Animal Trainers and Handlers

Perhaps you lived in a rural area and grew up familiar with horses and how to handle them. Or you may have been fascinated by the lion tamer at the circus or Lassie in the movies. You may have even performed the miraculous--taught a cat to jump through a hoop!

If any of these descriptions fit you, there are opportunities awaiting you in the field of animal training. Again, you will have to decide which animals you prefer to deal with and which kind of training you would be best at. Then you can set your course accordingly.

Your natural talents and abilities must, of course, be honed into actual technical skills, which can be acquired in several ways. For some, college courses will be the key to successful employment in animal training. Others learn training skills in the military or law enforcement agencies. Still others start out as volunteers or apprentices to a professional trainer or work at shows to gain experience. Others have combined these methods and natural talents to create a career since no strict professional or educational standards have been established for trainers.

Dog Trainers and Handlers

Probably most of the instructors in the field today are dog trainers. Because of the popularity of dogs as pets, trainers are called upon to teach them how to behave and follow owners’ instructions. Training methods may vary, but generally the pet will learn not to chew up the furniture or articles of clothing, not to sleep on the furniture, or not to run into the street. They will also learn how to walk on a leash and to sit, stay, and lie down on command. Puppies also need to be housebroken.

Some trainers deal exclusively with the animal that is boarded at the training facility during the training period. Others conduct classes with owners and pets together. Some trainers work for larger training centers; others are self-employed. Some work full time as trainers; others, only part time. Those who are full-time, self-employed trainers may supply other services, such as boarding and selling food and training supplies. They may also provide counseling to people about to purchase a pet dog and give advice on nutrition for the pet.

Gaining Education and Experience as a Dog Trainer

It is possible to become a dog trainer by combining your basic aptitude with on-the-job training. If you feel that animal training is the career you want to pursue, you could begin as a part-time volunteer at a training facility. The facility could be a larger training academy or a smaller private business. Different kinds of facilities may have different qualifications for employment.

They may, for instance, require that you have previous experience with animals or animal-related education, or they may prefer to train you totally in their own methods. As an apprentice, you may be required to work for up to five years under the supervision of an experienced trainer. Since there are no professional standards or licensing procedures for animal trainers, you should exercise extreme caution in selecting a trainer to apprentice with. You should investigate their training methods and philosophy; including how and when they physically punish disobedient animals. Your professional reputation as a trainer may well hinge upon your choice of instructor.

Because of the lack of defined standards in the training field and the risk of choosing an incompetent instructor, more and more people who choose animal training are opting for some kind of college education related to the job. College course work might include psychology, animal behavior, animal science, or veterinary technology as a basis. This formal education will enhance your on-the-job training and put you in a better position for employment.

Attending dog training academies is yet another route to employment as a trainer. These courses are usually fairly short, however, with the trainee acting largely as a kennel attendant. There is usually just some very basic instruction in actual animal training. You should be wary of these academies because they are typically quite expensive and are usually not accredited.

Training Assist Dogs
As a dog trainer, your instruction is not limited to pet behavior problems. You may, for example, want to specialize in training seeing-eye dogs to help blind people lead more independent lives. There are only a few places in this country that train seeing-eye dogs, so the competition for job openings is fierce. In order to qualify for employment as a seeing-eye dog trainer, you must be physically strong and have previous work experience with animals. It is preferable to have an educational background in veterinary technology, animal science, or to have work experience in a kennel, hospital, or farm. No frivolous people need apply!

Most people are familiar with seeing-eye dogs, which are now quite common. But deaf people need help, too—in getting around, waking up on time, and knowing when the telephone or doorbell rings. Even such basic security devices as smoke detectors, sirens, and fire alarms are geared to people who can hear. Life can be dangerous and lonely for people who can't hear these sounds and whose freedom of movement is thus restricted.

Enter the dog who acts as its owner's ears! These dogs must be able to differentiate sounds and signal the owner appropriately, according to whether the sound is an alarm clock or smoke detector. They have to be alert and energetic, healthy and vigorous. Trainers of such dogs need both people and animal skills in order to match owner to dog and consider the individual personalities and needs of both.

Often assist dogs have been rescued from the pound. They usually go through training for more than a year with a hearing-impaired handler before handler and dog are able to work as a team. Assist Dogs International, a professional organization, can help you find the right training program for you and inform you of required qualifications.

Training Working Dogs

The U.S. Customs Service, the military, law enforcement, and other government agencies employ animal trainers and handlers to train animals, mainly dogs, for such tasks as detecting specific scents at border crossings or airport terminals, finding injured people trapped in wreckage caused by earthquakes or other disasters, and even attacking enemies. These agencies usually train their own personnel and thus often require no specialized education or training experience for employment. The dogs that are trained as guard dogs, either for law enforcement agencies or private owners, must have obedience training first. The best dogs for this type of training should be aggressive but obedient. Therefore, you would probably be working with such breeds as German shepherds, Doberman pinschers, or rottweilers.

These dogs usually begin training with the handler at the kennel at the age of three to four months. Then they are brought to the actual worksite to continue their training. Dogs who guard homes should be good barkers, since that is what usually deters burglars; however, they must be gentle and loving pets, too. But guard-dog trainers will train the dogs to bite and attack on command if their work calls for that type of action.

Handling Show Dogs

Dog handlers are also used to show animals at dog shows. They usually work with individual dogs. Aspiring show dog handlers must have several years of experience as owners and exhibitors of purebreds in order to qualify for apprenticeship with an experienced handler. As professional show handlers, they often show dogs for those who do not know how or are too busy to show their own animals.

Employment Outlook

The demand for qualified obedience instructors is good within the public and private sectors, even though there are so many unqualified people in the field. Since trainers need not be licensed or certified in most places, anyone can open up a shop in any neighborhood in this country. If you choose this field, then, you should find a qualified and reputable trainer to apprentice with, get thorough on-the-job training, take some job-related courses, and build up a good reputation in your community.

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As an employee of a federal or local governmental agency, your salary will be set according to your job category, and you can count on a fair amount of job security. Self-employed trainers can set their own fees and hours, which generally tend to be long and irregular.

A Professional Dog Trainer

Jim Morgan, a professional dog trainer in a large mid-western city, opened up his own training facility in May 1989 after running his business from the back of a Chevette! He used to load up his little car with dogs of all sizes and bring them to the park to train. During this period, he was trying to build up a full-time business, based largely on a lot of natural talent and a real desire to turn talent into a livelihood. He was not sure that anyone could really earn training dogs, since he found training dogs so easy and had a hard time believing that anyone couldn't do it.

Jim thinks that the demand for professional obedience training for pets came about when women had to work outside the home. In the traditional family, Mom housebroke the family dog and taught it to sit, fetch, heel, and walk on a leash.

Now Jim and his wife and children live upstairs and the dogs they train and board live downstairs in what Jim considers to be the perfect arrangement—the dogs are never alone and he doesn't have to worry about them if they should get sick or need attention. He specializes in obedience training, but because of his customers' fears of break-ins and street crime, about 10 percent of his business is devoted to protection training.

Jim has evolved his own unique training methods and style. And since he is self-employed, he can set his own fees. Although he did not set out to be a trainer, Jim thinks that people in high school or college should consider taking biology, animal science, or any pre-veterinary courses to prepare for their career as a trainer. And he believes that anyone who wants to work with dogs has to go to dog shows, attend obedience training classes, work in kennels, read dog-related publications, and talk to everyone he or she can in the field. He would urge anyone who is considering this career to volunteer or work part-time caring for dogs, observing other trainers, and asking questions.

Be Careful about Getting Education

Jim is fully aware of the lack of professional standards in the field and warns anyone who wants to learn how to train dogs to be very careful about false claims and deceptive practices.

Dog-related publications carry advertisements for dog training academies and schools, but Jim thinks that if you decide to attend these courses, you should find out the names of recent graduates and whether they are presently working as trainers. In other words, since there are no accrediting standards for training facilities for dog trainers, you at least should find out if those who have completed the course are competent and employable. According to Jim, the National Association of Obedience Instructors is now working toward setting professional standards for accreditation and certification of licensed trainers and that this probably will be the norm for the future. People considering dog training as a career should keep up with this trend toward professionalization so that they can fulfill the requirements set forth in those standards.

If you are thinking about training dogs for a living, you also need to be aware that you will be dealing with human owners. That part of the job is the most difficult for Jim and is why he insists that the dog stay with him for a two-week training period without the owner. During that time, the owner is only allowed to view the dog at a distance, for example, from the car while the dog is being trained in the park. Jim believes in training every dog individually and that rapport must be established with the animal before the actual commands are taught. With some dogs, Jim achieves almost instant rapport; other dogs catch on only at the last minute.

Jim prefers to train dogs when they are young while they still have nothing that needs to be unlearned. After the dog is trained, he offers weekly owners' classes to reinforce training or to teach the dogs new commands.

Jim has never had to advertise his services-satisfied customers let others know of his skill and pass it on by word of mouth to family, friends, and neighbors. He has trained thousands of dogs and suggests that to make a living in dog training, you must love dogs, love veterinary careers, and love working with people.
friends, and neighbors. He has trained thousands of dogs and suggests that to make a living in dog training, you must love dogs, love working with them, and be prepared to work long and hard. But in spite of the hard work, so far Jim wouldn’t dream of having it any other way.

**Horse Trainers**

Those who choose to train horses take many of the same entry paths as dog trainers: apprenticeship under a professional trainer, educational background in animal science or technology, or experience as a volunteer or hobbyist. Once you have entered one of these paths, you need to determine where and what you want to train.

If you decide to come up through the ranks, you will be able to learn in farms, stables, or racetracks. On the other hand, a college education will train you in many of the skills you will need and give you some practical experience. It may also improve your existing skills.

You will have to decide on the kind of horse you feel most comfortable with—saddle horse, quarter horse, Lippizan, among others. You will then want to decide whether you want to train horses for steeplechase, dressage, racing, or show jumping. With any of these choices, you also should be able to work well with people—the riders who are also being trained and the owners of the horses.

All of these options require determination, endurance, patience, physical strength, and, of course, a love of horses. Horse training is different from dog training because the emphasis is not on behavior or protection, but rather on performing specific tasks for competition and prizes. Race horses, for example, long part of our cultural scene, require specialized training because the owner’s prestige and often livelihood is at stake. Amateur equestrians depend on the horse’s training for international competitions that may lead to professional standing. And all of these events and competitions depend on the competency of the trainer who will prepare the horse and rider for the specific purpose they are capable of and designate as their goal.

**Something Different: A Cat Trainer**

For most of us, dog and horse training seem familiar. We know that dogs and horses love to be trained to perform, protect, and compete; but what about cats? "Never!" you say.

But if you really want to train your cat to play a toy piano, roll over and play dead, sit up and beg, or jump through a hoop, you might want to know about George Ney in Wauconda, Illinois. George was hit hard by the oil crisis of the 1970s. When the housing industry foundered, his business as a tile and carpeting salesman also began to fall apart.

Being a creative person, however, George used some of that unused carpeting and started to build cat houses, including condos, duplexes, and ranch styles, as well as couches, chairs, lamps, and tables. In order to sell them, he brought them to cat shows where he became moderately successful and fairly well known for his imaginative designs.

Eventually, and instinctively, George had begun to try some basic tricks with one of his cats. Surprisingly, the cat learned to roll over, to beg, and to shake hands. When he told people about this performing cat, they all laughed in disbelief. Until they saw it for themselves! And soon more and more people were seeing it, too.

George began putting on volunteer demonstrations at local establishments and then bringing the act to cat shows, where he and the cat put on a show and sold some cat furniture, too. Eventually he taught the cat more and more tricks, such as sitting in a high chair, rolling a barrel, and "answering" a toy telephone. He added more cats and travelled most weekends with his feline troupe, logging about 40,000 miles a year. They appeared in malls, convention halls, schools, nursing homes, on television, and in commercials. And they're still going strong.

**How to Train Your Cat**

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George's training methods and style are based on love and fun. They include gentleness, pacing, and patience. George has learned that cats' attention spans are not long. Training sessions don't last more than ten minutes an hour, but are held as many times during the day as possible, between the first and last priority of any cat-naps. Working with natural feline abilities, such as jumping and rolling, as well as a love of petting, George devised ways to make cats respond to certain cues. He also learned to reduce the larger trick down into its simpler component parts.

Some of the problems with training cats often originate in humans' misunderstanding of cats. They are really not as aloof and independent as some think, but they certainly do not have the inclination to get training as dogs and horses do. George believed that you should start with a neutered cat who already knows how to use a litter pan. You start training a cat with simple tasks such as using a scratching post or staying off the furniture. Catnip and a water spray are usually enough to teach most cats what you require as acceptable behavior.

To learn tricks, your cat should be at least eight weeks old and enjoy being touched and petted. You need to pay attention and let the cat give you cues as to its fatigue, boredom, or lack of interest in any particular trick. Repetition, praise, and a training table to practice on are essential components in the training of cats.

If you are planning to make a living with your trained cats, you also have to be sure that your cats can travel well and can adapt to the changes of life on the road. Cats are usually very territorial, and can be very upset by changes in their environment, including noises. You might consider training more animals than you actually bring with you to any given show, so that they will have a resting period between trips.

Since there is no market for watch cats or any need for cats to protect home or property, training cats to perform should be considered a method of bonding between owner and cat and a source of pleasure for both.

George Ney, in his unique capacity, decided to make a career of it. He literally created this career out of economic necessity and love, and thus had no previous formal training or education either in making cat furniture or training cats. But as a businessman, he needs to be concerned with publicity and promotion, booking and scheduling, travel and veterinarian expenses. Being affiliated with professional associations such as the American Cat Fanciers' Association, Canadian Cat Association, International Cat Association, and Cat Fanciers' Association is very helpful in such a career. Cat periodicals tell George when and where national shows are taking place and local papers and bulletins inform him of local events and organizations that may be sources of future business.

As with many other careers having to do with animals, definite educational and training criteria and standards need not be established in advance. Sometimes you just have to combine natural talent, economic necessity, hard work, and love of animals to create a career path that provides you with economic security, a real sense of satisfaction, pleasure, and fun. Ask George Ney. He did it.

Career as an Animal Trainer

You may decide to apply your training talents exclusively to the performing arts, such as movies, television commercials and shows, special events and performances, circuses, and carnivals. The animals you might train would include dogs, cats, horses, elephants, lions, and tigers. Often zoological parks or aquariums have performing animals as part of their exhibits and trained animals may also appear at trade fairs and shows, parties, and community events.

You may work as an independent contractor who hires out to movie or television producers, zookeepers, aquarium curators, or show organizers to teach specialized tricks to specific animals. Or a particular animal may be used as the regular representative of a particular product or service in a continuing series of television commercials.

As an independent contractor, you may set your own per diem or per performance fee. Fees will vary according to whether you are performing at a children's party or for a commercial or movie. If one of your animals has a major role in a movie or is the star of a commercial series, your fee might be quite high. If you are employed by a particular institution on a regular basis, you will receive an annual salary with normal benefits.
Trainers may also decide to write books or articles or even put together audio- or videotapes on successful training techniques and unusual experiences. They also may combine their training skills with other services, such as counseling, nutritional advice, kennel operation, or pet product sales.

Some trainers may use their experience and skill as a stepping-stone to other positions within their field or to open up their own franchise operation or combination shop. As you gain experience and a solid reputation, you will begin to train the trainees or apprentices. And as professional organizations start up, you may become involved in their work.

These choices are basically up to you, according to your inclinations and capabilities. Decide which animal you are most comfortable with—dogs, cats, horses, wild animals. Do you want to train them for specific skills? Do you want to work for another person or be an independent contractor? Are you willing to be on call for the animals every day, all day? Would you like to have a combination business, such as trainer/kennel operator? Do you want to train guide dogs or police dogs?

The choices are there; you just need to make them. But there's one thing about yourself you should be sure of before you decide to become either a trainer or handler: you must love to work with animals.