

The GABRIEL chronicles

by Doyle Bickers



CHAPTER 7

Puppy Kindergarten

It seemed like a good idea at the time. My wife discovered that the Continuing Education program at the University was offering a puppy kindergarten, four weeks of special training, a way for a puppy to "learn basic manners such as leash walking, no jumping, "sit", "stay", "down", to come when called and more... The last class will be a graduation from Puppy Kindergarten ceremony. The instructor is a certified dog trainer with years of experience working with dogs and their parents. Come ready to have fun." Given the fact that Gabriel has a "mild" propensity toward being stubborn, pig-headed, belligerent, argumentative, etc., it seemed like a great idea at the time. Surely a "certified dog trainer" could give us tips on moderating those demonic behaviors that have tempted us to give our angelic Gabriel the middle name of Lucifer.

Gabriel is a clown at heart. He loves to play games that allow him to exhibit his special talents – chasing, charging, jumping, grabbing, wrestling and running wildly in circles while joyfully barking. And nothing seems to give him greater satisfaction than to pull off a prank, whether it's stealing a shoe, sneaking up from behind to startle us with a charge between our legs, or scaring the "dickens" out of a squirrel that he has cautiously stalked in the back yard.

But a little moderation in some of his behaviors might be useful and at least reduce our now chronic need for Valium. A couple of examples may help folks to understand my initial optimism about the

puppy kindergarten.

Gabriel views himself as my chief assistant and sometimes supervisor when I am working in the yard. He feels the need to "help," whether I am raking leaves, cutting the grass, digging in the garden or performing some other chore. On one particular day, I was building an addition to the privacy fence that surrounds the back yard. Gabriel played under foot, occasionally grabbing at my shoe, hauling off a piece of lumber or searching for some unique stunt that would sabotage the project. While working on the fence, my tools stayed in a plastic tub for safe keeping. Hammer, saw, screw driver, drill bits, etc. Since it was spring and my allergies were in full swing, I also kept a handkerchief close by. I had just finished nailing a slat to the fence frame and had turned to get another. Gabriel was leaning into the tool tub and had grabbed the handkerchief. Knowing his love for chewing things into oblivion, I lunged at him yelling, "No Gabriel. Drop that." He is really quick. He easily dodged my charge while gulping down the handkerchief. You would have thought it was a ham biscuit. The last edge disappeared down his throat as I cornered him.

Why? What strange urge motivated him to swallow a handkerchief? I was faced with a dilemma. What now? As I thought about the problem, I realized that the handkerchief would probably block his digestive tract before it disintegrated in his gastric juices. "Probably serve you right," I muttered. "Bet you'd have fun crapping that." I was talking mostly to myself as I heaved him into the truck and headed for the Vet's office. When I called her office, she had asked the obvious question, "He ate what?" "Yes, bring him over. We should induce vomiting."

I actually imagined that I heard snickering from the office staff as I carried him into the back room at the Vet's office. They know Gabriel well. He eventually regurgitated the offending item. As we left the office, one "well meaning" staff member grinned and asked if I wanted my handkerchief back.

Stealing and chewing almost any forbidden item is uniquely satisfying to Gabriel. We have replaced rugs, shoes, a pair of glasses... My billfold has a strange pattern of scars across it. I explain to people that it is a "special leather" that is in style now. He is six months old, weighs over thirty-five pounds and is getting tall. He can stand on his back legs and reach onto most tables and counters. This has led us to adopt a unique style of decorating in our home referred to as "centering." It will probably be featured in Southern Living in the near future. Nothing should be close

to an edge.

So, with all of this (and more) in mind, puppy kindergarten infused us with a new sense of hope. Here was an expert, one who could encourage the type of behavior we saw in the puppy training video (see picture).



At this point, I should inject a reminder. It was my wife who had discovered the puppy kindergarten, registered "us" for the course and conveniently forgot that, on the exact evenings when it was taught, she had conflicts with her Tai Chi class, presentations at work, critical grocery shopping, and wine consumption while peacefully enjoying a quiet moment of television. Gabriel and I were left to relish the experience alone. It was to be an exercise in bonding.

The course instructions indicated that we should bring a leash, a lawn chair and some of his favorite treats. Referring to the last item, I preferred to bring actual doggie treats. Rugs, billfolds, glasses and shoes were just too cumbersome to haul around.

Gabe is large for his age. He is barrel-chested and strong as a mini-ox. His personal life goal seems to be pulling the Iditarod - single handed. He practices by towing me around the neighborhood on our evening walks.

I will set the stage. Approximately fifteen couples and individuals are sitting in lawn chairs arranged in a circle. Each participant is accompanied by a puppy. These vary in size and temperament. There are tiny Yorkies, a Pit Bull, a Springer Spaniel, a variety of Heinz 57's, a Chocolate Lab, and, of course, Gabriel. Most of the dogs are sitting or lying down calmly surveying the situation. Gabe is standing on two legs, his leash stretched tautly. He is making a valiant effort to drag me toward Buddy. Buddy is a good natured mutt sitting next to us. Buddy is big, appearing to be a mix between a Chow and a German shepherd and about a year old. Gabriel is completely convinced that he needs to show Buddy who is boss. Earlier in the session, we had allowed the dogs to have a socialization period in a large pen.

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I discovered a lot about Gabriel that night. He wants to lead the pack, to get everyone in line, to dominate. He is particularly interested in pushing around the larger dogs. Small dogs don't seem to represent a challenge. He and Buddy along with Trooper (the Pit Bull) engaged in a spirited wrestling match. There were growls, yelps, flashing teeth, but, thank goodness, no serious biting. The other owners seemed a bit apprehensive. Gabe threw what amounted to a tackle on Buddy. It resembled one from an NFL linebacker. Buddy rolled over and Gabe jumped on him. At that point I was able to grab Gabe's harness and haul him up into the air and out of the pen. The scene settled down. It was suggested later that Gabe might be well enough socialized and that I might refrain from allowing him further participation in the pen.

Over the four weeks of the course we practiced coming, sitting, lying down, retrieving, walking on a leash and other skills. When not distracted by other dogs, Gabe did well. He is smart and learns quickly. We had only one small disaster. We were practicing walking when another dog got loose and came running by us. Gabe launched himself after the other dog who made a quick turn. The leash wrapped around my legs and down we went into a pile.

Overall, the program was good for both of us. We now practice the various commands in the back yard and on our walks at the farm. I suspect that Gabriel misses the sessions. He seemed totally happy each evening when we returned to the truck. He was grinning and panting. I almost expected him to look over at me and say, "Showed them, didn't we?"

CHAPTER 8

Meditations While Following a Little Brown Dog

When Gabriel was younger, three to five months old, he tended to be restrained when we would take walks at the farm or into the woods. He would walk beside me or even linger a little behind as we approached an unfamiliar area. In the last month, he has assumed his rightful place. He now leads the walk. He keeps a nice pace, normally staying fifteen to twenty yards ahead while looking more and more the part of the upland bird dog. He courses back and forth, nose to the ground. Periodically, an exciting smell will set his motor revving. His body seems to almost quiver, his tail vibrating back and forth.

Since we are not hunting, these have become times for me to reflect. Our route is

often familiar as we trace the boundaries of pastures. Unless something such as an itinerant herd of cows alters our course, he knows where we are headed and confidently guides the way. It has been pleasant to let my mind wander, ruminating on activities past and present.

Joie de Vivre – As I have grown older, I have slowed down, at times becoming almost sedentary. My moods and passions



have mellowed. During the period when we were not owned by a dog, I found myself less likely to get into the woods and fields, and I was the poorer for it. Enter Gabriel. There is nothing like a puppy who is totally filled with the joy of life to get you moving. To a certain extent, this is self defense. Without adequate exercise, his energy is spent in projects and activities that may not be totally appropriate. OK, he'll drive you nuts. It isn't his fault. He is a puppy. So we now have outings three to four times a week. These consist of walks through woods and fields, trips to the lake for a swim and basic tours of the local neighborhood.

We are headed across one of his favorite pastures. I watch his excitement and cannot help but be infected. He runs round and round, only stopping to leap at a butterfly. His enthusiasm is rubbing off on me. I haven't been bird hunting in a long time, but the idea of seeing him encounter his first covey this fall causes me to begin making mental plans. I inventory our equipment needs in my head. I wonder if the birds are still in their old haunts. Beautiful flushes from the past run across my mind. Suddenly, we are back at the truck. Once more, he has made me feel more alive. Back at home, I relax in my chair. I am anticipating activities that I had pushed from my consciousness. With Gabe's help and a shot of good bourbon, I may just live a little longer and take a few more walks.

On Noticing- Gabriel seems to notice everything that is within the range of his vision, smell, touch and hearing. He misses very little. Recently, I was amazed when a grasshopper whirled out of the weeds near our path. Gabriel turned as if it had

been a covey rise and bounced after the bug only to have it fly again. This went on for a few minutes until he was distracted by some smell. Often, he forces me to notice little things, partly because I have to determine the nature of whatever object he is trying to eat. I find myself watching more closely. Whether it's the ground at our feet or the wood line, I am constantly checking for snakes, coyotes or whatever

else we might encounter. He is reminding me to focus, both on the tiny bluets along the path as well as the stern looking hawk that is sitting on a dead pine limb ahead. I am reminded of what I miss when I am not outdoors and also how the order and beauty of nature have contributed to my belief in a deity during times when events have shaken that faith.

At Peace- It is only mid-May but summer is bearing down on central Alabama. The temperature will be in the low nineties and the humidity feels about the same. We have begun to leave earlier in the morning for our walks. While it isn't cool, it is at least more tolerable. Gabriel is leading the way. We cross the north pasture and, by the time we reach the far fence line, we are both wet from the dew. I am curious to see if we can spot a coyote that has been frequenting the area. We ease quietly along entering the northwest pasture. We slip through the pecan grove and back to the edge of the woods. No coyote. We skirt the edges of the blackberry patch, and re-route slightly to avoid a boggy bottom. By now we have covered a fair distance. Gabe's tongue is hanging out as he tries to get cooler. The sun is up and is probably uncomfortably warm on that tightly woven fur coat of his. I decide that it is time to begin heading for the truck. There is a slight ridge that divides the pastures and we climb to the top. A gigantic oak tree dominates the skyline. As we reach the tree, we enter its shade. It feels so good. I sit down with my back against the tree. We can see the bottom from here and I still want to watch for the coyote. Gabriel sits beside me, surveying his kingdom. I have walked with dogs who

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