

## Fixing the Redbone

This dog's crime was so severe that local animal control, urged and under pressure by the community, wanted the dog dead ... and they wanted it dead yesterday.

No, we ain't talking about some Pit Bull belonging to some drug dealer in some ghetto somewhere. This story is about a Hound from an affluent neighbourhood on the eastern coastline. It begins with three boys (10ish) waking to school. Their path taking them by the home where our subject dog lived (an 18-month old red bone). Each morning it was the same play, the boys would approach the fence, the dog would give a bark, one of the boys (Michael, the invincible one) would give a curse and a foot stomp, the dog would charge the fence, the boys would run off to school, the dog would return to his porch, peace would return to the morning, the hound would return to his snooze. That was the play which unfolded each school day.

But on one fateful day, the dog woke up from his morning snooze and walked off the porch to re-mark his yard. That's when he noticed an opening in the fence line. Out onto the sidewalk, nose to the ground, and he's on the hunt.

Ten blocks away, three boys are playing in the schoolyard when the hound shows up at the gate and walks through. Witnesses will state that the dog kept his nose to the ground as he harmlessly wandered around and amongst the kids, giving each an additional little sniff as he passed them by. Someone ran to get a playground supervisor, but when they returned they didn't see a dog aimlessly wandering around sniffing the kids.

At some point the hound found his quarry, lifted his head, squared off and walked straight over to Michael. The boy gave a curse and the foot stomp, the dog charged ... but this time, with no fence to stop the dog's response, Michael the Invincible was forced to take it up a notch. Witnesses say he took a swing at the dog as he yelled another obscenity ... but he was no match for the 80 pound hound.

The boy lay motionless on the grass as medical emergency services arrives on the scene ... the dog is long gone.

Ten blocks away, the lady of the house opens her door for the first time that morning. She steps onto the porch, gives her hound a smile and a warm good-mornin' pat on the head and then brings him in. Within the hour there is a knock at the front door; two police officers and two animal control officers.

They explain that there was an incident at the school that morning and that they have witnesses that can identify her dog as the one that seriously injured one of the kids. They explain the nature of the injuries to be so severe that she should probably contact her attorney. They further explained that they were taking the dog into custody ... right there, and right now.

"But officers, my dog couldn't have done that ... he's not been out of my sight today except for when my husband let him out to go pee and poop, and I brought him right back in ... your witnesses are mistaken."

During the life of the personal protection dog, he may be called upon once or twice to battle on behalf of his master. When that happens we want him to see the situation as no more than another training exercise. Intensity will obviously be different and he'll somehow 'know' that the stakes seem higher than normal. But remember, this is a dog that was selected on the merits of his good temperament and calm, confident disposition ... he'll make the behavioural adjustments necessary to take command of the situation ... using no more aggression than is minimally needed to provide the owner a safe retreat from the

situation. More importantly, the owner will have come to trust his dog's good judgment.

"Trust," becomes the operative word in any discussion where rehabilitating good dog status is being proposed for a dog labeled as a "Dangerous Dog." It really all comes down to this: what assurances can be given that the dog can be trusted amongst the community? The quick and short answer is experience; training experience, that is. "Experience" becomes the operative discussion when demonstrating that trust has been restored.

Y'all keep in mind that experience IS the dog's teacher and that the trainer's involvement in the experience is just part of what's involved. Also, there will have been literally thousands of people involved in this dog's training experience before it was all said and done.

The training plan for this dog included:

60 hours of basic training, 40 hours of field experience (the discrimination exercises borrowed from level one and level two agitation), and 21 hours of handler training. This training contract was for 13 weeks.

Demonstrating that the dog could indeed be trusted in public was accomplished along a protracted timeline and required that several 'dog authorities' be part of the training experience. Remember that 'thousands of people' mentioned above? Well, some of those would be some of these. Ergo, many of the very people that would have to trust the dog enough to recommend that the restrictions be removed or modified were made part of the training process. Some directly and some coincidentally ... but all had to see a trustworthy dog.

Beyond the training, there were many other challenges that had to be overcome, mostly of logistics and legality ... none of which I'll share on this forum. What I will share is the final demonstration that was done to showcase this dog to be trustworthy.

We met at a very well attended park. By 'we' I mean the owner, the co-owner, an animal control officer, the co-owner's insurance lady and me. This park had several areas of use. There is a public pool, an equestrian centre, little league diamonds, a 'tournament play' softball centre, and a stocked fishing pond. There are several lawn areas for those just hangin' out or picnicking. Also, there is a system of pathways which interconnect each of the 'event' areas ... all pathways lead to the fishing pond and "Duck Island."

It is on Duck Island that we begin our demonstration. Duck Island is a one-acre patch of land in the middle of the fishing pond. It is accessible only by way of a wood planked pedestrian bridge. It is frequented by fisherman (mostly pre-teen boys and girls in the company of a parent or older guardian), shutterbugs, and hundreds of ducks, and ... oh yeah ... those that feel it their duty to feed the ducks (signs prohibiting the activity go un-noticed).

It was arranged that we would all meet on the island at 6pm. When I arrived with the dog everyone was there and ready for this long anticipated meeting. This would be the day that the dog got to tell his side of the story ... that the bite incident was an isolated act of poor judgment and that his training has set him on a new and more discriminate path. It was my hopes that his good performance today, along with the previous training sessions which were set up in part to provide glimpses of the training process to those that would be involved in the final decision, would weigh favourably for the dog.

We did the meet and greet thing and then moved right into the demo. I asked the co-owner (to whom the dog would be returned) to stick close to me, and I instructed the others to remain back or to the side about 20 feet; I wanted them out of the way in the event that I needed to make any corrective turns.

We started with a three-minute sit-stay, immediately followed by a five-minute down-stay. The dog was placed at a 90-degree angle with a 55-gallon garbage can blocking his view of me. I returned back to the dog and did an exercise finish, then switched him over to the 6-foot lead; We did about 5 minutes of random heeling and automatic sits, a 'dancing with dog' type of thing, shamelessly performed to highlight the dog's commitment to obedience even when in areas of high value distractions (cut bait tossed on the ground, food thrown for the ducks, the ducks themselves, and the kids and adults 'whoopin' it up over a nice catch).

Next comes the 'approach by a stranger' to demonstrate the dog's acceptance of being not only approached by folks unknown to him, but touched as well. Over the bridge and onto the pathway that leads toward the playground and picnic areas. One wouldn't think that a breed ring champion would have any problem with the stand for examination, and the dog didn't let us down. His experience as a show dog actually helped out a great deal in finding folks to approach him. He has the 'it' factor; he has presence; he conveys that level of confidence and stature that stands patent for the eye to see.

I took him at heel toward the area reserved for radio controlled boaters. We worked on more heeling, this time punctuated with stand for exams, never turning down any request by onlookers to pet the dog. The old, the young, the fit, the sloppy, men, women, boys, girls, black, white, brown, yellow. The dog, as expected, had no problem with the stand for exam. From there we made our way over to the softball diamonds which are about three hundred yards away.

It was at the softball diamonds that I dropped the leash and we worked on some sit and down stays, we also worked recalls there. Then it was off-leash heeling over to the equestrian area.

The route to the equestrian centre included exposure to many different types of distractions. There were folks picnicking, there were folks on the bank of the fishing pond, there were ducks and geese, cats and dogs, joggers and power walkers, there was even an impromptu game of Frisbee golf playing out.

I was a bit disappointed to find only a few horses at the arena, and not many children. None-the-less, I worked on some random recalls, more stand-for-exams, and some sit and down stays ... but I needed this dog around kids, and lots of 'em. Also, and more importantly, I needed everyone to see that the co-owner was as capable of controlling the dog as I was.

So far this training session has taken us on a mostly peripheral route from one event center to the next ... but to really showcase this dog as safe to be in public, I needed to put him right in the thick of things. We would now abandon the groomed pathways and take a diagonal line through the middle of the park where the playgrounds were.

Then, while still at the arena, I had the co-owner work on some walk away sit and down stays. On the last down-stay, I had her switch over to the 6-foot lead. I then directed five minutes of on-leash heeling, making sure to place turns, sits, and pace changes in places which demanded the dog's commitment to obedience. We also worked on a few recalls.

Into the middle of the park we went. Light line heeling, sit-stays, down-stays, recalls and before we knew it, we were between the two play grounds; chutes and ladders to the left, monkey bars and jungle-gym to the left.

This area of the park was actively active to say the least. There were smaller kids, bigger kids, supervising teens, adults and a few dogs. There was even an ice cream vendor with a monkey ... although he split after some conversation with one of the park Rangers.

For the first time in this demonstration I asked the ACO if there was anything in particular that he wanted to see. He said that he wanted to see what the dog was like when he was not under any commands.

Fair enough. We did an informal meet and greet (stand-stays) for some of the curious kids ... some wanted to feed the dog, some wanted to pet the dog ... one wanted to ride the dog. Then I asked the ACO if he wanted the dog on or off lead when we released him from any commands.

The most he could ask for was the local standard: on voice command (which we were prepared for, but I knew he would not put that on the table) or on a leash of sufficient strength to control the dog. This is the recommendation I wanted him to make ... he did. We agreed on a fifteen foot line. The dog was given an 'Okay' release.

With the line fully let out, and the dog on an okay 'release,' we walked from the playground area back to the parking lot, stopping and re-starting along the way only for effect. By the time we were back to our vehicles both the ACO and the insurance lady were quite bored ... this dog is really no big deal ... what a total waste of time and worry. Perfect, positively perfect.

This story can't actually conclude until the dog is dead, in a box and on someone's shelf. In the meantime, he lives a pretty typical dog's life. Beyond normal community ordinances there are no special restrictions on him. He doesn't have to be muzzled when off the property, he doesn't have to be contained in a fully enclosed kennel when he's outside, the home owner is not required to maintain an 8' fence around their property, he does not have to be on leash when he's at the dog park, the owner is able to maintain her homeowner's insurance (albeit modified to include an exclusion on the dog). The dog is, however, still considered a 'Dangerous Dog' and therefore subject to being destroyed if found running at large or in the event of another unprovoked bite.

But getting back to the point of this story, it really took no more than a basic obedience program to recover this dog, and it took no more than a demonstration of the elements included in the companion dog routine to demonstrate that he was worthy of having some of the heavy restrictions removed. Cost can be kept low and maintenance is both fun and easy requiring no more than regular visits to the park ... what dog wouldn't enjoy an hour of his master's undivided time each day?

*Footnote to the above story: The dog passed away several years ago. There were no relapses. The trainer, has rehabilitated over 300 "problem" dogs in his private practice since 1985.*