

The Chronicles of Oliver—Introduction

Many questions have been rolling in lately. I'm so excited that people are discovering there are ways to help enhance the relationship with their dog by solving behavior problems. I always answer questions individually, and try to get as many as possible into the weekly articles. Sometimes the questions are similar—grooming aggression, separation anxiety, housebreaking issues, confinement issues, dog aggression, and problems rehabilitating dogs with excess baggage. The other day while talking with a group of friends, I realized I have one dog who has experienced all the issues in that list, if not more. I decided to spend the next few weeks writing the Chronicles of Oliver. We'll take a walk down the rehabilitation path that Oliver has taken over the past year. Hopefully in the process you will learn some new ways to relate to your dogs, learn how to work with hand-me-down dogs who have a history, and most likely discover that this trainer is only human as I bare all in my account of my journey with Oliver.

Oliver is a mutant miniature poodle. I say mutant because by AKC standards he's really too big for a miniature, but much too small to be truly considered a standard. Besides the word "mutant" often brings to mind something out of the ordinary, and Oliver is truly that. He came to me via a rescue group at their wits end. Oliver had been returned for a variety of, well, let's nicely call them "issues." The rescue was concerned he would continually be returned unless his issues were resolved. No doubt they were correct. There were definitely days that I wanted to return him! While evaluating Oliver, I discovered the last family who had adopted him was not exaggerating their explanation of the problems Oliver was facing. Oliver had a lot of work ahead of him, and so did I.

People think because I work with dogs that I must love all dogs. I admit I don't. I care for all living creatures, I'm fond of many dogs, but I don't instantly fall in love with all dogs. Delilah, my St. Bernard, was love-at-first-sight. Oliver...not so much! His separation anxiety made it so he couldn't be out of my sight for a moment or he started the highest pitch cry I'd ever heard. He couldn't be put in a crate because he had confinement issues, which his many broken teeth were a testament to the seriousness of this issue. When I came home after leaving him alone, he not only jumped on me, but he raked and tore my clothes and bit my rear end when I turned to walk away. Oliver wasn't housebroken, so he hiked his leg on practically everything he passed and did what we call the poopy walk. He couldn't just leave a pile in the middle of the rug, he had to walk while doing his business. LOVELY! No it definitely wasn't love at first sight!

However, because I knew that solving Oliver's behavior problems was going to take a long time, I called the rescue and said I wanted to adopt him. My family thought I was nuts. I have to admit, I agreed with them. I knew, though, that Oliver's issues would never go away 100%, and if I couldn't make a commitment to this dog, who would? No, I decided that if I was going to make any headway with Oliver, I needed to have him be a permanent part of the family. It wouldn't be fair to put what was probably going to be months if not longer of work into Oliver only then to pass him on to someone else. Because of his nature, he most likely would regress, and all that work would go down the tubes. Plus I truly believe that dogs know when we aren't sure about our commitment to them. It's hard to build trust when ambivalence is involved. I've seen it numerous times when helping people who have just adopted a dog. Until they make a commitment in their minds that they are keeping the dog, progress in training is slow. I didn't have to be madly in love with Oliver to make a decision to adopt him and care for him. All we needed was an understanding of roles that were held in the household-- what I expected from him and what he could expect from me. The love would come later.

And believe me it did. I never really cared much for Poodles with their funky haircuts and prissy attitudes, but I have become a true Poodle lover thanks to Oliver. Does that mean he's a perfect pooch now? Hardly. There are days that I throw my hands in the air and wonder what on earth I was thinking when I signed those adoption papers. Then Oliver climbs into my lap, gives me a kiss, wags his long uncropped poodle tufted tail, and I'm nothing but mush. Boy does he know how to work those brown eyes to his advantage! Now that you've met Oliver, read next week to learn more about our journey of acceptance, trust, leadership, and love.