

Raising the Bar

By Kim Brophrey, CDBC, CPDT, APDT member

753 Cedar Cliff Rd., Marshall, NC 28753 kbrophey2@yahoo.com

828-656-8305 828-674-8493

When I was in college writing my senior thesis on the human-canine relationship, there was not exactly a wealth of solid material on canine behavior and learning from which to work. There were, of course, the dry presentations of Skinner and Pavlov as it related to general learning and conditioning, many animal behavior studies that informed peripheral insights about dogs, and a myriad of anecdotally satisfying though pointedly unscientific books on the subject of dog training and behavior. There were a mere handful of quality resources drowning in a sea of unsubstantiated and often dangerous ideas. Any legitimate research that had been done was largely confined to the desks of a few committed veterinarians and scientists or was referenced in related fields such as Service and Therapy Animals. What reliable data I did find was mostly included in materials and methodology applied to the training of these specific kinds of working dogs, not in sources intended for pet dog training applications. While I now know that there were a small number of exceptional books that had been published at the time, I certainly couldn't readily find them in my four years of searching through every available dog training resource I could get my hands on.

My young Australian Shepherd, burdened with the unfortunate occupation of being my senior thesis project, became the reluctant guinea pig for what information I did glean from this initial collection. As a puppy and for a number of years to follow, she would bear the brunt of the unpleasant if not abusive results that dog training advice has so often historically yielded. And though, in hindsight, she should have bitten me in self-defense on dozens of occasions, she would only cut her eyes at me after some clumsily executed alpha roll or other foolish attempt to convince her that I was not only a dog but a dominant one (despite my upright posture and opposable thumbs). It is amazing that she had the patience to wait until a few years later when I "crossed over" as they say, after stumbling upon the book, Culture Clash, by Jean Donaldson. When I read it, my mix of regret, excitement and ponderings kept me up for countless sleepless nights, and my poor dog probably sighed in long-awaited relief. At least now, my continued errors inherent to my own learning curve (those moments when I would still be too harsh out of habit in our relationship) would cease to be rationalized and excused by those mainstream theories I had once embraced completely as I attempted to raise the bar for myself as a trainer.

Jean Donaldson is an example (as are Ian Dunbar, Patricia McConnell, Karen Pryor, Pat Miller, Karen Overall, Pam Reid and countless others) of one of those individuals who symbolizes the pendulum swing not just for me but for countless other trainers, and for the field of canine

learning and behavior. As someone who has made a point of keeping up with the most current available information about dog behavior and training for the last 12 years, it is incredibly impressive to see how far we have come. Much progress has been made to scientifically validate and inform theories and practices in the world of canine behavior. The field of dog training, once consisting only of contagious popular myths and historical frameworks largely obsolete when applied to the modern family pet, has been redirected by a new group of professionals that includes animal behaviorists, veterinarians, trainers, and behavior consultants. These individuals are committed to the study of and methods reflecting the true science of learning and behavior in dogs, particularly as it is relevant to how humans relate and live with them today. The result is a growing trend away from socially condoned animal abuse in the name of dog training and towards effective, practical dog-friendly methods that reflect a “first do no harm” philosophy built upon a strong foundation of science (the two happen to be inextricably linked). The body of information from which all training and behavior professionals can draw is growing fast. Individuals in the field who are devoted to their education and to providing exceptional services to clients now have the tools needed to truly help people and dogs live with each other in the 21st century, without sacrificing the integrity or well-being of either party. We have successfully raised many bars – for ourselves and for the field as a whole. This is cause for true celebration, as the necessity for such intervention in human-dog relationships grows in tandem with and as a direct result of rapidly changing modern lifestyles and environments.

So why is the public so completely unaware of these developments and the implications for them and their dogs? Why do so many myths and wives’ tales still dominate the public perceptions of dog training and behavior? If we know so much more than 10 years ago, if we now hold in our hands the tools to train and resolve problems without playing behavioral Russian roulette with dogs, why are we still so often “shooting the dog”?

We are at an unparalleled polarity in the public eye as a profession, and there are far too many dogs still waiting for their owners and trainers to get the right information. While we have made these enormously consequential strides forward on the cutting edge of the field, the body of the blade seems to be stuck in some twisted combination of outdated practices and the modern media culture. We are in the age of Hollywood’s romantic embellishment of archaic attitudes and assumptions that are addictively consumed by the American public in well-produced and edited television shows and infomercials (Stillwell being the glaring exception). In many ways, the great dilemma in the world of canine behavior and training is personified in those individuals that have no formal education, no credentials, use techniques dangerous to humans and dogs, and yet are the most “pop”ular dog trainers in the world. What is immediately impressive (the outdated “dominance” threat-based model of controlling behavior) has been sold as reliably true and without side effects (despite its documented fallouts), and we

as a culture have totally bought it. Viewers are told that a person is a behavior expert, and have no reason to question whether the advice they are receiving from the program and materials is even safe for them or their dog, much less if it is the most scientific or helpful. The result is a very confused and disserved public, with very little guidance or recourse when it comes to their experience with dog training and behavior resources. While I personally have a great appreciation for the apparent natural talent some of these trainers possess, I feel it is utterly wasted and ultimately damaging when combined with a complete lack of a formal education or credentials. It is tempting to condemn trainers who do not practice from a strong knowledge base of current behavioral science, but we should instead invite these persons to share in the process of learning with the rest of us. Since it is impossible to force this evolution of certain professionals and what is therefore communicated by them to their audiences, we must focus on what we can do from where we stand as individual parts of our greater industry – creating standards for all professionals working with dog behavior and communicating this to the American public.

Our problem as the professionals working within this field, then, is two-fold – within and without. As an industry, we need to have consensus in clear definitions and specific standards, along with the respective credentials, for the professionals who provide training and behavior consulting services (rather than numerous low value certificate programs indiscernible from the few legitimate measure certifications). We must then, through community education and advertising, be able to provide the clarity and transparency that clients need when hiring a professional which then affords them access to legitimate services related to their dog's behavior. So we need to set aside what small differences separate those individuals and groups who share the interest of providing professional, scientific, and ethical services to humans and their canine companions and come together in creating this profession in order to protect dogs, owners, and our jobs. Let's look in detail at a few of the organizations at the forefront of these efforts so that we can better understand their value, how they complement one another and might work together in the future, and why we should individually support their work through membership and certifications.

- APDT- The Association of Pet Dog Trainers (established in 1993 by Ian Dunbar, PhD, BVetMed, MRCVS, CPDT) “is a professional organization of individual dog trainers who are committed to becoming better trainers through education. The APDT offers individual pet dog trainers a respected and concerted voice in the dog world. We continue to promote professional trainers to the veterinary profession and to increase public awareness of dog friendly training techniques.” Vision – “All dogs are effectively trained through dog-friendly techniques and therefore are lifelong companions in a relationship based on mutual trust and respect.” Mission- “Promoting caring relationships between dogs and people by educating trainers in canine behavior and emphasizing professionalism and reward-based training.”

The APDT offers an annual educational conference, publishes the recently awarded [*The APDT Chronicle of the Dog*](#), and was the primary motivating force behind the creation of the CCPDT in 2001.

The APDT is working hard towards this shared goal of defining the profession, having recently taken a strong position in their new list of approved certifications that meet their criteria for professional membership (the list includes only the CPDT, CDBC, and CDTA designations). In addition, the APDT Education Task Force (ETF) has explored the profession of dog training and formulated recommendations to the APDT Board of Directors. The ETF has suggested regarding the role of the APDT as the potential oversight parent organization working with, informing and supporting the missions of groups such as the CCPDT and IAABC as they collectively work to professionalize the industry and create designations for pet dog trainers as well as those specialty fields within. These specialized credentials will enable trainers to continue to raise the bar for themselves in their own careers if they choose, and obtain recognition for those accomplishments which indicate their qualification to serve in more advanced and diversified applications. The APDT also aims to continue to provide education and curriculum development for trainers and consultants, as well as market these organizations and credentials through public relations and advertising.

- CCPDT- Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (established in 2001), “this independent, non-affiliated certifying organization was originally created by the Association of Pet Dog Trainers” and the CPDT exam was developed “by a task force of approximately 20 nationally-known dog training professionals and behaviorists”. “The CCPDT is the first national (and is international as well) testing and certification program for professional pet dog trainers.” “The CCPDT's certification program is based on humane training practices and the latest scientific knowledge related to dog training. Competence and continued growth in training practices is promoted through the recertification of qualified professionals.”

Mission – “The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers serves to establish and maintain a recognized level of competence in dog training by certifying professional trainers through criteria based on continuing education, experience, and standardized testing. Through this standardized certification process, the vocation of pet dog training will attain a recognized level of professional excellence worldwide.”

The Guiding Principles of the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: “To develop a recognized standard of proficiency and scientific exactitude in the profession of pet dog trainers through an independent, not for profit certification process of standardized testing; to maintain a current, empirically validated, certification test that is psychometrically sound, based on science content in the field, and independent of

commercial influence; to recognize documented training experience as valid, functional criteria relevant to the certification process; to encourage growth in and fluency of knowledge in the field, and thus foster a link in the community of trainers, academics and pet professionals; to benefit animal and human welfare by promoting training strategies and methods based on humane practices as supported by current scientific research; to promote and protect the CPDT designation as the publicly recognized credential of trainers committed to education, experience and professional excellence.”

The CCPDT is currently developing a new certification designation for dog behavior consulting, “given the natural growth in our industry from trainers only to behavior consultants” (Miranda Workman, President CCPDT) who are further qualified to work with serious and complex behavior issues such as aggression and anxiety.

- IAABC – International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants “is a professional association for the field of animal behavior consulting. The association represents the professional interests of behavior consultants throughout the world. It is involved with the problems, needs and changing patterns of animal-owner relationships, and helps to ensure that trained practitioners meet the public's needs. The association provides the tools and resources animal behavior professionals need to succeed. It works tirelessly to nourish the animal-human bond. The association's members meet standards for education and training and are held to the highest ethical standards of the profession. Certified members qualify in one or more species-specific divisions, working with dogs, cats, horses, and/or parrots. Associate members are consultants in practice, on the path to Certified membership.” “As professionals, IAABC members work to minimize the use of aversive stimuli and maximize the effective use of reinforcers to modify animal behavior. The LIMA (least intrusive and minimally aversive) principle is useful as a general rule.” “Animal Behavior Consultants are required to demonstrate competency in five core areas including assessment and intervention strategies, counseling skills, behavioral science, knowledge of animal behavior, and species-specific knowledge in order to obtain certification through the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants.”

The IAABC (International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants) has offered the only certification for dog behavior consultants so far and continues to work both independently and in tandem with the CCPDT towards accomplishing the mutual goals of legitimate standardization and credentialing in the industry. Marjie Alonso, current president of the IAABC, feels that the IAABC and the CCPDT “are in a good sisterhood of organizations working towards a shared goal with mutual respect for each other.”

All of these organizations have made particularly impressive progress towards furthered professionalism in the industry in the past year and continue to do so. As a member of all of these organizations, and being unbiased towards anything but the interests of my clients, their dogs, and my own business, I fully support them working together in such as fashion as we

move forward and will contribute whatever I can to that process. For any of us who share in this goal of raising the bar in our field, we should remember that membership in, credentialing by, and promotion of these organizations in their efforts independently and together will have a direct impact on the quality of life for countless dogs as we exponentially inspire other trainers to raise the bar on their own practices. Even if we don't currently need them for the success of our businesses, our involvement and credentials speak volumes about our personal and professional values and strengthens the mission of ensuring the scientific and ethical future of dog training. We should all work to educate trainers, animal service providers, and the general public about them in our own communities. In my own community of Western North Carolina (Asheville), I have recently launched such a community education program, "Train Humane". This program offers free presentations for veterinary hospitals, shelters/rescue groups, kennels, groomers, and training centers about: modern training practices reflecting both science and the humane treatment of dogs, cutting edge organizations and legitimate national credentials. Since the public currently doesn't generally recognize any of these organizations and certifications as any different from the myriad of generic certificate programs offered by various programs in this unregulated field, we have our work cut out for us. As we make our grass-roots efforts in our own cities and towns, these organizations can launch increasingly large-scale marketing campaigns. We need to communicate what is at stake when hiring a trainer or consultant and instill our commitment to excellence and accountability as professionals.

We cannot accomplish this too soon. The suffering, cruelty, abandonment, and euthanasia that befall innocent dogs as a direct result of the wrong information (which occur, without consequence to the providers of that information, on a regular basis) should be considered entirely unacceptable and constitute malpractice. I do not believe that it is just a coincidence that, in a society still intensely dominated by misinformation about canine behavior, the number one reason dogs are relinquished to shelters in this country is "behavior problems". Just as veterinarians do, we literally hold dogs' lives in our hands, and should strive to both practice and preach the "first do no harm" oath of the veterinary profession which begins by our commitment to science and education.

What the public is absorbing in volumes on national television is mostly outdated information, dangerous techniques, misguided assumptions and lack of credentials and professionalism. It is up to us to change that. We must raise the bar again, with an even clearer vision of the end result and a more thorough understanding of the steps we must take to realize it. We all know that we will have to raise the bar gradually, incrementally, rewarding whatever approximations of our ultimate goal are available. We will have to work consistently with each other and the tools we have (including our knowledge of learning theory as it applies to human behavior) towards realizing a better world for dogs and all of us who are so greatly touched by them. We should consider all of our efforts to be the administration of an antidote to the epidemic of misinformation and resulting suffering plaguing America's dog owners and their canine companions today. We hold the solution in our hands, and now must act to reproduce and distribute it in an organized and efficient manner. We owe it to this species that has lived and evolved with us more intimately than any other, as its gifts have been and continue to be immeasurable.