

WITH “FRIENDS” LIKE THESE...

“Unnecessstress” defined

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After a long day of training dogs, coaching owners, and in the course of this work, sometimes serving as a de facto marriage counselor and psychotherapist, I like nothing better than to come home, put on my PJs, pour a glass of wine and veg in front of the TV. People always think that as a professional dog trainer, I have the cable box permanently set to “Animal Planet”. But the truth is there are very few dog-related programs that I can stomach. Most either celebrate the dog as victim; present glossy, dumbed-down propaganda about a particular breed; or show “trainers” at varying levels of incompetence taking forever to barely teach a dog a basic command. The last time I tried to watch one of the latter (“It’s Me or the Dog”), it was a British import, and its star was a woman who dressed like a Savile Row dominatrix and, like some post-modern Mary Poppins, seemed to believe that “wishing would make it so”. Or at least that’s how it appeared as she tried to control an out of hand Great Dane with some cookies, a head halter and a squeaky, ineffective voice that probably sent thousands of dolphins beaching on the nearest coast. It was funny... NOT. See, I do this for a living and got the same feeling from watching “It’s Me or The Dog” that a real physician would get if “General Hospital” was presented as a documentary.

So, why did I decide to DVR the premier of “DogTown”? Call it my indefatigable sense of hope that someone besides the vilified Cesar Millan will get it right when telling people the truth about their relationships with dogs. And the place where you are most likely to see the wreckage of the out-of-touch dog owner is in a shelter. Contrary to what most folks believe, the majority of shelter residents are not victims of abuse, they’re victims of poor planning, carelessness, and often, the bewildering overindulgence of humans who confuse dogs with children. Plus, as someone who devoted many years to rescue and shelter work, I have a soft spot for those on the front lines who are doing things the right way: saving an animal’s life not just to put another notch on their “Good Deeds” belt, but because the animal can go on to experience the joy of a

healthy relationship with an invested human owner, and make that human's life a little bit nicer, too. I figured that if "DogTown" made the cut at the National Geographic network, it was probably going to be some quality viewing, and might possibly give me an extra dose of much-needed warm-and-fuzzies. I should've known better.

"DogTown" is set at the Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in southern Utah. At first blush, Best Friends is a wonderful concept; a full scale, all-species rescue that also serves as a permanent sanctuary for animals that are unadoptable. A training friend of mine did work for them in the past, flying to Utah to help rehabilitate some of the more challenging cases. Like me, he's a balanced trainer whose only agenda is helping a dog succeed rather than being a religious zealot about condoning or condemning training methods. It was quite a few years ago, but I figured if they let him train out there, they couldn't be half bad. But what I saw on "DogTown" wasn't half bad...it was about 85% bad.

Let's take the case of a little black dog who was one of the featured storylines in the first episode. Rescued from a puppy mill situation with a host of his companions, "Animal" was the most challenging of the lot. Matted, filthy and defensive, he was hard to handle for the staff of "experts" from DogTown. But he only weighed about ten pounds. I cringed as I watched three or four women scrambling to capture the poor thing, making half-hearted, frightened attempts to get a towel over his eyes, and to scoop him up in their welding glove-clad hands. I'm sure their absence of decisive action was to avoid "stressing" the already shell shocked dogs. But the more Animal evaded his Keystone Kops-like saviors, the more freaked out everyone (including the other dogs in the room) became. What dog lovers don't seem to grasp is that some stress is necessary, and some stress is not. The stress that dog lovers want to avoid is generally necessary. But they will cause mountains of *unnecessary* stress to the dog to avoid feeling bad about the *necessary* stress that would be over with quickly. I call what they do "unnecestress". Just two weeks ago, I had to capture a lip-curling, anal-gland expressing, growling 60 pound Rottie mix from the corner of a large room. I'm not a big person. I managed. My goal was to get the job done in the safest, fastest way, not just for my own safety, but for the behavioral well-being of the dog. And there weren't even any cameras! So right off the bat, I asked myself what I was seeing on "DogTown": Was it a grand vaudeville being put on to demonstrate the hair-raising exploits of these daredevil rescuers? Or was it naked incompetence? This would become the recurring theme as I continued to watch.

Sideshowes aren't as common as they once were. But did you ever go to the county fair, stop outside the bally of a "human oddities" exhibit, and listen to the talker breathlessly describe the horrors and wonders within?

"See the world's most dangerous creature! The Gorilla Girl of Lower Mongolia! Captured and on display for your titillation! Step right up and witness the terror for yourself! But don't look in her eyes, folks! She's a killer!"

You'd pay your two dollars, walk into the tent, and see a carney in a monkey suit, making half-hearted threats at the Styrofoam bars of the makeshift "cage". You're a rube: you just got beat for two bucks because you wanted to be impressed.

Listening to the voiceover for "DogTown", I was reminded of that experience. As Animal and his compatriots were scampering around on the floor of the trainer's home, the deep male voice ominously reminded us that ten-pounder Animal was "a threat to everything and everyone around him". Everything and everyone except for the nine other dogs, the five people, some of whom were sitting on the floor and whose legs he nonchalantly stepped over, and the film crew. I started to feel like a rube. I was getting beat, not for my money but for my time and my empathy. I started thinking about Monty Python sketches regarding "Killer Rabbits", and about comedic actresses jumping on chairs to avoid terrifying mice. But this wasn't supposed to be a comedy.

Each segment had a human associated with it: and Animal's spokesperson was a woman named Sherry Woodard, described as a trainer and behaviorist. Now, I know you can't throw a rock anywhere in the United States without hitting a soi-disant "trainer" or "behaviorist", but you'd think the producers of "DogTown" could find one who'd have at least as much dog sense as a 4H Obedience kid. Ms. Woodard seemed to be very sincere and genuinely passionate about her work. But if you are sincere and passionate about doing things that fly in the face of your proclaimed philosophy of caring for animals, perhaps it's time for a long look in the mirror. Earlier in the show, Ms. Woodard tells us "It's very important to me to feel like I'm making a difference." So, what's most important is *how you feel* rather than what you do. What exactly are we "saving" out here in the desert, kids? Dogs' lives or peoples' egos?

Exhibit A: Animal gets a bath.

I'm a Dobe person. You trim their nails every week, simonize them twice a year and you've pretty much met your grooming requirements. But even *I* know that if a dog has mats, the worst

possible thing you can do is to wet its coat. So imagine my surprise when Ms. Woodard described the feces-encrusted, hopelessly clotted fur of Animal and then let us know that she “like(s) the idea of taking care of a coat instead of stripping it off” and that to shave Animal would make him “uncomfortable”. As I watched her restrain the scrambling, panicking pup in a tub while trying to remove the now-even-more-embedded knots with a metal comb, I wondered how “comfortable” *that* was in comparison. In the end, the intrepid Ms. Woodard admits defeat, and Animal is harmlessly shaved while he is anesthetized for neutering. In the subsequent footage, the shorn Animal looks the opposite of “uncomfortable”: he looks downright psyched that he’s lost his nasty doggy dreadlocks and is sporting a crewcut. If I had to pick one example of “unnecestress” out of the thousands I have witnessed in my career, I would choose this footage.

Exhibit A-1: What not to do when a dog is panicking.

My first-time, absolute beginner student-owners learn that if their dog is acting insecure or defensive, the worst possible thing they can do is to frantically coo, “It’s OK- It’s OK-It’s OK”: this is reinforcing the dog’s fearful behavior and confirming all of his worst suspicions. My newbie students grasp this concept within five minutes of hearing it, and by seeing their dogs visibly relax as soon as they stop their neurotic consolation. Watching designated “experts” do this exact same thing to a dog who will *never* be convinced of the ok-ness of his present, “unnecestressful” situation was enough to send me into the red zone. Sherry, honey, what Animal is doing is definitely *not* “OK”, and what *you* are doing is definitely *not* “OK”. Please stop making it worse for him.

Exhibit B: How to start a dogfight.

Another segment featured a trainer named John Garcia, who was charged with the rehab of two hound brothers. The first job was to separate the two dogs to better prepare them for adoption. While many pet owners would find that difficult to accept, I understand from a trainer’s viewpoint that it was probably a necessity. However, Mr. Garcia chose to introduce the newly-separated hounds to their new friends in a way that was practically guaranteed to cause “unnecestress”. At different times, each dog was brought into a tiny room and restrained on a leash. A new dog would be brought in to that same room, on leash, and allowed to interact. Any dog trainer worth his salt knows that a surefire way to cause aggressive displays is to let dogs “face off” on leash. Smart shelters let new dogs meet in large spaces where the dogs have room

to move around each other and do the sophisticated dance of introduction. But letting dogs suss each other out at the end of short leashes with two hovering humans in a 12x12 cell is a recipe for bad doggy vibes. And this is how they did it at Best Friends on national television. While the first hound made it through the hazing, the second one was presented with a cell-mate who wanted to assert his dominance right away. While the dogs never engaged in full-out aggression and could have been easily interrupted with planning and timing, we were treated instead to the sight of Mr. Garcia blasting them in the face with citronella spray to stop a fight that was only going to happen because of his own poor judgment, or Best Friends' strange policy. I found myself in the same mode as my Better Half when he watches football: I was by now shouting at the television, calling the people "idiots", and yelling things like "You're on THIRTY-THREE THOUSAND ACRES, dude! Introduce them outside!"

But before you decide not to watch, please realize that it wasn't *all* bad. I'd even say that the veterinary angle was excellent. I watched as Dr. Michael Dix did some detective work to help sort out the skin problems of a lovely Lab mix named Porto. Dr. Mike didn't broadcast his Great Love For Animals with words and tears and anthropomorphic confusion. He looked at Porto as a fellow creature in need of comfort, and he set about his work quietly and with compassion that required no photogenic lower-lip biting. Porto's story was informative and had a genuinely happy ending with no stops in between at "unnecessstressful" behavioral experiments or poorly thought out handling. And I smiled when I saw the adoption of one of the hound brothers, who got to meet his new canine family in a much more reasonable setting than the one at the facility.

When I see a very difficult dog in my practice, I strive to find a few good things about him, some potential we can hook our hopes to as we set about training and rehabbing him. I felt the same as I watched the Best Friends crew. They seem like really nice people with good intentions. Believe me, I *want* to like DogTown, but it's difficult. And since they're not about to call me and ask for suggestions or, I suspect, accept the ones I would make, my ability to rehab the rehabbers is limited. I can only sit and watch, and I can only do that as long as they don't finally lose me to my frustration with their actions. When I begin to think of viewing "DogTown" as self-inflicted "unnecessstress", I'll have to stop.

The next episode is called "Second Chances". I'm willing to give the show a second chance, too. I just hope that we see more examples of true problem solving and fewer scenes of "unnecessstress" disguised as "love".

Just because a humane organization has a large financial endowment and beautiful facility, doesn't mean it's the best place for you to send money. Check out a couple of my locally based, favorite unsung rescue heroes: these folks may never have a TV series or a state-of-the-art compound, but they deserve your support. I bet if you go looking, you'll find some real "best friends" on your own home turf, too.

Manchester Animal Shelter www.manchesteranimalshelter.org **603-628-3544**

Wagging Tails Dog Rescue www.wtdr.org **infodog@wtdr.org**

Or if you are looking for my breed of choice:

Doberman Rescue www.DRU.org

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