

ART, FASHION & DESIGN ISSUE

THE American DOG

MAGAZINE

YOUR DOG. YOUR FAMILY. YOUR LIFESTYLE.

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BARACK OBAMA
with BABY!**
3-legged puppy mill
rescue dog

Julia Szabo
*Pet Design
Authority*

**BEST FRIENDS
ANIMAL SOCIETY**
in Los Angeles

PIT BULL
BSL

Author Jana Kohl
Anti-puppy mill
CRUSADER



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“It’s Me or The Dog”



Photos by Bill Adler

Victoria Stilwell Speaks!

I AM VERY EXCITED AND HONORED to be writing for *The American Dog*. In future columns I will be covering all kinds of dog related issues, but to begin with I thought it would be appropriate to write about who I am, what I do and why I believe that training dogs is the greatest of professions.

I have been a dog trainer for many years both in Britain and the United States, but for the past four years I have been training dogs in the television program *“It’s Me or the Dog”* as well as judging for the CBS show *“Greatest American Dog”*. I have also written two books on training and behavior—*“It’s Me or the Dog—How to have the Perfect Pet”* and *“Fat Dog Slim—How to have a Healthy, Happy Pet,”* and continue to write regular columns for various publications in the United States and Britain.

Dog training is an inspiring profession. It can also be an intensely personal and intimate one. Not only do I have to work closely with dogs but also I have to know how to communicate effectively with and in some cases counsel their owners. Those who work with, care for and/or own animals understand how they can stir up the most intense emotions within us. Dogs are our companions, loved ones, best friends, children even, and when things go wrong we can be profoundly affected. “My best friend is behaving badly,” owners tell me, “my child is ignoring me,” “my companion is running away from me—why?” We take our dog’s negative behavior very personally and we should. So much of the behavior that we see in our dogs is a reflection on who we are as people, but we must never forget that dogs are dogs and certain behaviors that are a problem for us are perfectly normal for them. My role as a dog trainer is to help owners understand why their dogs are

behaving in a certain way and develop a training plan that aims to restore harmony. To ensure that the training is a success I must motivate owners to continue working with their dogs consistently and diligently after I leave them. If I fail to do this, both dogs and owners suffer.

It continually amazes me how two completely different species such as man and dog have found ways to understand each other. We are worlds apart, yet the barriers that divide us are continually being broken down, and with greater knowledge comes greater understanding. However, this quest to understand the canine mind continues to cause much controversy among the training establishment. Many trainers in Britain and the United States still use traditional training methods. These methods focus on a dominance/submission methodology where the dog is taught to obey the owner using hard methods such as leash jerks, physical manipulation and punishments in the form of Alpha rolls, flicking, scruffing and sometimes even hitting. The ultimate aim is to have an obediently trained dog that will respond to an owner in all situations with little focus given to building a relationship based on trust and kindness. Reward-based trainers, however, believe that a dog can be trained to respond to their owner just as well through a continuous, variable and/or intermittent reward system. If a dog is rewarded with something it likes immediately after performing an action or behavior then the chances of that dog repeating the action or behavior are greatly increased. Punishment does have a place in reward-based methodology but not to the detriment of the dog. Ignoring negative behavior, removal for 'time outs' and using vocal sounds as interrupters of unwanted behavior are the preferred methods of 'punishment.' There are many people that use a mixture of traditional and reward-based methodologies and still others that are completely positive and don't believe in using punishment at all.

I strongly believe, as do others, that owning a dog is not a right, it is a blessing and it is therefore up to us as owners to provide an environment where our dogs can live happily alongside us even with all the pressures of domestic life. It is the trainer's and owner's responsibility to keep questioning, investigating and challenging themselves to learn more about their canine companions, resulting in a stronger bond. My personal opinion is that training dogs with reward-based methods is a much more successful and smarter methodology than training through dominance and/or fear. Time and time again I see how harsh training damages the fragile human/animal bond and prevents a truly successful and trusting relationship developing. We have come so far and know so much more about how dogs learn, how they operate and what they need to thrive that resorting to dominant methods is not only unkind, but ignorant and unnecessary. I would much rather a



dog respond to me because it wants to rather than responding through fear. There is a better way!

Finally, I would like to say to all those dog owners out there—seek out the positive and run far away from the negative. Training and living with dogs is about embarking on a journey together, facing challenges, conquering problems and fostering a deeper understanding of each other. Whether I am training dogs on television, doing a private consultation or working with dogs at the shelter, my aim is the same. I want to help deepen a bond, improve communication and see a happy dog learn and an owner smile. There is nothing better than when a connection has been made, another barrier broken down and a human/dog relationship strengthened. Training dogs is a truly inspiring and wonderful profession. 🐾

Visit **Victoria Stilwell's** Web site at:
www.victoriastilwell.com and don't forget to tune in to her show *"It's Me or The Dog"* on Animal Planet.