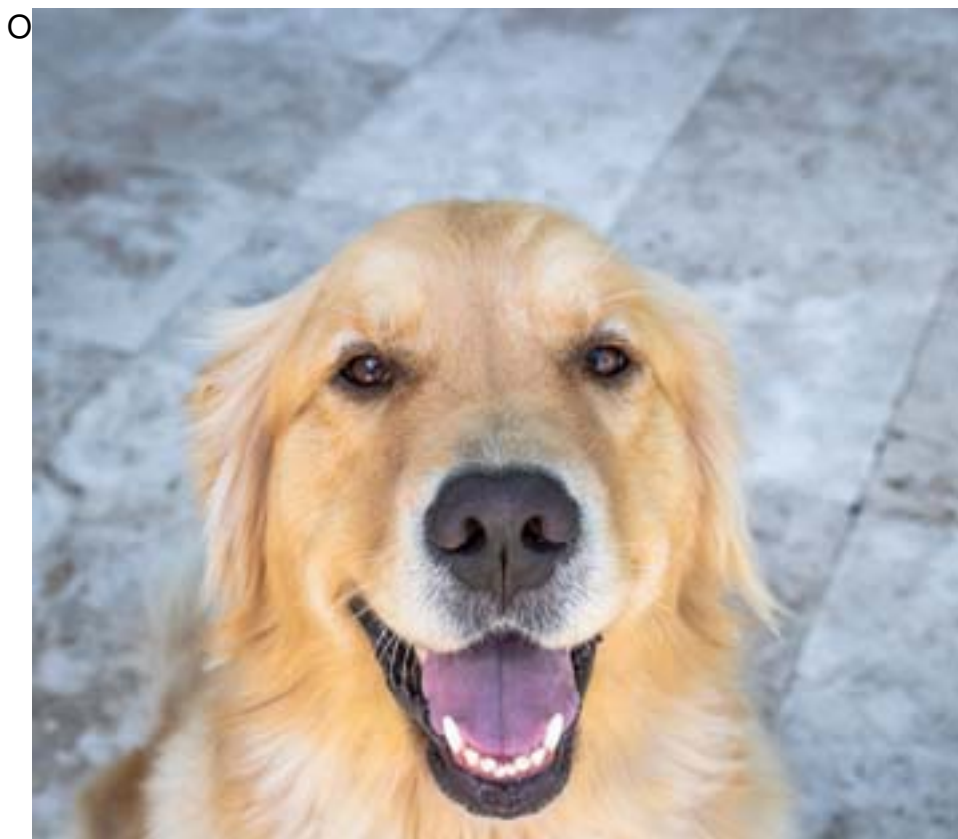


The leash life -- a memoir

My life with four-legged friends -- big and small, sweet and mean



Over the years as a dog trainer, my favorite leash has handled thousands of dogs. Not quite six feet long, it was cut from cowhide that was dyed a deep reddish-brown. There are no rivets at the brass clip or at the handle loop. "This way, it doesn't weaken the leather," said Johnny Gonzalez, master leather craftsman, when he sold me his handiwork 30 years ago.

Johnny was also known as a veteran dog trainer, leading the Schutzhund club in Hillsborough County. Schutzhund is a sport that develops a dog's obedience, tracking, and protection skills. In German, the word means "protection dog." It's a respected dog-training tradition, meant to create the perfect canine companion: a dog that's useful to humans and can just about do it all.

He was right. His use of braiding and knots, rather than rivets, has held up for three decades. How many leashes can say that? It has lasted through scorching hot South Florida summers, three hurricanes, and unruly dogs. And right along with it, somehow, I've lasted, too, in the dog business.

10,000 Days With Dogs

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor; Photos by Silvia Ros
March 2019

When people learn that I work with dogs, teaching obedience commands, good manners, and solving bad behavior issues, they often say, “That must be such a fun job.” It has been rewarding in many ways, but I doubt people know just how tough it can be as well. Long hours, rare days off, zero sick days, torn ligaments, ringworm, tick infestations, and lots of ramen noodle suppers -- those early years have taken a toll on body and spirit. There is heartbreak that clients only live an average of 12 years, and nightmares about animal abuse and neglect you’ve seen. And dog bites, especially the one by a 100-plus-pound German shepherd named Hans that tore muscles from my forearm and for a while took the use of a couple of fingers.

As Dr. Callahan went to work repairing the damage, he chatted me up as if we were old buddies down at a local watering hole. Out of nowhere I asked the hand surgeon, “Will I be able to play the guitar again?”



“Oh, sure, sure,” he answered. “No reason why you couldn’t.”

Funny how playing the guitar was suddenly very important to me, although I hadn’t picked up my six-string in 15 years.

Clients sometimes smile and ask, “Can you train my husband, too?” Remove “my husband” and insert “my kids” or “my wife” -- I’ve heard them all. They ask if I’m a dog whisperer. “Cesar Millan is the dog whisperer,” I say. “I’m just a dog trainer.”

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And, “How did you get into dog training?”

“I married a dog trainer,” I tell them.

I met my late ex-husband Jack in February 1987, while on vacation for Mets spring training games in St. Petersburg. He was a Southern boy who didn't care much for New York City, where I lived and worked for a stock photo agency. By the summer, we moved into a pink house near Park Street in St. Pete, on the “pink streets,” streets paved with the red Georgia brick of his home state. Through marriage, I was officially thrown into the dog business, part owner of Good Dog Bad Dog.

Soon I went from giving out business cards at the Wagon Wheel Flea Market on weekends to airing a television commercial several times a week. Still, we could only afford one phone number and the cheap time slots for the ad. When it ran at 2:00 a.m., at 2:01 we'd get “wake-up calls” from prospective clients.

With each training job I landed, I observed Jack work and learned dog training right along with the dogs. I learned how to train a customer's dog to respond to a handful of commands, how to end certain bad behaviors and how to train a dog in personal protection -- in other words, teaching them to bite and release a bite on command similar to police K9 training. I even became skilled at taking the bite on an agitation sleeve. In a couple of years, I was training clients' dogs myself.

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