

Perfect Poochies

Local dog trainer teaches people and their pooches how to make the most of their relationship

By Ryan Parton

Megan Hird barks out orders in a firm yet melodic voice, her bare arms planted squarely on her hips and her cropped blond hair flared out from under a green, military-style ball cap. While she wouldn't look out of place in army fatigues, she's instead clad in a sporty tank top, black capris and a pair of well-worn sneakers. Dangling at her hip is her sidearm of choice—a climber's chalk bag full of dog treats.

It's graduation night for Poochies' advanced dog obedience class, and six eager canines and their owners will have to show Hird that they've earned their diplomas. It's not going to be easy. Building up from a simple heel, the students will eventually have to show that they're capable of braking from a full run into a sit, and then remaining calmly seated while their owners march up to 100 metres away and launch into a set of jumping jacks. As if that's not challenging enough, Hird will be taunting them every step of the way with the aforementioned treats she keeps all too readily available at her hip.

Although she has occasionally been compared to a drill sergeant, albeit a giddy one, Hird is more often referred to as the Comox Valley's *Dog Whisperer*, although it's a comparison she tends to downplay. As the proprietor of Poochies Dog Obedience Training, Hird reckons she's trained hundreds, possibly even thousands, of animals using a mixture of respect, challenge and praise-based coaching.

"I'm not like the *Dog Whisperer* on TV where I just jump in and make the dog submit," Hird says. "I actually earn the dog's trust. I take the trust first and start working the dog with smaller steps to build up its confidence and trust in me. Then I'll start challenging it."

When it comes to training a dog, Hird says, the challenge is what it's all about.

"Many people don't give dogs nearly enough credit," she



"Dogs get to be dogs," says Hird of the off-leash wilderness dog walking service she offers for graduates of her obedience classes. "Having them learn from me, and from the other dogs, makes it much more than just another walk." Hird takes up to 16 dogs at a time on the two-hour walks. Photo by Boomer Jerritt

explains. "They're extremely intelligent animals and they're not challenged enough. People will say, 'It's just a family dog, it's just a pet,' and they'll leave it in the backyard all day long and never ask anything of it. It's just like never challenging a person, like having a kid that's never taught anything new. They can go mentally crazy."

"It's really sad," she continues. "There are all these dogs in the pounds for problems that can go away in a week's time if you just teach them some boundaries and ask a bit more of them. They end up really loving it. A lot of people feel that obedience is a kind of punishment, but really it's mean not to ask anything of them. They love the bonding, they love the one-on-one time and they love to work."

Through Poochies, Hird offers private lessons and consultations, as well as a series of group classes ranging from basic obedience training for beginners to advanced obedience and even

tricks. In basic obedience, dogs learn commands such as "Sit," "Down," and "Come," and techniques to correct behaviors such as aggression, jumping on people or furniture, begging for food and excessive barking.

Basic obedience classes are held twice a week for six weeks. These twice weekly classes really help to excel the learning rate for people and for dogs, says Hird. Advanced obedience takes those skills to the next level, and the just-for-fun tricks classes teach dogs stunts like rolling over, spinning, weaving through their owners' legs and jumping through hoops.

Graduates from all classes are also welcome to join Hird on her monthly Saturday free class, where they can refresh their skills and catch up with old classmates.

The most talked-about Poochies service, however, is the dog walking. After you've completed her basic obedience training, Hird will pick your

dog up from your home and take it on a two-hour "wilderness adventure" along the Trent River near Union Bay. Not doing much to allay her comparisons to the *Dog Whisperer*, the slight-framed 28-year-old takes up to 16 dogs off-leash and never has a problem with dogs misbehaving or running away.

"They've got the rules already set in their heads from the group class," she says confidently, "and so it's just a matter of enforcing them off leash."

"It's pretty cool," she admits. "Dogs get to be dogs. They spend so much time around people that they don't really understand how to be like dogs. Having them learn from me, and from the other dogs, makes it much more than just another walk."

While the idea of one person controlling more than a dozen dogs may sound impossible to an owner whose companion won't even sit still when asked, Hird reminds us that it all starts

with the basics. Instilling effective obedience techniques, she says, is as much about teaching the owner as it is about training the dog.

"Owners tend to use a lot of voice, but that's not really going to help them out," she explains. "Dogs don't speak English." Instead, Hird teaches owners to complement their commands with hand signals and body movements that help coax their dog into position.

On graduation night, in the field behind the old Tsolum School, Hird's emphasis on body movements transforms her image from giddy drill sergeant to enthusiastic aerobics instructor. She whips her hand dramatically into the air to demonstrate a distance "Sit!" command, then throws her whole body into a lunge with a downward point to demonstrate "Down!" These canine calisthenics are repeated for each student as she makes her rounds, alternately shouting encouragement, laughing at her

students' antics and offering good-humoured advice for her sometimes-frustrated owners.

"No swearing at the dogs," she shouts playfully in response to one particularly frustrated owner whose dog appeared more interested in licking than listening. "When they make you the maddest, remember their good qualities; remember how much you love them—most of the time!"

If anyone could be born to work with animals, it's Megan Hird. Raised on a hobby farm near Shawnigan Lake, Hird grew up surrounded by cats, dogs, chickens, sheep and horses. "Every animal I had," she says, "I learned everything I possibly could about them and tried to do more and more and more. I always wanted to (work) with animals. I had to do something with animals."

Hird began volunteering at veterinary clinics when she was 16, and got a job as a veterinary assistant at a Vancouver clinic immediately after high school. It was there that she really began to discover her skill with dogs. She wasn't allowed to have a dog in her apartment so she began walking dogs for friends and even clients from the clinic, doing basic obedience training along the way.

Hird was gearing up to become a veterinary technician and volunteering at the Victoria SPCA when she enrolled in an animal welfare program through the College of the Cariboo. This year-long course gave her an in-depth knowledge of animal anatomy and behavior. Following this, Hird went on to complete an intensive four-month dog-training program in Victoria under the tutelage of trainer Ben Kersen, all the while volunteering with the local SPCA and working at a combination kennel/training facility.

"Doing the dog training programs really gave me the confidence to start my own business using my own methods, and help people have a better relationship with their own dogs," Hird says. She relocated to the Comox Valley "for the outdoor life" in December 2004 and began working part-time at local vet clinics while starting up Poochies.

Today, Hird's pack includes three dogs—Kayla, an eight-year-old Belgian Malinois-cross she rescued from the Victoria SPCA; Skye, a two-year-old

Border Collie she raised from a pup, and Choncho, a two-year-old Chihuahua also rescued from the SPCA.

Kayla, scheduled to be euthanized due to her aggression toward dogs and men before Hird adopted her, is now a friendly, balanced dog—thanks to intensive training and exposure to all kinds of situations.

"Kayla is now my teacher to other dogs," says Hird. "She is a role model for other dogs, and helps other dogs with aggression issues get through it and past it. She and Choncho (who had three other homes before being rescued by Hird) and Skye are the ambassadors for Poochies—they are there to help with the training too."

Her dogs all accompany Hird to classes, where they wait patiently for after-class playtime, participate in demos and act as distractions for the dogs in class.

With her dogs as proof of the benefits of training, it's no surprise that Poochies' classes are in demand, and have been since she first started. Back in 2004 her obedience classes began to fill up almost immediately as word spread about her apparent gift with animals, although "gift" is another word that Hird surely wouldn't use to describe her knack with dogs. To her, it's simply a matter of reading the dog and knowing what training method will work best.

"Every dog is an individual," she says. "Some dogs are really food motivated, some aren't. Some are toy-driven and some just want to run around or snuggle. It's finding the motivation for the dogs, and what works best for the owners."

"I don't really have just one method. It's all praise-based and reward-based, but while I'll tell one owner to do something in group class, I might tell the next owner to do something completely different, depending on their dog and their capabilities with it."

Her methods seem to be working.

It's hard not to be impressed by the half dozen dogs heeling, halting, sitting, staying and dutifully earning their advanced obedience diplomas. Immediately after the class, participants are already asking Hird when she'll be offering a follow-up course. (She expects to have one available before the end of the summer, as well as a course

NATURE WORKS: BETTER CHOICES, BETTER FUTURE LAWN & GARDEN EVENTS AT THE COMOX VALLEY COMPOST EDUCATION CENTRE



Time to Really Get Growing.

The Comox Valley Regional District Compost Education Centre is offering opportunities to get advice from garden professionals.

August 9	10am	Invasive Plants with Caroline Rutledge
August 10	1pm	Workshop: Worm Composting
August 16	10am	Water Conservation with Gayle Bates
August 30	10am	How to save seeds for the future with Lucie Desjarlais

Backyard composters are available for sale at the centre. Composters \$45.00/Aerators \$10.00 (cheque or cash only).

Come visit us at 4795 Headquarters Road in Courtenay, beside the Farmers' Market and across from Vanier High School. Registration is required for workshops. Call 250-898-1086.

Summer hours: Thursday, Friday, Sunday: Noon – 5pm
Saturday: 8am – 1pm

For an updated event schedule or for more information visit www.comoxvalleyrd.ca or call **250-898-1086**



 **Comox Valley**
REGIONAL DISTRICT



Shades

WINDOW COVERINGS

Blinds | Shades | Shutters

Fully mobile service offering custom window coverings at YOUR convenience

Residential / Commercial | Featuring **SHADE-O-MATIC**



Locally owned & operated

Rob Green
Candice Wheeldon
250.898.7530
250.898.7725

www.shadeswindowcoverings.com



Comox **Physiotherapy** Clinic
physiotherapist corporation



www.comoxphysio.com 250-339-6221



Megan Hird with her charges, including her "number one" dog, Kayla (front left). Photo by Boomer Jerritt

VALHALLA PURE
OUTFITTERS
... for the Adventure! ♦ www.vpo.ca

TRAVEL ♦ BACKPACK ♦ CLIMB



The gear is here.

Made in Canada

334-3963
219 5th St. ♦ Courtenay

The BEST gear, the BEST prices – guaranteed!

TREK ♦ TOUR ♦ YOGA ♦ RESCUE

focusing on handling aggressive or fearful dogs.)

"It really shows the depth that you can go with training your dog and how you can establish a really good relationship," says Linda Perron, whose dog Ellie May has just graduated. "There are things she's doing now that she wasn't doing before, and things that I understand in her behaviour that I didn't understand before."

But it's Taz, a three-year-old terrier cross, that's the real story of the day. "He's from the SPCA in Nanaimo," explains Lucienne De Vries, Taz's owner. "He spent his first two years in a back yard. He was not house-trained and he

had no social skills with humans or with other animals. He was a wild animal." The name Taz is actually short for Tasmanian Devil, a moniker he earned with his demonic behaviour.

After his Poochies training, De Vries says, Taz is a different dog. "He has manners now. He listens. He was dominant and never had any control in his life, but now he's totally calm."

Hird has recently rescued another dog due to be euthanized for his aggression with people and dogs. "He didn't have the tools to handle situations when it came to people greeting him and dogs approaching him," says Hird of Rotty, a three-year-old Jack Russell/Miniature Pincher cross.

Thanks to Hird and her dogs, Rotty is now learning how to behave properly in a variety of situations. "I have been doing set ups with him every day to teach him how to interact with people and dogs, always ending with a victory," says Hird, adding that Rotty has gone back to basics and is developing proper social skills and learning "life boundaries."

In the week she has had him, he has "come so far. He is now running free with other dogs and has had many successful visits with dogs and people," says Hird, who will continue to work with Rotty until she feels he is at a level to be re-homed.

"I am sure Rotty will become a great new family member to somebody fairly soon."

"It's never too late to teach on old dog new tricks," says Hird, adding that she recently helped correct some bad behavior in a 12-year-old dog, a geriatric to say the least. Whether it's for a young puppy or an older dog with behavioral issues, Hird's advice is always the same: "Invest the time."

"Commit to the time because it just takes a few little reminders here and there after you commit to that time in the beginning. It's just so nice to be able to have that control when your dog's out in a public place and is listening to you."

"Nothing," she adds, "is more frustrating than when you hear owners yelling and screaming at their dog and the dog doesn't have any idea what the owner's asking them to do, and the owner doesn't understand why the dog's not listening."

If Poochies' success continues, as it seems destined, those kinds of ignorant owners in the Comox Valley may soon become a dying breed. 🐾

Poochies next basic obedience sessions start September 22. Classes are held Monday and Thursday evenings for six weeks. For more information and details about upcoming classes call Megan at 250-898-9022 or visit www.poochies.ca.

Stop by the Poochies and TaG Agility booth at the Comox Valley Fall Fair, August 23-24 at the Courtenay Fairgrounds.

Check out our Pro Shop

For a brand new line of summer clothing...

Capris • Shorts • Tanks • Yoga Pants • Hoodies
Plus clothing by Champion and Brooks

Watch for new classes starting in September:

Spin Classes • Yoga Classes • Boot Camp • Chiselled (advanced weight training)
Call for registration dates and times

FITNESS
EXCELLENCE

Come on in - for the health of fit!

2637 Moray Place, Courtenay • 897-3552 • www.fitex.ca • Mon.-Fri. 5:45 am-9 pm • Sat. 8 am-4 pm • Sun. 9 am-5 pm



Poochies Tips for Successful Dog/Human Relationships

How to Properly Greet a Dog:

The best way to approach a new dog, or a dog you don't know, is to let them come to you—don't force the attention. Crouch down and have the dog come to you—if he doesn't, don't force it. When you do pet the dog, always pet underneath the chin and on the chest—putting your hands on top of the dog's head places too much pressure on the dog. Picture it from their perspective—if a giant came and smacked his hands on your head, how would you feel?

Dog Meets Dog:

Try to introduce your dog politely to other dogs—don't just let them race over and throw themselves at a strange dog. A dog's first greeting should always be a nose-to-bum quick sniff of each other, before it turns into play or 'not interested'.

Always keep an eye on your dog and watch their body language—if your dog or the other dog becomes stiff or turns into a bit of a statue, time to move on. If your dog is unsure or trying to be too bossy, keep your visit short and sweet—a quick sniff and move on. Gradually let the visits get longer. You can't force a friendship when it comes to dogs—some dogs are social butterflies, but not all and people have to accept that. Remember tension only creates problems—try to keep your leash loose at all times. Seek professional advice if you are not comfortable introducing your dog to other dogs—there are ways to manage dog-on-dog aggression.

Jumping:

If your dog jumps up on you, use the word 'OFF', instead of down. A jumping, excited dog is seeking attention—don't give it to them! Turn your head away and don't make eye contact. When they are calm and all four feet are on the ground, say hello and *then* pet them.

You Can Teach an Old Dog New Tricks:

All dogs can benefit from training, no matter what the breed or age. Training gives them confidence, keeps their minds stimulated, conditions and socializes them to other people, dogs, objects and more, and improves the bond between you and your dog.

Think Positive:

Believe your dog can do it—be confident.

Rewarding & Praise:

Remember to use lots of praise and rewards when working with your dog. Even if it's a small effort, make sure you acknowledge it when your dog listens to you, especially at the beginning stages of training. Make training fun for you and your dog, and let them know when they are doing what you ask of them. Your pooch will quickly realize that the training sessions are an opportunity to be lavished with praise if they obey the given commands.

Time Out:

It is important to remain calm and assertive when working with your dog—yelling and getting frustrated doesn't work. Usually the dog will just match your energy and take it up a notch, pushing harder. If necessary, give yourself and your dog a time out to calm down.

No Means Never:

Try not to overuse the "No" when you are making a correction with your dog. Save the word "No" for things that you never want the dog to do: jumping up, biting, and other bad habits.

Obedience is a Family Affair:

Dogs need consistency. Whatever signals or words you use, make sure the whole family or whoever is handling the dog is using the same. Be fair to your dog, who will pick things up much faster if everyone is consistent.

The Benefits of Obedience Training:

- Confidence for you and your dog
- Preserves your dog's life by keeping him stimulated
- Your dog learns that you are the pack leader
- Exercise for dog and owner
- Creates a reliable and trustworthy dog
- Quality time with your dog
- Training in a public area creates a conditioned and socialized dog

Problem Behavior:

Obedience is one of the first steps in fixing problem behavior. When you have the understanding of how to properly communicate with your dog, you then can move on to work on the behavioral issues. Obedience is the foundation on which to build and correct problems.

Above: The Poochies dogs wait patiently to be released from Hird's truck for their walk. Photo by Boomer Jerritt



J · E · W · E · L · L · E · R · S

Downtown Courtenay

250-334-4523

Classic Diamond Hoop Earrings



luxury and grace



New Arrivals...

GEOX FOR KIDS!



Send them
back to
school in
comfort
& style!

Hurry in!
Quantities
are limited.

Available exclusively at:

Comox Shoes

"ON THE AVENUE"

1771 Comox Avenue, Comox · 339-2015