

My Story With Canines

Tony Nila



Introduction

In order to share my story of how I became involved with canines and Wolfdogs, I ultimately have to start from the very beginning of when I first started becoming influenced as a child.

I was raised by a single mother who came here illegally from Central America Guatemala which was quite a struggle for our lifestyle, until my mom was able to obtain her citizenship.

During this time my mother used to clean houses for a living, but had no way of finding transportation and oftentimes would ride a bike from Ventura California to Ojai with a vacuum strapped to her back.

Childcare was difficult, so she often had to take my sister and I to her clients homes with her. Here is where we had to learn to be self-aware, respectful, learning to entertain ourselves while she was House Cleaning. Many times these homes that we would often visit had pets.

Pets and dog breeds that I never dreamt that I would ever be able to own one day. The kind of expensive dogs that you see on TV that were well bred, and cared for. As a child I understood that perhaps owning one of these breeds was just a pipe dream. The reality was that my sister and I would often find stray dogs that we would bring home. We often visited our local shelter to pick up abandoned animals and we soon realized how emotionally traumatized their situation was. Something our parents were not willing to deal with, so often we would return home from school only to realize our family dog was returned to the shelter.

You would think this is where my love of animals began, but it's actually not that kind of a story. This is where my fear of dogs and owning animals began. Although many of my mothers clients owned wonderful pets, there was not as much education on dog training available; it was not even considered an honorable career in the 70s. Back then trainers would charge \$25 a lesson and knowledge was scarce, keep in mind we had no Internet back then. No YouTube, Google etc.

The most horrific memory that I had was being at a barbecue function with my family, and witnessing my sister attacked and bitten in the face by a German Shepherd. There was blood pouring down her face as she stood there in shock and disbelief. I remember every detail leading up to the event. Yet as a child I was unable to articulate or process any of this information. The only thing ingrained in my mind was rushing my sister to the hospital and seeing her undergo stitches squirming in discomfort and pain

Later as parents they quickly started realizing how uncomfortable I became around animals. All kinds but f animals not just dogs, and this upset my mother very much. At the time she had met my stepdad, a former military man. Seeing a young boy grabbing onto his mother every time he saw a dog on the street probably upset him more than it upset my mother as I'm sure he felt embarrassed by my submissiveness. His only desire was to toughen me up.

If I displayed any discomfort my stepfather at the time would force my interaction between me and the dog which always resulted in me getting bit because naturally dogs are uncomfortable with my insecurity. As a result I learn to suppress my fear outwardly, I can only internalize my anxiety because of the fear of being forced to engage with a dog.

It seemed my situation was getting worse. There was a very real possibility that going into adulthood I would be an advocate of anti-pet ownership. Also a good possibility that I would have no desire to have animals in my life at all.

Animals only scared me and brought me discomfort, and in return the anxiety induced my asthma so that it became an emotional health risk to be around animals. Dogs especially.

I wound up in the hospital many times because of the stress that induced my asthma so severely. Common asthma medication and inhalers back then were not effective enough to subside my symptoms.

During this time my parents had a serious talk as to the most cost efficient solution to my problem. We did not have any insurance or any means to find me professional therapy.

Which brings me to my next life event...The moment I owned my first dog!

My father brought home what looked like a giant stuffed teddy bear! A teddy bear that was overly excited to see me, and yet I never perceived it as a threat. I was able to love on this puppy and as a child probably put him through situations that no dog should have to go through, as I knew nothing about caring for animals.

I named my new puppy Loly and she slowly became my new best friend! As she got older her appearance started to change drastically and her size quickly grew. It became apparent that Loly was not gonna be a small dog forever.

As Loly got older her breed started to reveal itself and it was then that my sister and I quickly realized that Loly was a German Shepherd! Which happens to be the same breed that had attacked my sister.

I had no reservations towards Loly and instead I became obsessive with her breed! Come to think of it, being that my step father was a former marine, wanting a German Shepard made sense. It was then that my father turned me onto television shows that Featured German shepherds and movies that my parents allowed us to watch despite the ratings or the appropriateness of that may have not been rated for children.

As time went by it was clear to me that Loly's breed was widely used for police work, and it was then that I thought to myself, it would be so awesome to have a dog that can think for itself and go get help should I need it, or offer me protection when I was at a disadvantage to do so myself.

Because of the type of breed that I had, it's no secret that like most first time working breed owners, they get involved in training that is specifically designed for their breed. In this case protection work, is the direction that Loly took me.

A specific sport called Schutzhund. Schutzhund is a sport designed to test the temperament, health and breed-ability of a future working line. This meant that the K9 had to go through rigorous tests as to its proficiency at being able to track sent, excel in obedience, and be able to read their environment while understanding social cues from their human as to when it is appropriate to bite and when it is not appropriate to bite someone.

During the evolution of the sport the direction of training was taking a turn in the industry. People started having reservations on certain methods and styles of training, often bickering and ridiculing each other as to their knowledge assessment of working with dogs. I entered into the sport at the beginning of a trend that has now taken this world by storm The inception of training methods and styles.

From 1993 to the year 2000 I have had many mentors and became very proficient in traditional-based methods, positive reinforcement, clicker training, e-collar and other training methods that have come and gone.

At one point in my life I was considered what used to be known as a master dog trainer which simply meant you are not a method extremist and not only are you aware of the different approaches to training dogs, but you are proficient in each approach, not just a hobby trainer or dabbling so to speak. Your experience comes from 100% full time work, and not a part time trainer.

During this time it was quite clear to me that almost every method had a flaw and that not all approaches could be used as a cookie-cutter type approach, to all behavioral issues.

The only problem is that for the amount of time it takes one person to master their set of skills, nobody wants to start all over again just to master a completely different approach that will take time for them to become proficient at. It is much easier to dismiss other approaches as flawed rather than experiencing them for yourself as to whether these methods are flawed or whether it is actually the proficiency of the handler or the teacher.

During this time, popular tv shows started to emerge and mainstream training began to take hold. One of the main schools of thought that was constantly preached for many years by the positive only entourage, was that using wolf biology and research to better help understand how to train dogs is highly problematic. You cannot train a dog like a wolf, much like you shouldn't train a chimpanzee like a human. Other positive mantras were you cannot train a killer whale with a pinch collar, so this caused animal behavior knowledge to become a thing of the past. Mainstream dog training was now about conditioning animals to perform tricks and trick obedience became the wave of the future.

I will be the first to admit I also hopped in the same boat, which is the reason why I am so proficient at clicker training. But it dawned on me that dog training in general regardless of methods and strategies all have a flaw, all of them. It was my goal to find the solution to that flaw.

Over the years I became obsessive trying to crack this puzzle piece to make me more proficient and a better version of myself while working with animals. This eventually burnt me out and caused me to take a long break working with clients and their dogs.

During this time I started re-evaluating my approach and started working on behavior modification with Wolfdogs. Why Wolfdogs you ask?

Simply because I was brainwashed by other trainers stating you can't work with wolves the same way with dogs. Well If that is so... what do you do in the case of working with a Wolfdog?

As I started working with Wolfdogs, I noticed a very similar trend amongst owners of these majestic beautiful animals. I realize that they were also brainwashed with a belief system that you cannot train wolves and wolfdogs like a domestic dog. So the lack of working with their own Wolfdogs created behaviors not all that unfamiliar to behavioral issues that dogs carry with them throughout life. Except for the community of Wolfdog Owners had a good excuse. That excuse was, they're not dogs so you can't train them as such.

After working with Wolfdogs I realized the importance of understanding the difference between beliefs and knowledge.

Knowledge is the education you receive from experience by knowing things that you have done through trial and error over and over. Beliefs however are stories, theories handed to you with the faith the information you're receiving is in fact knowledge. In order to feel comfortable with the knowledge that is handed to you, you must have what the religious definition of faith is. Without faith none of this knowledge will make any sense and many things can be dispelled as myth.

I had realized that growing up in the dog training industry the direction and the future of our canines is mainly based in beliefs and faith. Even scientific research or independent research has become popular and mainstream without ever being peer reviewed by a university

I quickly realize after working some time with Wolfdogs they most certainly can be trained like dogs! Whether that's clicker training or positive enforcement. I've even seen difficult wolfdogs E collar trained to be off leash and behave similarly to your every day dogs you see at the dog park. As a matter of fact many zoo staff utilize operant conditioning and training to condition animals to be able to help with handling during exams, medication and even preparation for surgery.

During this time it became clear to me that other trainers were also connecting the dots, but during this time I had a very important tool under my belt that gave me a competitive advantage over other professional colleagues. My advantage was my sensory processing disorder, my sensitivity to being overly sensitive to my environmental surroundings and overly empathetic.

Having these attributes helps me with observable behavior and the ability to recognize patterns. There's an old saying that says the definition of insanity is continuing to do the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

As one of my most recent best friends and colleague Darwin had pointed out, you're repeating your old mistakes and applying them to wolves and Wolfdogs. It was at this moment that I realized the huge difference between our domesticated breeds and wild candid. What is the difference you ask?

The big difference is that they know how to fend for themselves, take care of themselves, keep themselves from danger, keep their young from danger, or are hyper aware of their environment and are less reactive than a domestic breed.

Our domestic breeds, much like their owners, can be dropped in the middle of a forest and will slowly die as they have no common sense when it comes to survival skills. As a matter of fact even common sense among humans is turning out to be less common.

Observing this did not take a genius to know that animals in the animal kingdom are not trained by humans. Orcas and dolphins are some of the most intelligent creatures on this earth and biologist see remarkable decision-making and problem-solving skills all the time. Most people are absolutely unaware, as to the capabilities and cognitive abilities of wild animals! Abilities that our common pets don't have.

As a result our pets need to be micromanaged and controlled through obedience commands and constant supervision.

Some global influential trainers also know this about their own dogs, in denial that their own training systems are flawed. They are so willing to accept defeat or make excuses.

As so many of you have probably observed. Most homeless people have off leash dogs that have required zero training to learn how to function and be a calm member of society.

So why is this anomaly taking place? And what can Wolfdogs and observable behavior teach us about our own pets.

This is where my story has a silver lining. I would like to admit that i did not solve this puzzle piece all on my own. Truth is, that somebody in the industry had been following me and watching over my career. Because of their kindness, they quickly pointed out to me how important latent learning is to wild animals and how our domestic pets are not latent learners, they are operant learners. Therefore our pets do not even know how to cross the street, or how to self police, not knowing how their energy affects those around them.

Once you're able to solve this latent form of learning, and how it applies to everything your dog experiences from puppyhood to adult. It becomes painfully obvious that we should have never gotten in the habit of training our dogs to begin with. As a parent of a child, it is not your job to train children, it is your job to raise your children so they can make proper decisions for themselves when they leave the nest.

Training often becomes confrontational whether you're using a positive only approach or a traditional approach. Learning can be stressful despite your style or method. But natural latent learning will dissolve your dog's dependency on constantly needing your direction to be a well behaved dog.

-Tony Nila