

Free to Be

“Observation Without Direction” – The power of “free time” training

BY CJ PUOTINEN

How well do you really know your dog? Like most trainers and competitors, Nancy Tanner of Bozeman, Montana, assumed she knew hers inside out – until some whales and their trainers taught her an important lesson. You too can adopt the simple technique she learned at a marine mammal park to improve canine interactions at all levels.

Tanner’s path of discovery began five years ago at Sea World in San Diego, California, where she took a behind-the-scenes tour.

“I chose ‘Lunch with the Orca Trainers’ and it changed my whole approach to training,” she says. “In addition to enjoying great food, I got to watch the whales and ask questions. Sea World’s training program is impressive, but what they require from their trainers in knowledge, observation, and applied skills is

even more so. I came away realizing that I might not know my dogs as well as I thought.”

What caught Tanner’s attention was the whales’ “free time” pool. In this large, safe, comfortable environment, whales do whatever they like. Sometimes the pool is occupied by a single whale and sometimes by two or more. Trainers are always present but they never initiate activity. They simply watch and wait.

Occasionally the trainers add interac-

tive objects such as beach balls, chunks of ice, or a bird kite on a tall pole. If a whale jumps for the kite the way orcas in the wild leap at low-flying birds, the trainer can acknowledge this with a whistle, but that is all. Shaping and luring are not allowed. If the whale initiates play, the trainer plays the whale’s game and does whatever that particular whale likes best, such as scratching his tongue, pouring water into his mouth, or throwing ice balls into his mouth. There are no food rewards. The free time pool is used to build the trainer/animal bond but the two interact only if the whale wants to. The pool is never used for active training.

Tanner, who runs workshops and competes with her own dogs in agility and canine freestyle, thought for weeks about what free time insights might contribute to her dog training. She started practicing what she calls “Observation Without Direction.”

“I wanted to come into my dogs’ world and learn by following their lead,

Nancy Tanner was inspired by a marine mammal training technique to develop “Observation Without Direction.” Essentially, it’s taking a dog to a special “free” space and allowing him to do whatever he wants to do – and then using what you learn about him for a better relationship.



not mine,” she says. “So I started to plan a free time routine by replicating, as much as possible, the whales’ free time pool.”

This was at first a challenge because most of the areas she and her dogs visited were associated in some way with training. “I realized that my house, yard, and training field wouldn’t work for this project at all,” she says, “and what I had thought of as ‘free time’ while hiking actually involved working with my dogs the whole time.”

Tanner decided to look for an area she had never used for training. “It had to have boundaries for safety,” she says, “so that I would never have to call or correct them. No other dogs could be present except my own and no other people unless they were family. There could also not be any large distractions that would reward the dogs in a big way. Small self-rewards would be fine. In addition to being safe and free from distractions, it had to be a dog-friendly environment.”

She chose a trail that has streams and trees with a steep drop on one side, a steep hill on the other, and a large meadow at the end.

“We go once or twice a week,” says Tanner. “I have no rules when we get out on this specific remote trail. The dogs can sniff, run, sit, follow, or do whatever they like. It’s up to them. I don’t bring food or toys. If they pick up a stick and initiate a game with me, I play fetch with the stick. If they play their I-am-going-to-lie-down-and-stalk-you hide-and-seek game, I will pop behind a tree and play. I initiate nothing. This free time is on their terms. We usually go for half an hour to two hours, depending on my day.”

WHAT THE DOGS DID

What did Tanner’s dogs show her, and how has Observation Without Direction changed their training?

“There is trust and relationship on both ends now,” she says. “When my dogs and I work, they are way more engaged. Our relationship isn’t just about what I want to do and the dogs doing learned behaviors. It’s about them taking part in my interests and me taking part in theirs. It is important to note that free time is not putting a dog in the back yard and then going inside to cook dinner. The

trainer is working hard by observing and being attentive and intentional. There is a simple bit of magic to watching dogs and really being observant.”

Tanner’s dogs are very different from each other, and now their differences define her approach to training.

“Story is an amazing dog,” she says of her six-year-old Border Collie. “Honest and balanced is the best way to describe him. He

enjoys dogs, people, work, play, and eating. He is a dog’s dog. What free time showed me was that he is inventive and all about ‘the game.’ He is always thinking up new games and keeping things light and fun. If he had a motto it would be, ‘Walk lightly and carry a big stick; fetch is way more fun that way.’”

While Story has always been a willing partner, Tanner never felt that she was tapping into all of him. “He was almost too polite,” she says. “Through free time I observed that he liked to keep the party going. He was always inventing new games with either me or the other dogs. His self-reward is sharing his enthusiasm for games and including those around him. I have never observed him playing a game by himself. He always wants to include others. This was very cool for me as I knew how I could use this in training. Lightbulb!”

Tanner turned Story’s training into a big game, and this approach has made them partners in competition and in life. “There is no leader or owner. We come at it together. Whether it is freestyle, agility, hiking, or fun tricks, his pay-off is the interaction of the game. It also holds me accountable for being there 100 percent when I step out with him. There is no half way in anything we do together.”

Ocean, an eight-year-old Border Collie/Australian Shepherd, was a shy puppy. “At seven weeks,” says Tanner, “she was spooky and cautious. I worked

for years building her confidence slowly but consistently through tricks, play with a purpose, agility, freestyle, and herding. Dog sports are where she shines because it is all work. Working became her safe place.

“Ocean is an amazing competition dog and loves to learn new things, but what I discovered through free time is that she did not have confidence outside of working. She did not want to explore or interact with the environment without my direction and was unsure of making choices on her own. It took her a year or two to leave me during, but once she started trying new things (digging, rolling in scat, exploring streams) all on her own, I saw another layer to my dog and watched her confidence grow. She is learning that choices are good, exploring can be wonderful, and if she needs to check in, I am always there.”

The first time Ocean felt comfortable enough to walk away from Tanner, she found elk scat and enjoyed herself immensely. She had never before shown any interest in scat, but after that experience, she sat taller and walked with all four paws solidly on the ground.

“This was a breakthrough for us,” says



Story: Life is a full-immersion game; if it’s fun, he’s there – and he wants his pals to play, too.



Ocean: Being free to roll in scat was transformative; it gave the formerly cautious dog confidence!

What you can do . . .

- Create a free time area where you can safely let your dogs do whatever they like.
- Watch, observe, and take notes, but don’t try to train or direct your dog’s behavior.
- Learn what really motivates and rewards your dog – it may not be what you expect.
- Look for behavior patterns and notice how they differ in training sessions or at home.
- Incorporate your discoveries into your training sessions for maximum efficiency.



Tanner. “To this day she rolls in elk, deer, and coyote scat with gusto, and you cannot diminish her enthusiasm afterwards. While she will always have some cautiousness, she has more balance than ever before. In agility I let her decide whether she wants me close or needs more distance. In freestyle, if she renegotiates the path, we go with it. She is amazing and one of the most fun dogs to work with!”

Franny, an 11-year-old mixed breed, had low motivation for training and was never interested in human-directed activity. “Nothing got her involved,” says Tanner. “Tricks, agility, play with a purpose, fetch, tug, none of this was of interest to her, even in small spurts. She would patiently watch me go through my motions and slowly walk away. She showed zero interest even when I tried to hand her a steak.”

During free time, Tanner observed that Franny had stealth hunting skills, that her prey drive was alive and well, and her motivation was high. “She was focused and tenacious, so I brought this into her training. I would ask her for one small thing, maybe come to me in the house, and then say YES! and throw a meatball across the room. The reward of orienting, stalking, chasing, catching, and eating the meatball made a powerful impact on our training and relationship. I found a way to reach her through what she found highly rewarding. She is almost 12 now and still enjoys learning new things. I adore working with her.”

Seeker, a three-year-old Border Collie, has always lacked dog social skills and is more interested in people.

“In free time,” says Tanner, “I learned that Seeker is a mimic, and this caught me totally by surprise. He doesn’t just follow the lead of my other dogs, he copies what they are doing. I found this interesting because he lacks the ability to read canine social cues, so it was almost as if he was ‘trying’ through imitating. I noticed that if Ocean

rolled in something, he did it next to her. If Story runs circles, he runs circles, too. If Franny was licking her paws, he would lick his paws, too. If Ocean marked, he would mark.

“I started bringing one of my other dogs whenever working with Seeker. For example, if I was chaining a complicated sequence, I would work with Ocean and then Seeker, and flip back and forth. He caught on faster this way than if I worked him by himself.”



Franny: The key to capturing her interest in training was engaging her hunting instincts.

OBSERVATION WITHOUT DIRECTION

Spending time with your dog is one thing. Watching for behaviors that can be incorporated into training is another.

Free time, while free for the dog, is work for the handler/trainer. It requires focus and attention to detail. Experienced trainers and competitors will notice things that novices won’t, but even if a handler is not actively training a dog, or the dog is best

described as a house pet, free time can be an effective tool for better understanding the dog’s interests, temperament, and personality. “That adds balance to any relationship,” says Tanner, “but first and foremost I think it adds depth to a solid training program. You can use what you observe to create a better and more cohesive dog/handler team, with the relationship first and foremost in mind.”

Here are Tanner’s suggestions for beginning a free time program.

■ **Always work in a safe area with no moving traffic, no other off-leash dogs, no people other than familiar family members, and no opportunity for your dog or dogs to chase wild animals or eat something dangerous.**

Take time to choose a location before you start. If a remote outdoor area isn’t possible, it can be a borrowed fenced yard or an indoor room or basement. The location should be large enough for freedom of movement and have no training association.



Seeker: Wants to see another dog try it first; then he’ll give it a whirl. Training in a group or pair works best for him.

■ **In a multiple-dog household, bring all the dogs, as you most likely operate as a unit.** Working with one dog at a time makes them easier to observe, but that becomes time-consuming. Familial dogs do fine together in free time. You just have to be on your toes as an observer.

■ **Observation Without Direction should be completely free from judgment.** If your dog rolls in scat, then you observe. Clothes can be cleaned and baths can be taken. You are gathering information. If you start gasping or re-directing your dogs when they stop-drop-and-roll, you are correcting and training, and it is no longer free time. Be prepared and be open.

■ **If your dog wants to engage you in a game, then play, but don’t start directing.** Learn to follow your dog’s lead during free time.

■ **Some days you will come home with great information and other days nothing, just a nice outing.** Write notes to yourself. Watching your dog for weeks or months in free time will help you see patterns in behavior, and these are what deserve your attention.

■ **For dogs who are independent or don’t have a strong relationship with their owners, observation should be directed toward what attracts their attention and what motivates them.** Example: The moment you take off the leash, your dog runs away and stays away, and the pattern repeats over and over. This should bring up a lot of questions. Does the same pattern happen at home? In the dog park? Does the dog’s leash come off right away and she immediately gets to run, or does the dog pull her owner to the dog park and then get the leash unclipped, and does the leash get put on with a correction once the dog finally comes back?

The goal in a training program would be for the leash to come off and the dog acknowledge the owner before departing. If scent or sound pulls the dog away, or if inconsistent handling drives the dog away, those observations can be incorporated into the training program by providing stinkier treats, squeakier toys, and play every time the leash comes off at home. Leash comes off, stinky liver treat, leash goes back on, leash comes off, boom, stinky liver treats. Leash comes

off, game of tug with squeaky toy, leash goes on, game stops, leash comes off, game with tug toy, and so on.

■ **For cautious, worried dogs, free time may be overwhelming.** Try for short, successful sessions. Start with 5 to 10 minutes and then leave. Choices can overwhelm dogs who do not have confidence, so they often don't even try. Just sit tight, or walk around the free area. Don't say anything; just be neutral and present. It may take time for uncertain dogs to try something out, but once they do and they find that all is good, confidence can grow and the handler can learn by observing.

Be careful not to "direct" an uncertain dog during free time, as then you are training, and don't reassure the dog by saying things like, "You're OK, go on, you'll be fine" – that's directing! Watch for a nice working tail position, slow easy wag, nice relaxed mouth, light panting, soft or "easy" eyes, sway in the body when walking around, and most important, tiny steps toward exploring on his own.

■ **Study canine body language.** Get at least one book, preferably with photos or line drawings, to help you interpret canine signals. The more you observe body language in your dog, the better you'll become at deciphering subtle signs, and clusters of body movements will speak to you like a book. This is when free time takes off for any trainer. (See Tanner's recommended reading list in "Resources," page 24.)

PUTTING THE PLAN INTO ACTION

As soon as she felt confident describing Observation Without Direction and the benefits of free time training, Nancy Tanner began sharing her insights in workshops, online forums, and seminars. It didn't take long for the technique to change canine lives.

Katie Tracanna lives in Dennis, Massachusetts, with six dogs. One of them, a six-year-old Shepherd/Border Collie named Wiley Coyote, competes with her in musical freestyle, is training for rally competition, makes therapy dog visits, and is an enthusiastic running partner.

After she discovered Tanner's ideas in



an online workshop, Tracanna found a perfect free time location at the beach. "You have to walk a ways to get to the spot," she says, "but when you do, you're surrounded by sea grass, sand, and the ocean. It's a perfect place for free time with Wiley because I can see for a mile in all directions, so I don't have to worry about anyone approaching when I want to just let him 'be.' And that's what we do when we reach this spot. Wiley makes the rules. He can engage with me, he can swim, he can run the beach, and he can basically do whatever he wants for as long as we're out there.

"Usually, he entertains himself for a few minutes and then starts engaging me in some sort of game, which could be a game of chase, a game of digging in the sand where I'm sitting and then running around in a large circle, or a 'bash brothers' game where he likes to slam into me like a wrestler. These are all games that we've modified to include in our training sessions as rewards, and they've helped build our bond because there are no limitations. It's just us being present in the moment together, cueing off each other and having fun."

In Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, retired dog judge Sue Ailsby has shared her life with Chihuahuas, Miniature Schnauzers, MinPins, Australian Cattle Dogs, Portuguese Water Dogs, and 17 generations of Giant Schnauzers. A trainer and competitor, her main interests are research, learning, teaching, bonding, and refining skills in service dog training, conformation, obedience, rally, agility, sled racing, scent hurdle racing, tracking, nose work, treibball, herding, carting, duck hunting, and tracking.

"I was taught as a child that the dog is my enemy," she says, "and both his mind and body must be mastered. When I realized that the dog should be, at worst, a junior partner, it changed everything. Having a friend doesn't mean imposing my own opinions on that friend, al-

ways doing what I want to do. If you're going to be friends, you have to honor the other person's opinions and let them choose. It's the same with dogs. Giving the dog respected downtime

hugely increases the bond and the dog's desire and willingness to work for and with me."

When she first read Tanner's comments about the free time pool, where the whales can do whatever they want and nothing is required of them, Ailsby says the idea hit her over the head like a sledgehammer.

"It's true that Scuba and Stitch, my Portuguese Water Dogs, can usually choose to interact with me, but I don't usually choose to reciprocate. My dogs know that when I'm working on the computer, they might get a momentary tug or a ball-toss out of me, but after that I give them the 'leave me alone, I'm working' hand signal. When I'm talking on the phone, I'll probably pet them, but not



tug or toss. When I'm doing chores, they follow me around and get in my way, but all I'm doing with them is getting them out of my way without kicking them in the head. When I'm lying down,

they can jump on the bed, but they have to lie down.

"I realized that I have *no* trouble being 'present' when training – training makes the whole rest of the world go away – but there was *no* time when I was in the dog's world. That night Stitch and I went to the guest room in the basement to see what she would like to say to me when I'm actually listening."

Now, says Ailsby, the dogs have faith that when they speak, she will listen. "This makes all training, as well as living with the dogs, easier because the dogs no longer think or behave as if they need to 'shout' at me to have me hear them. I recommend Observation Without Direction and free time sessions to everyone who wants better, closer relationships with their dogs." 🐾

For a recommended reading list and contact information for people mentioned in this article, see "Resources," page 24.

Freelance writer CJ Puotinen is grateful for her time living in Montana, which has given her ample opportunities to observe family dogs Chloe and Somebody in the great outdoors.