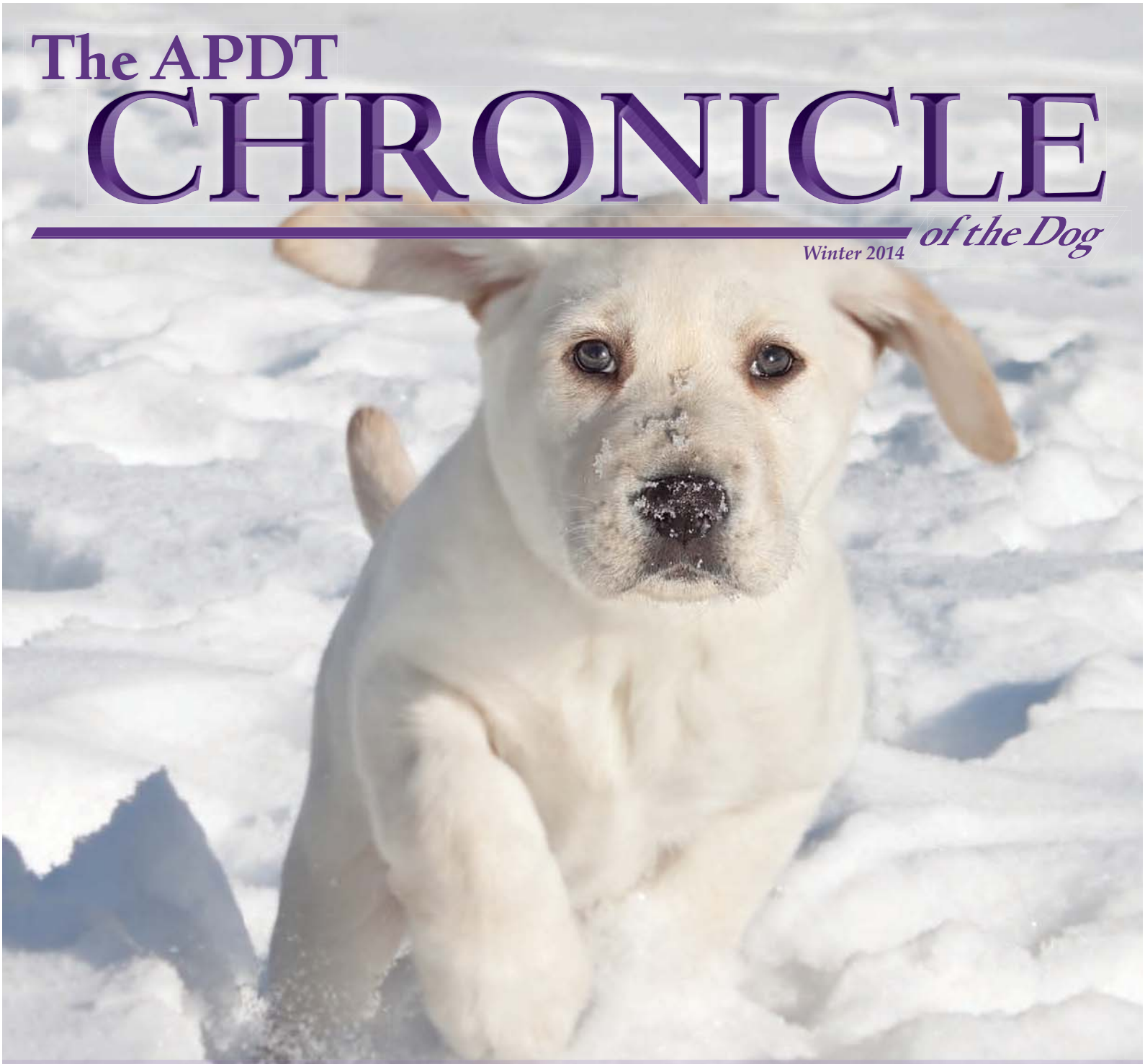
The APDT
CHRONICLE
of the Dog
Winter 2014



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Marley's Fetch Club

Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA

We've all heard of the dog who doesn't love other dogs, but easily tunes them out while retrieving a ball. Or the dog who is uncomfortable with strangers but happily plays agility in a building filled with people he has never met. In certain contexts, enjoyable activities can help a dog function, even in the midst of stimuli that can be challenging, but often this functionality does not generalize outside of that specific context. As a result, our ball-retrieving dog falls apart when she's face to face with another dog in the vet's office, just as our agility-loving dog explodes into a reactive meltdown when passing a stranger while out for a walk. Working to understand exactly why activities within certain contexts enable some dogs to feel comfortable and behave appropriately, I believe we can use positively conditioned activities to help dogs feel safe in a wider variety of circumstances, and eventually truly begin to generalize that feeling around stimuli that were previously concerning to the dog.

The first time I met Marley was for an in-home training session. Upon seeing me, she sank into the back of the couch and slightly exposed her belly. She was five months old and had only been in her new home in Philadelphia for a few days. Her owner, John, had gotten Marley from a Jack Russell Terrier breeder in rural Pennsylvania who he met at a dock diving event he was attending with a dog he had been fostering for the local shelter. At the recommendation of fellow volunteers, John had looked into sporting activities with his foster dog, and his own interest in dog sports began to grow. When his foster dog was adopted, he called the Jack Russell breeder he had met at the event, and she happened to have a puppy still available from her last litter.

Marley was enrolled in multiple classes a week in addition to the private training I was doing with her and John. She took puppy class, agile pups, obedience, therapy dog, tricks, and freestyle. And as she got older, the list grew. There was not a dog sport or activity John did not at least try with Marley, and she was extremely keen at all of the training exercises and games he played with her. Marley was naturally driven to work for various rewards, and she was intense and focused while training.

Marley's social comfort, however, continued to require maintenance and attention as she got older, even though we had taken care to socialize her carefully from the day she came home. Coming home as an older, shy puppy, this was challenging, and so we kept in mind that she might struggle at times regardless of the work we were doing. We made sure to crate train Marley with care and tons of positive conditioning so that she would always have a safe place to be able to take a break from any situation that was uncomfortable for her. She learned the Look at That game and practiced frequently while walking through the city, and occasionally in the context of her sports classes as well. John and I discussed the importance of keeping her interactions with people at a pace and intensity that was tolerable for her, even during sports where she did not struggle with new people the way she did when a new person came into her home, or approached her while walking through her neighborhood.

Because of Marley's skills in obedience and her ability to put her "thinking cap" on when in training classes, or anywhere she could be in "training mode," she passed her CGC/TDI tests with flying colors. John and I discussed the fact that a dog with social anxiety is not an ideal candidate to do therapy dog visits, where tactile interactions and lots of petting were often required. We decided that if she were to do therapy dog work, it would be in the context of "performing" for people. We went to her first therapy dog visit at a nursing home together, and it proved an extremely valuable experience, in ways very different than we had originally intended.

Upon entering the building, Marley was immediately uncomfortable navigating past doting strangers. We micromanaged her into the location where we planned on doing a demonstration of her tricks and impressive behaviors. As people filed into the room, she was concerned with each person. At one point Marley barked at a latecomer who, in an attempt to be funny, barked back at her, which was, as far as Marley was concerned, terribly worrisome. I am being honest about this less-than-ideal therapy visit for two reasons: first, it's a critical part of Marley's journey, and second, I think it's important that we as trainers realize we are not going to be perfect, and that we learn from our mistakes.

My hope was that the therapy visit would fall into the category of "work environment" in Marley's brain and she'd function as beautifully as she had in classes or competitions, but the environment did not look similar to anywhere she had trained or competed, and so she did not arrive and immediately go into work mode. She was still able to focus on her training tasks, but her discomfort with the social nature of the visit was too high for me to consider this activity appropriate for her. My goal was to get through the visit safely and carefully, and then restructure our goals for Marley.

Despite the rough start, Marley did perform beautifully. Furthermore, the complex skills she displayed enchanted her audience and sparked questions about dog training

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that led to stimulating discussions and conversations about learning in general. Her moments of struggle were not perceptible to anyone other than me and John, which does not make them okay, but the subtlety of her discomfort did make the experience positive for everyone else involved.

At one point during Marley's performance we were showing off her retrieves. Marley is very advanced at bringing various objects to and from locations or people, and while bringing a dumbbell from a basket to John, she saw the hand of a person in the front row dangling down and mistook this for a target. She readily brought her dumbbell to the hand, and when the hand did not receive the dumbbell, she dropped it, picked it back up, tried to place it in the hand again, and then rerouted once we gave her the cue to bring it to us. When we explained what she was trying to do, the person whose hand she targeted said that she would take it from her should she wish to try again. And so Marley began retrieving items to and from her audience, happily interacting with them as though they were assistants in her routine. Of course we were extremely careful to instruct everyone only to take or give objects and not to attempt to interact with her by petting or picking her up, but at one point during some down time and discussion, Marley even leapt into someone's lap and began to snuggle, seeming comfortable and happy to interact socially.

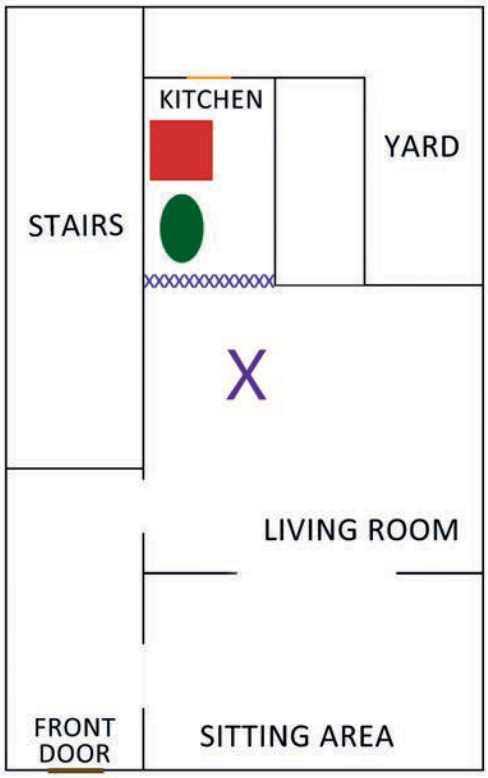
On the walk home, John and I discussed how the visit went and agreed that although all in all it was relatively successful, this was not appropriate work for Marley. And so her therapy dog career ended just as it began, with everyone on board that Marley's experience needed to be the defining factor in whether or not something truly was a good choice for her.

The other decision we made that day was to focus on her social interactions more strategically, as it seemed that having a job to do helped her function more productively than counter-conditioning by doling out resources during simple tasks. Her area of greatest struggle was coping with visitors in her home, and although we had given her jobs to do — incompatible behaviors like going to a mat and games like Look at That — a large part of Marley's brain was still consumed with worry. I wondered if giving Marley more mentally demanding games could help to engage her brain in a way that would positively influence her emotional response to otherwise anxiety-inducing stimuli.

The process for selecting an appropriate sequence of activities and behaviors for Marley to begin to view "guest reception" as a functional working activity changed as we practiced and learned from her responses what would work for her. We changed the locations in the home that we practiced the activities and the order in which we did things, and here's what the finish product looked like for Marley (a diagram of the setup of John's home is available on the next page.):

- Begin in her crate (the red square on the diagram), which is located in the kitchen behind a baby gate (the blue Xs on the diagram), with a stuffed food toy, with a blanket over the top of the crate to remove visual stimulation.
- Remove her from the crate on a leash using her release cue, "okay." A release cue is used whenever Marley leaves her crate, and so this remains consistent with a protocol we have in place to make sure she does not run out of her crate before her handler is ready.
- Ask Marley to go to a mat (green oval on diagram), where she begins to play the Look at That game, being rewarded for looking at the new person. This step happens while Marley is still in the kitchen behind a baby gate. (The kitchen opens into the living room and there is no door, which is why we used a baby gate. The gate was helpful, as it created a barrier but still enabled the view that Marley needed to begin to acclimate to the guest though the Look at That game.) The distance between Marley and the guest at this point is about eight feet.
- Invite her off of her mat and continue to play the Look at That game while moving through space in the kitchen on a loose leash with her handler. We utilize distance as part of her reward system by strategically moving toward and away from the person/baby gate, often tossing her reward in the opposite direction. We used food as a reward with Marley because we did not want to risk over-arousal by using a toy, which generates a higher arousal response in Marley.
- Remove the baby gate. Continue to play the Look at That game while using movement through space in the same manner. During this portion of her protocol we gradually move out of the kitchen and into the same room as the guest, who is about five to seven feet beyond the threshold of the kitchen (represented by the purple X in the diagram).
- Offer Marley a dumbbell and ask her to hold. Progress to delivering the dumbbell to a basket specifically for this purpose (positioned wherever it seems best based on the circumstances), then retrieving from basket, with high rate of reinforcement throughout.
- Ask Marley to bring the dumbbell to the guest, then retrieve it from the guest. Repeat.
- Disengage from the game and give Marley another stuffed food toy to enjoy wherever she chooses.

The most important part of moving from one step to the next is reading Marley's body language and measuring how able she is to respond to cues. If at any point Marley seems tense, or is unable to perform her task as smoothly as she would be able to if a guest were not in the home, we go back to the previous step.



A diagram of John's home. The red square is Marley's crate, the green oval is her mat. The baby gate is the line of blue Xs. The guest generally starts off in the location indicated by the purple X.

One really beautiful thing that began happening when Marley became accustomed to this system was that she began taking herself to the previous step, retreating to her mat or the crate, if she began to feel uncomfortable, and we always took this as a message from Marley that she needed a decreased degree of task difficulty.

Because Marley has never been punished for mistakes while training or forced into a training task, it is unlikely that she will participate unless she wants to. Marley's training tasks are modified if she shows stress or a lack of motivation, and so the likelihood that she will push herself beyond her threshold is decreased. An essential element in communication during all training is responding appropriately when a dog displays anxiety or a lack of desire to perform. Since Marley's training history reflects that her handler helps her when she is in need, simply not participating in her training task is a message that gives a lot of information to her handler. The fact that the communication goes both ways in this training relationship is integral in its functionality. I struggle to find a word other than "trust" to define how the training relationship Marley has with her handler serves as a comfort within the context of a challenge.

Marley's ability to actually make a decision to choose between removing herself or engaging in something that made her feel comfortable is something that some dogs are able to do without such an advanced training system, and lucky for them! But to see the training protocol actually function as a way to help Marley learn to cope for herself was what made me feel like we were making bigger strides than just enabling her to function at the moment. We were teaching and reinforcing self-regulation and decision-making while navigating a challenging social encounter.

One thing I want to be clear about in engaging a dog in activities like this is that the goal is not to have the dog become so hyper-focused on the activity that she doesn't even perceive the stimuli around her. I want the dog to notice and be aware of the challenging stimuli, so that she is not surprised or overwhelmed when she eventually takes a break or stops the activity. It is also important to me that the person engaging in the activity is the dog's handler and not someone we are trying to get the dog acclimated to. Having the stranger give the rewards can cause the dog to force herself to get closer to the person than she is truly capable of at that time. Involving the person or thing in the training protocol at some point is okay, so long as the dog knows the handler is doling out the rewards and she can choose other behaviors to earn a reward if she is not ready to involve the unfamiliar person.

One of the key elements in creating an activity that works for this kind of application is that it can be done in a wide variety of locations. I'll never forget trying to hand my dog a tennis ball while walking down the sidewalk in order to reward him, and having him stare at me blankly. If romping and chasing the ball is the fun part, being handed a "dead" ball does not function as a reward. Similarly, this activity needs to be rewarding to the dog *within the context that it will be used for counter-conditioning*, and it needs to be practiced regularly. I believe having a sequence or pattern involved helps bring a degree of predictability and familiarity to an otherwise strange and unpredictable situation. The more well-rehearsed the activity within the context, the more functionally it should work.

When explaining this protocol to other clients as an example, or discussing it in a way that helps participating guests understand, I often joke that Marley more readily accepts people once she knows they are in the "Fetch Club." If we think about people with social anxiety, we often recognize times when they can more comfortably socialize within the context of a familiar activity, or the discussion of a fond subject matter. When people find they have something in common with another person, they feel an immediate sense of affiliation. I believe these social lubricants can function in the exact same way for dogs, and rather than seeing the Fetch Club as an anthropomorphic analogy, it is actually a way to describe how predictability, familiarity, and confidence within context can aid in social behavior.

Not only did this regimen enable John to have visitors, and Marley to actually feel comfortable with them, it got easier as time went on. Eventually John was able to breeze

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through each step of the protocol more quickly, and even eliminate some steps altogether. In other words, Marley is on her way to actually feeling okay about guests and not needing as much help from John. Depending on the dog, there are varying degrees of reasonable goals. There are some dogs I would never ask to even try this type of work, and some who, if I found something that worked, I would never deviate from the structure of the protocol. Making smart decisions by processing all of the information we have about each dog and handler team is essential.

This was not a project that took three sessions, or that required only a few simple behaviors. The training regimen as outlined above took hundreds of hours of practice and patience. Because John had practiced teaching Marley many complex behaviors, he had the training chops to be able to find appropriate motivators, establish appropriate schedules of reinforcement, and to measure appropriately when to ask for more and when to back off.

If a person does not have the training skills to teach a dog a complex behavior like a trained object hold, retrieve, etc., he is not yet proficient enough to carry out behavior modification, especially as it applies to social discomfort. Asking for too much while teaching a dog how to do a trick may result in some stress and the inability to actually perform, but asking for too much when trying to help a dog behave around a person she finds alarming can result in much worse. I'm not saying each client should have to take his or her dog through competition-level obedience and agility in order to try to teach the dog not to beg at the table, but I do believe that we as trainers need to demand as much from our clients as we do from their dogs. If John told me he did not have the time or money to invest, my end goal would have been different. I would have spent our limited time teaching him how to make Marley comfortable in a crate in a bedroom and told him that the crate should be her location for the entire duration of guest visits.

I am thankful for committed clients like John and brilliant learners like Marley, because they give me a glimpse of what can happen when all of the resources are available, and all of the factors line up just right. I will have many more clients whose dogs are uncomfortable with visitors, who will not have the same end result, and that's okay. My hope is that the more cases we have that motivate us by showing the magic of just how well dog training can work, the further our work, and the dog training field overall, will come.

Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA, has a small dog training business in Philadelphia called Philly Dog Training. She 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 runs the dog training portion of a non-profit organization called Hand2Paw (www.hand2paw.org) that connects homeless youth and shelter animals in a mutually beneficial way. Marisa lives in Philadelphia with her three rescue dogs: a Yorkie/Jack Russell Terrier named Super, and two Pit Bulls, Pun and Muffin. Marisa can be reached at www.phillydogtraining.com.