Perry have been involved in, visit [www.phillydogtraining.com/dog-training-animal-actors.html](http://www.phillydogtraining.com/dog-training-animal-actors.html).

*Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA, began training professionally in 2007 and has continued to expand her knowledge and expertise through experience and education and close relationships with other professionals in her field. She lives in Philadelphia with her three rescue dogs: Super, and two Pit Bulls, Pun and Muffin.*

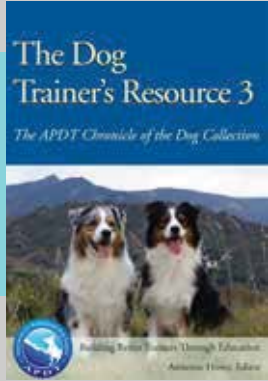
*Perry DeWitt, CPDT-KA, started her journey into professional dog training in 2008. She is very involved in dog sports and also has a passion for teaching dogs tricks and complex behaviors. She lives in Philadelphia with Billy, and two Border Collies, Goose and Verb.*

*Marisa and Perry have a small dog training business in Philadelphia called Philly Dog Training, ([www.phillydogtraining.com](http://www.phillydogtraining.com)), and run the dog training portion of a non-profit organization called Hand2Paw ([www.hand2paw.org](http://www.hand2paw.org)) that connects homeless youth and shelter animals in a mutually beneficial way.*



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