

Teaching young Fido to high jump

By **Brian Pearson**
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Instead of having young Fido, Spot, Lassie and Rover run down and fetch the traditional wooden sticks and rubber balls,

teach them to catch and retrieve flying discs.

The stick-and-ball routine can seem boring after watching a dog race 50 yards, leap nine feet off the ground, twist his body in midair, chomp down on a descending disc, return to the ground and calmly trot

back to the thrower for another turn.

So teach your dog to do it.

Simple? It can be, but only if you use good teaching methods and the dog is interested in a modern, plate-like, polyethylene version of a stick.

Although all puppies will not become the energetic, four-legged pogo stick described earlier, almost any breed of dog is a potential disc catcher.

Scott Gunn, a Texas A&M graduate zoology student who has taught dogs to catch discs, says Labradors, Golden Retrievers and Whippets make the best disc dogs.

"But any breed that has a history of speed, high jumping and an ability to retrieve will make a good disc dog," Gunn says.

He says that after a dog is chosen, three important things owners need for the teaching process are time, patience and a light (141 gram maximum), expendable disc. It's inevitable that a few discs will be chewed to a slimy, plastic, hole-riddled pulp, but it's a small price for man's best friend.

Dogs of all ages can learn to catch discs, but it's best to teach them while they're puppies, Gunn says.

"Once a dog gets past two years old, it's hard to make him a good Frisbee dog," Gunn says. "He can be adequate, but he's not going to be one that's going to be competitive."

The primary learning goal, Gunn says, is getting the puppy or adult dog interested in discs.

Gunn says puppies should be introduced to their first disc soon after they stop nursing. Instead of using aluminum pie pans or feed and water bowls designed for dogs, use discs. This way the dog has the chance to associate discs with one of his favorite activities — eating.

When the puppies are into their running, chewing and 25-hours-a-day playing phase, a disc should be their only toy, Gunn says. Initial play should involve slowly rolling the disc along the ground and letting the puppy chase after it.

At this stage, the puppy gets the sensations of chasing, chewing and pawing a disc. Don't let the puppy chew a disc for too long. If you let him do more chewing than chasing, he might consider discs as chew toys for the rest of his life. Every disc within the dog's reach, including your favorite one, may be shredded to unflyable splinters.

Gunn says praise is important. After every second or third roll, give the dog positive reinforcement such as saying, "Oh, Fido's such a good boy!," patting his head or giving him a chocolate cookie. Don't praise him every time because he'll expect a reward every time he chases the disc.

Also, Gunn says, it's important to give the dog his own disc so he doesn't chew up others'. The dog will know his own disc and might refuse to play with any other. Dogs usually will adopt another disc if their favorite is lost, mutilated, thrown away or whatever.

After a dog seems acquainted with chasing, chewing and pawing a disc, then teach him to jump for it, Gunn says. Hold the disc above his head and let him hop for it. Let him have the disc about every second or third good hop. Praise him for his efforts.

Gunn says it's sometimes good to play disc tug of war with the dog. Don't play too much or the dog may think the purpose of a playing disc is to take it and keep it away from you. This can lead to frustration if he's got your favorite disc and has plenty of running room.

After the dog is jumping higher, then it's time to teach him to run and catch it, Gunn says. The transition from jumping in place to running, leaping and catching is difficult, but if the dog has come this far, he usually is ready for it.

Gunn says correct training procedures should produce a "pretty good Frisbee catcher" within nine months after the training begins.



Kenny Sanders, an A&M graduate student in the Department of Recreation and Parks, tosses a disc to his dog Tosh. Sanders says he named the two-year-old dog after Peter Tosh, a reggae musician.