

Refining Bowser's social skills

By Nancy Floeck
Battalion Staff

Ten of them stood in a line, waiting their turn.

Some were impatient or bored, others seem anxious to get on with their work. Their owners looked on warily. "Please behave and do me proud," their looks said.

In the background, under the illuminating force of the lights in Zachry parking lot, other owners were pulling on leashes, tugging on heads, running around in figure-eights with their pets.

It was conformation night, time for the show dogs to practice exhibiting their excellence in breeding and excellence in obedience, the way they would in a dog show.

Most dogs did just that, with just a few acting as if they had never had a lesson in their life. Some suddenly turned stone deaf, dumb and blind to all commands.

"You're supposed to gait them, not run them," Kay McGuire, dog obedience and conformation instructor, called to one pet owner who was galloping in the same manner as her canine. They were practicing gaiting — walking in a manner that allows the show dog to flaunt his physical attributes. Done in a figure-eight shape, the exercise was performed in the pattern used in dog shows.

Texas sculpture on exhibit

A rare opportunity to view the sculptures and artifacts of Elizabeth Ney, Texas' first eminent sculptor, is available at The Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio.

The 25 pieces on exhibit include a six-foot statue of Stephen F. Austin dressed in buckskin, a bust of Texas governor Oran Roberts and a full-length statue of Lady MacBeth.

Ney, who died in 1907, gained world acclaim for sculpting life-sized figures and portrait busts.

Born in Germany, Ney was the first woman to attend the Munich Academy of Art. Ney and her husband immigrated to America in 1871, and purchased a plantation near Houston.

She was commissioned to do statues of Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston for the Chicago World's Fair and gained new critical acclaim.

The works in the exhibit are on loan from the Ney Museum in Austin while it is being refurbished.

The works are on display at the institute at the corner of Durango and Bowie Streets on HemisFair Plaza from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. Admission is free.

Different breeds of show dogs have different type of gaits, McGuire later explained. Some "roll" when they walk, others single-track.

Other commands pierced the night air: "Put your head that way," one German shepherd

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was told. He ignored the request. He also wasn't allowed to move until he obeyed.

A card table was in the center of this activity. Dogs took turns standing on the table while their owners and trainers pushed on their legs and tugged on their heads, trying to accustom the dogs to that perfect show-dog stance — legs apart, head and ears up, not a muscle twitching.

One German shepherd rebelled by slouching on the table, his head in his owner's hand. After several minutes of prodding, tugging and commanding, the dog stood up straight, mainly out of exasperation and disgust, it seemed. If that dog could talk, he probably would have said "Give me a break — I'm unhappy, I'm cold, let's go home. I don't like parking lots."

But one black-and-white dog put the others to shame.

The owner walked around in circle, with the dog on a leash. She stopped. "Heel," she said. This receptive Rover did a quick circular march around the owner's heels, then sat stoically at her feet. Very impressive.

Later, the same dog jumped — no, sailed — over four white plastic bars immediately on the command "over it." Then he promptly heeled. The owner shouted, "OK!", the signal for stop-you're-free-to-do-whatever-you-want, and the dog happily leaped up.

I predict great things for that dog.

Meanwhile, a shaggy black spaniel named Angel ran around the lot and bumped into cars' license plates. Remember, the dogs' classroom is used as a

parking lot when class is not in session.

Although some of the dogs seemed unhappy about spending their Tuesday night frolicking in parking annex 50, McGuire said trained dogs such as these are happier and better adjusted than undisciplined ones.

Dogs who are pets rather than show dogs don't need to be trained as extensively as this, she said, but they need to learn basic obedience and socializing skills.

A trained dog is easier to live with, she said. It obeys, doesn't act obnoxious when people come to visit, and learns to be a companion rather than "something that's tossed out in the back yard and food thrown to," McGuire said.

"Anyone who owns a dog should socialize that dog like a child," she added. McGuire has taught dog obedience lessons for about seven years.

Most dogs can learn the obedience basics in two weekly lessons, she said. McGuire's classes are 10-week sessions; the last weeks are used for polishing and reviewing the dogs' new-found skills.

In addition, pet owners need to spend about 15 minutes a day working with their canines and reviewing their lessons; McGuire said, since obedience is a continuous, building process.

"The basic problem is keeping the dog's attention," she said. "A hand signal is more complicated (than voice commands) because you must have the dog's attention."

For this reason, dogs are first taught to respond to voice commands — sit, heel, stay, OK.

Then they graduate to the hand signals — a clap means "OK," a hand in front of the dog's face means "stay" and a finger pointed at the ground means "sit."

But not all dogs make it through their obedience course; the drop-out rate is 35 to 40 percent, McGuire said.

"People get behind and embarrassed and won't come to class," she said, again stressing the need for continuous review of obedience skills.

McGuire said show dogs should get precise and stringent work-outs, but pet owners who

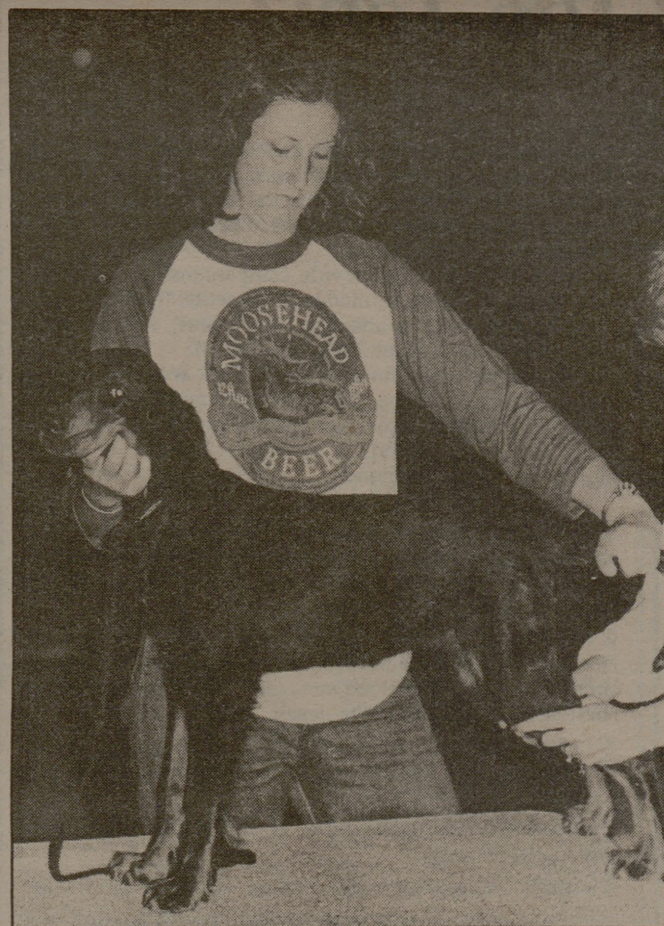


Photo by Janet Golub Joyce

As part of a 10-week dog obedience class held in the Zachry parking lot, this proud dog owner learns to place her canine for judging.

don't intend to submit their dog to a judge's scrutiny don't need to be as strict, nor do their pets need special classes to learn obe-

dience, although socializing improves dogs' temperaments.

"You can easily train a dog from a book," she said.

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