



In February, 2003, an amazing group of clicker trainers gathered in Newark, Delaware, USA. One would have thought that this was a reunion of a coed sorority or a gathering of far-flung relatives, when in fact most of the conference attendees had never previously met face to face! We recognized each other by our dogs' breed or a name tag that identified us as a member of OCAD: the Operant Conditioning Assistance Dog email-list community. From the moment we gathered, attendees and presenters seemed all to be of the same fabric. Samantha Burton put it well when she said "I was so impressed by everyone's ability to problem solve, to think creatively. Instead of hearing 'I can't do that' everywhere I heard 'How can I do that?'....and 'lets try this and see what happens'. Whether it was brainstorming ways to help people with limited use of their hands to up their rates of reinforcement, or coming together as a group to talk about dance moves that could be used in Freestyle, there was always someone (or more likely, a group of people) creatively, proactively, positively, working through training challenges."

We had people at the seminar with a variety of disabilities, and a variety of dogs. It was so neat to see how all of these dogs -- big or small -- could get the job done, and could work so well for their partners.



Service Dogs Come in All Sizes and Have Their Own Ways of Enjoying Each Other's Company

Many of the dogs were dogs in training, and it was wonderful to see the attention that everyone paid to what their dogs were doing. No one got angry when dogs made "mistakes" and in fact, they worked together to help to set dogs up for success. There was always someone there, willing to click a dog for something that might be difficult for the dog's partner to see, willing to brainstorm solutions to training challenges, willing to share a story and a laugh, willing to step forward and say "you think that was bad ... I remember the time when my dog did _____", and always there was someone right there willing to lend a hand.

In post-conference letters Cissy Stamm commented, "it was a very non-judgemental gathering of like-minded people, who were there to learn and share all they could, to network and put faces to the names they have known via email. Debi Davis wrote "this was, for me, one of the most incredible of miracles--that it was such a free and open sharing of hearts and knowledge, and such a cohesive circle of support. There was no hint of "them and us"--- we were all 'us' and that sense of unity became palpable as the conference progressed. "

Carolyn Scott and her dog Rookie's freestyle performance and workshop wowed everyone! Carolyn tried out lots of musical options with a variety of dogs, everything from "new age" to rock to "kicker," as she called the "country and western" songs. Working with service dogs and handlers she demonstrated how to select music that fit the dog's natural movement. Carolyn's enthusiasm, encouragement and graciousness put everyone at ease, no one appeared nervous about trying to dance with her own dog. Many participants previously thought dance a form of expression that had been stolen by the advent of disability. What a wonder to watch dogs and handlers creating a new dimension to their partnerships through dance movements and music!



**Shaping A New Behavior:
Samantha Clicks and Gives Fergus a Treat for Figuring Out How
to Get Under the Chairs**

Workshops within the conference covered topics such as “Shaping New Behaviors,” “Overcoming Retrieve Challenges”, “Body Awareness” “Gaining and Keeping Focus and Attention,” “Help, I’ve Fallen and I Can’t Get up!”

Help I’ve Fallen and I Can’t Get Up”



(Above) Abby “Braces” to Assist Theresa to Stand

(Below) Abby “Braces” in an Alternate Position to Assist Tammy



(Below) Fergus fetching a pillow to Samantha



**In the workshop On The Importance of Body Awareness for Service Dogs:
(Below) Two Dogs Practice Walking Through the Rungs of a Ladder**



Virginia Broitman and Sherri Lippman (of Take A Bow Wow fame) set up a wildly popular, "Run the Gauntlet" course for the dogs that was recreated by popular demand the following day. The gauntlet consisted of two lines of distracting smells, sounds and human antics, between which dog and human teams passed – with the objective of keeping the dog's focus on the handler.



“Running The Gauntlet” Debi Davis & Peek learning that “Man in A Check Shirt” is only there to test them.

What a collection of creative and seductive distractions they gathered: plates of odiferous liver treats; squeaking fuzzy toys; Bruce, the human, making the most outrageous noises as he stretched out on the floor; other people popped bags, waved pieces of cloth and tried to reach out and get the dogs’ attention. The dogs and handlers rose to the challenge, remaining remarkably focused on each other (except Peek, who according to Debi, “was so entranced with the sounds coming out of Bruce that Peek appeared more interested in Bruce than in the liver treats littering the floor!”)



Abby Learns to Retrieve a Cane



Ethan Stays Focused & Resists the Temptation of Treats Lined Up on His Leg

Beyond Susan Mann's awesome organization skills lie talents that enabled her to create an atmosphere of cooperation and acceptance that permeated the conference. Susan is already focusing ahead to next year and another conference. It will be truly wonderful if she and others are successful in their effort to find sponsors to help to fund future conferences so that more service dog teams will be able to attend!

There Was Lots of Snoozing and Bonding Time For The Dogs at the Conference

