

Review:

Shaping Success

A book by Susan Garrett

By Martha Faulk

Meet Buzz, the “unlikely champion” whose education and training is the subject of Garrett’s second book. He’s an energetic, enthusiastic, fast-learning red Border Collie whose behavior Garrett has carefully shaped by positive training methods since he was only a few weeks old. Now, at seven months of age, Buzz is sitting patiently at the entrance to the agility area of the training facility. He has just completed the obedience portion of the class, showing beautiful attention to his handler, despite the distraction of the other puppies. As the doors open, though, an astonishing transformation takes place: Buzz becomes a lunging, clawing, lunatic of a dog as he tries to get into the room full of agility equipment. Garrett describes Buzz’s behavior “as if he were possessed by the devil himself.” Buzz’s transformation from an agility demon into an agility champion is the compelling subject of this book.

Susan Garrett is well known in North America as a competitor, educator, lecturer, frequent contributor to *Clean Run*, and the author of *Ruff Love*. Readers of Garrett’s first book about dog training might have wished, as I did, for more explanations and descriptions of her suggested training approaches. Her second book, *Shaping Success*, provides not only comprehensive information about her training philosophy and methods, but also her own frank analyses of what worked and what didn’t.

For example, Garret tells us that the hard-driving Buzz, after being taught to touch his nose to a target, soon began to smash into the ground target so hard that he often made his sinuses bleed. To correct the problem, she taught him to do a head-bob

toward the target. Today, she says, she would have shaped instead a softer nose-touch to the target because the head-bob is a more ambiguous act to the dog. By sharing with the reader her mistakes as well as her successes, Garrett encourages us to think through our own training problems and to assess our own results in light of operant conditioning.

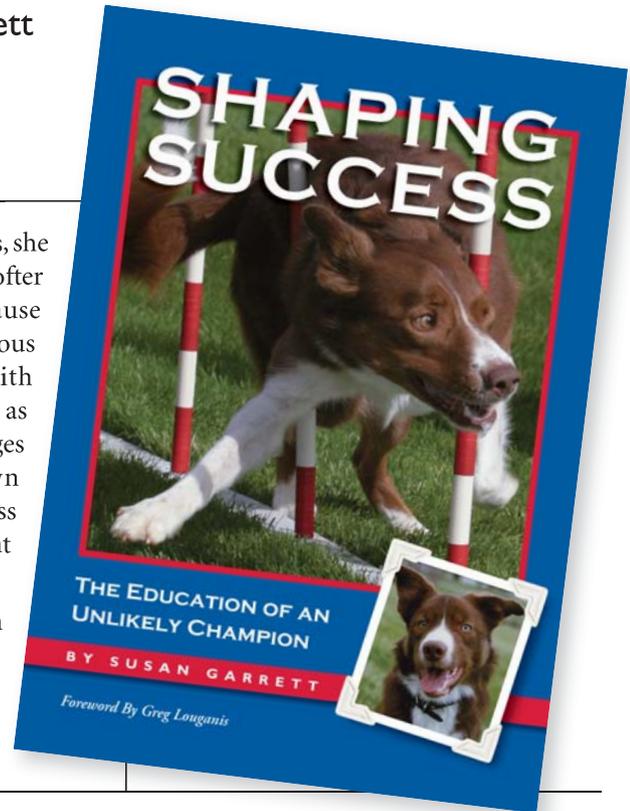
Garrett’s dog training approach is firmly grounded in the two scientific theories that govern how animals learn: classical conditioning and operant

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conditioning. Classical conditioning, sometimes called Pavlovian conditioning, describes behavior which is “autonomous, reactive to a stimulus, often emotionally triggered, and uncontrollable.” The basis for “conditioned reflexes” resides in Pavlov’s famous observation that, after being first conditioned by having food presented as a bell was rung, a dog would then salivate at the sound of a bell. It’s operant conditioning, however, that is the guiding theory behind most successful dog training in agility, obedience, flyball, and other dog sports. The operant principle is that an animal (including us) is likely to repeat a behavior that is positively reinforced and to suppress a behavior that produces undesirable consequences (such as no reinforcement at all).

Garrett explains that Buzz’s demonic difficulties were caused by the clash of these two principles of behavior—classic conditioning, which compelled Buzz to lose his focus when overstimulated by the environment of agility equipment, and operant conditioning, which Garrett used to reinforce the desired behaviors. When Buzz was presented with something he loved such as agility, he had no control over his behavior. The conditioned reflex interfered with his ability to follow previously learned operantly conditioned cues.

Garrett tells us that Buzz was not being “stubborn” or “willful,” but he, like other animals, was overcome by the conditioned reflex of overstimulation from the environment. Understanding



As Buzz's story continues, we learn step-by-step training exercises and commentary about how to get the best results with our own dogs.



*For Bruce, Jane,
Phil & Gwen*

In Loving Memory of

Sydney

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classical conditioning can help us to develop a plan for counterconditioning this response. As Garrett explains, it takes an intellectual understanding of dog behavior and patience to overcome such extreme behavior problems. When she initially chose Buzz from the litter, she wanted a high-energy dog and believed that there could not be such a thing as “too much drive.” She believed that “off the wall” dogs were created by poor training and were not born that way. Shaping Buzz’s off the wall behavior “literally changed both our lives,” she reveals, and that behavioral progression weaves a compelling narrative thread through the book’s 250 pages. As Buzz’s story continues, we learn step-by-step training exercises and commentary about how to get the best results with our own dogs.

Let’s return to the seven-month-old Buzz we left screaming and lunging at the entrance to the agility equipment. What would you have done? If you are a firm believer, as Garrett is, in the Premack Principle—for your dog to get what he wants, he must do what you want—you know what the outcome will be. To his dismay, Buzz did not get to play on a single piece of agility equipment in class that night. Because Garrett did not want Buzz to associate agility with acting out of control, she waited until after the other puppies had left, and then when he was calm and quiet, she allowed Buzz to walk around some of the equipment. She knew then that their training journey would be a long one.

From the beginning of their training, Garrett recognized that she needed an “operant” dog, that is, one who is savvy to the potential rewards of offering behaviors while training. Garrett explains how using a clicker becomes a conditioned or secondary reinforcer, like Pavlov’s bell. Once the dog connects the secondary reinforcer (the clicker or a word marking

the desired behavior) with his reward, you may reinforce any desired response from the dog with the clicker or marker word. This process, commonly called “shaping,” was what Garrett used with Buzz to change his behavior and to help him learn to control his overexcited impulses.

Early in the book, Garrett explains clicker training in great detail. Most dog trainers are familiar with the precept that “What you click is what you get,” the favorite saying of the famous animal trainer Bob Bailey. To help readers get what they want out of clicker training, Garrett provides a handy “Diagnostic Training Chart” for understanding the timing, criteria, and rate of reinforcement where training may be weak. Garrett also instructs her students and her readers in the D.A.S.H. program to help them organize the order of training priorities. The D.A.S.H. acronym describes D for Desire, A for Accuracy, S for Speed, and H for Habitat. Throughout the book, Garrett explains how she keeps the four factors uppermost in her training.

As Buzz’s training and development proceed, Garrett includes helpful descriptive inserts that tell us how to play puppy games, recall games, and tugging games. She also includes a checklist for “Fading the Target,” advice for “Legendary Contacts,” and a description of her innovative method of training weave poles, “Weaving 2 x 2.” There are useful photographs for many of the training methods described and plenty of photos of Buzz that leave no doubt about his intensity for agility. Garrett credits other handlers and trainers such as Mary Ray, Susan Salo, and Greg Derrett with helping her solve many problems on the road to transforming Buzz into a national agility champion.

Shaping Success is that rare “how-to” guide that is filled with candor, humor, engrossing detail, and a recipe for the reader’s own training success. It’s also a darn good story. 🐾

Martha Faulk is a lawyer and author who lives in Fort Collins, Colorado. She is Chairwoman of the Board of Directors for the Larimer Humane Society and teaches agility there. Martha trains an Australian Cattle Dog and an Australian Shepherd that she adopted from the shelter and also runs a Border Terrier in agility. Martha may be reached at Marthfaulk@aol.com.