

Setting up camp

PAULA KERR, Herald News Staff Reporter

06/01/2003



Stella shows the alert face of a well-bred bird dog. Jeff Branco, owner of Cedarshire Kennel, breeds a litter of Brittanys like her every year or so. Brittanys are tireless hunters.

The basset is bonkers, the golden is gaga, the retriever is rambunctious and the Westie is wacky.

No wonder. A grim winter, a crummy spring and last weekend's dismal, if unofficial, start of summer, has left man and beast out of sorts, even a tad heftier.

But while humans can right things with retail therapy and gym visits, no such options exist for poor, petulant poochie. Until now, that is.

Welcome to Cedarshire Dog Camp, a Rehoboth retreat where Jeff Branco will help Rover adjust both attitude and girth.

"They work," he says by way of explaining that his is not a place where lolling about waiting for a biscuit is the norm.

Branco, 55, is a firm yet gentle sort who's been training sporting dogs since age 16, when he put obedience and hunting titles on a retriever named Red Gold.

About 20 years ago he got into Brittany spaniels -- sweet tempered bird dogs -- and has since gone on to become a trainer and breeder of national and international repute. His stature is such that one foreign businessman stepped up at a field trial and offered \$15,000 for his top dog. Branco refused.

His dogs have won the American Brittany Woodcock Grouse Championship three times and amassed 10 AKC hunting titles, five each in open and American championship competition.

Still, hunting and field trial seasons are limited and so a few years back Branco, who loves nothing more than to see a dog go from off-the-wall to obedient, hit on the idea of a dog camp for two guests each week. He hopes to up that number in years to come when he retires from the printing business.

"People had been asking me to train their pets for years," says Branco, who invariably declined.

What those folks saw were Brittanys thrilled to be fulfilling their mission in life, something most dogs never get to do. And a dog without a job -- even one as basic as following commands -- can become a problem.

It's what happened to Lilly, a lovable black Lab bought by a woman who thought she'd hunt with her husband, who owned professionally trained Brittanys and pointers. "She had a vision," says Branco dryly.

As it turned out the only birds Lilly saw were pigeons on the streets of Brookline, where routine walks became dangerous as she lunged this way and that, often dragging her owner into traffic.

Branco knew the woman's husband and took Lilly on as a favor, one that started him on the path of training dogs to be pleasant companions mindful of their place.

"It was a challenge," he sighs. "Lilly was an out-of-control 4-year-old that acted like a 3-month-old. Her purpose in life was to make herself happy. I like a happy dog, but that dog was too happy!"

So Branco, working in 10-minute intervals because of her limited attention span, taught Lilly the commands that became her job. By the end of a week, she was walking calmly at heel.

And all the exercise was causing her waistline to reappear. "She was a little chunky, she had the good life," observes Branco.

It took another two weeks to turn Lilly into a canine good citizen. And since it's been some time since he's heard from the folks in Brookline, Branco assumes all is well.

Certainly folks can do all this on their own, enroll in training classes, teach their dogs and watch the animal's weight. But most have neither the time nor the inclination. And out of guilt, Branco believes, they often overfeed, hoping to win their dog's affection in spite of the inattention.

But he can do in weeks what it takes most folks months to accomplish. "It takes an amateur three or four times longer," says Branco. "I've trained so long I know what the dog's going to do before it does. And I never give a command I can't enforce."

Often he doesn't even give a verbal command, which forces the dog to pay attention and read his body language.

Typically, a dog stays at Cedarshire Dog Camp -- more Spartan than sybaritic -- for three weeks and the cost is \$40 a day.

Branco works alone with the dog for the first week; during the second week the owner spends a day in training and then the dog goes home for a weekend; during the third week things are fine-tuned or modified according to the owners' wishes.

"I teach the dog what people want," says Branco. "Walk on lead, sit, stay, lie down and come when called."

Some, of course, would love to walk their dogs off lead, but Branco is cautious on that count. "I don't care how well the dog is trained, there's always a distraction that can put its life in jeopardy, a cat, a squirrel."

He also solves specific problems -- he cured a fox terrier of frantically hopping up and down while its owner dined -- but refuses to deal with aggression issues. "If I started doing that, it wouldn't be fun," he observes.

He prefers not to train Brittanys, because he likes a change from what he does all year long. "It's nice to experience different personalities," he says.

So, does Branco feel certain people shouldn't own certain breeds of dogs? Not necessarily, but he'd like folks do a little research and select a dog that suits their lifestyle.

"People see a dog on a television commercial," he says. "A weimaraner, and they get one without research. That dog's job is to run away and find game. And then they can't figure out why the dog is always taking off."

And what about those who buy dogs purely for looks? Again, he's realistic. "Looks are important," he admits. "If you're not happy, it's going to be a long haul, you've got to think your breed is beautiful."

Branco has just recently started hanging Cedarshire Dog Camp fliers in veterinary offices and feed stores. Until now, clients have learned of him by word of mouth, which he still considers the best advertisement.

He's his own best advertisement for training because when a visitor arrives and points out that none of the dogs in his kennel are yapping hysterically, he inquires sweetly, "Are they supposed to bark?" And as his story unfolds, Delphinium, currently his top dog, naps nearby on her own bed, merely opening an eye and cocking an ear when her name is mentioned, never giving off a hint that she's tough as nails and can run for hours. "They know they're dogs and they're happy about it," says Branco.

He's also a great advertisement for setting out on horseback with a few Brittanys to hunt quail. In fact, he gets downright poetic as he talks of the sport's Southern plantation origins; as he tells of hunting in Kansas on ranches the size of Rhode Island; as he recalls dressing for dinner to enjoy the fruits of the hunt, prepared just so.

But it is late on a Friday afternoon and the dogs need conditioning, so he'll load them into the truck for an hour run on a friend's Berkley property.

Delphinium tags along as he heads to the kennel where some of her pups -- now 2-year-olds and ready for evaluation to see if they're national caliber material -- are anticipating the outing.

They epitomize what Branco believes. "A good dog is one that makes its owner happy," he says simply.