

Training & Working with the Chesapeake Bay Retriever - By Lani Scheman

When working with any breed of dog, the genetic heritage of that dog must be taken into consideration if you wish to achieve maximum success. Maximum success is a term that can be applied equally to the field trial dog, the obedience competitor, or the family companion. Each arena has its set of expectations and all of those expectations require the respect and understanding that is the foundation of a good working relationship. The genetic heritage that the Chesapeake Bay retriever brings to this relationship is one of a dog bred for intense and focused work, for the ability to think and problem solve for himself, for an enormous amount of endurance that allows the dog to ignore extreme conditions as well as pain, and for the tendency to guard objects and people. He was a true working dog developed by market hunters who needed a tough dog for a very specific purpose related to their livelihood. This is a very different animal from your attentive herding dog, your feisty terrier, or even your Labrador and Golden retrievers. Intelligence itself plays less a part in the equation of success than working well with the traits most likely inherited by your dog.

To begin, this article is not a primer in how to teach the standard commands to your dog. That is best achieved through a competent obedience trainer. The purpose of this article is to examine the various traits you might see exhibited by your Chesapeake and to use those traits to your advantage.

When discussing Chesapeakes, most people assume that they are quite stubborn. It's very common to hear the cliché "I heard you had to train them with a two by four". Stubborn dogs can often be created through poor training methods. But before exploring that idea, stubbornness itself deserves some discussion. Think back to the genetic heritage of your dog- intense working ability and endurance and the ability to think for him-self. When those qualities are working for you and everything falls into place with a command performance, we call it "perseverance". When the dog's thinking for himself is not quite the same thing we had in mind, we call it "stubbornness". Dogs are not as fine-tuned as we would like and one trait is often an extension or extreme of the other. I would argue that perseverance and stubbornness are on a continuum. To avoid stubborn behavior, find what motivates your dog the most and work it into your routine. If your dog is food motivated or a retrieving fool, find ways to present that stimulus. Many Chesapeakes will work hard at obedience commands just knowing that they can "mouth" a tennis ball every once in a while. Interspersing free play with happy retrieves into the training routine often keeps a dog interested in working for a long time. Even with daily routines, a dog that balks at getting into the back seat of a car or jumps around biting his leash can be instantly "out-foxed" by tossing a treat into the back seat (simultaneously repeating your command as he jumps in after the treat so you build a response pattern) or presenting a desired toy that he can hold as an alternative to holding the leash. The key is to avoid power struggles and to offer an alternative to the undesired behavior that elicits a different response.

If you engage in power struggles with a Chesapeake you will not win. Does this mean that the Chesapeake is, indeed, a stubborn dog? Not necessarily. Most Chesapeakes are willing and easy to train but certain methods or failures to read the dog will bring out the stubborn side of that amazing perseverance. The main cause of disobedience in any dog is that the dog truly does not understand what we expect. That sounds simplistic but it is very often the case. Just because a dog seems to understand a command because he has performed it a few times consistently does not necessarily mean he understands it the way we intend it to be understood. For example, "sit" does not mean, "when I feel like it" but every time, everywhere, no matter what the competing stimulus. Most trainers are lax- they repeat commands over and over yet do not require the dog to actually perform. They will expect a dog to behave one way in a certain context yet be indifferent to the same behavior in another. Does that mean we are bad people? Of course it doesn't. But what it does mean is that we have no right to have a temper tantrum and be harsh with a dog if it does not obey a command it has been taught without consistency. Chesapeakes seem to have some sense of fairness. If they know they are being corrected fairly, they tend to fall in line. If they do not understand a correction, they tend to shut down and become stubborn. I have seen Chessies flatten themselves out on the ground and refuse to work and I have also seen them so excited that they cannot obey a command. In both situations, I have seen owners hit or kick dogs in an attempt to get obedience and it has *never* worked. (Remember the "impervious to pain and extreme conditions" part of the genetic heritage? Do not risk injuring your dog through loss of temper!) On the other hand, Chesapeakes will take advantage of you by watching for your "mistakes". I had a dog that would never leave the car if I gave the command "wait"; he was 100% obedient. However, if I forgot to give him the "wait" command, he would bolt out of the car at the first opportunity. Did he understand that I expected him to wait? Of course- but he got me on a technicality.

There are body language cues that will tell you that your dog may not understand what you want. Chesapeakes have very expressive ears. An ear folded back or out to the side is usually a clue that the dog is somewhat stressed. Chesapeakes also make more eye contact with their owners than most dogs; an avoidance of eye contact can mean stress or confusion. Sometimes just stopping and staring at you means "I don't know what to do". All of these behaviors can also mean the dog has just had enough and needs to take a break. Please don't ruin a good dog through force. Quit for the day by taking the dog back to an easy part of a lesson that he can succeed at and end on a high note or break the difficult part of a lesson into a smaller task that you can build on and show him what you want. Dogs often do not know what we expect without showing. Shouting a command over and over to a dog that really doesn't understand it makes that dog look stubborn when perhaps he is not. It also

proves to him that he doesn't have to obey you if he hears a command repeated many times with no follow-up through enforcing that command with appropriate corrections.

Sometimes Chesapeakes just have to do it their way. Is that stubbornness? Think back again to the genetic heritage: a dog who thinks for himself and solves problems. A Chesapeake will try to figure things out for himself, he tends to "anticipate" what the trainer wants, which can get him into trouble, and sometimes he just seems to think that his way is the best way. (Occasionally it is but we don't have to go there.) In fieldwork, Chesapeakes have a tendency to locate and return their retrieves their own way. They have a tendency to "blink" marks (take an accurate line to a fall then by-pass it to play the field a while), cheat water marks by bank running, and break before being released to retrieve. They display these behaviors even after diligent training would have you believe that the dog understands what is expected. Before we blame the dog, we again must look at the independent thinker we are working with. Gentle, firm, and consistent redirection without allowing the dog to get his "pay-off" (reinforcement) for misbehaving is much more effective than showing how frustrated you are. Unfortunately, Chesapeakes seem to get some pleasure from watching a frustrated trainer have a tantrum so try to avoid a show of emotion- it can reinforce naughtiness. The more dominance a dog displays (Chesapeakes are known to be dominant) seems to have a direct relationship to how much pleasure he derives from frustrating his trainer!

There are other issues in training that are a direct result of genetic heritage. For a dog that has been bred to problem solve and think for himself, drill is meaningless. Your Chesapeake will get bored rather quickly with endless heeling patterns and command repetitions. ("Fake" yawns, sudden bursts of leaping and playing, or rolling over on the back and kicking the legs are all indications of boredom). The way to a better performance is to work problem-solving games (find the hidden toy) or retrieving exercises in with obedience commands. Once commands have a certain meaning or payoff, the dog usually performs in an alert and expectant manner. Household manners are also best taught this way. Rather than teaching "sit" in a vacuum, have the dog sit each time you put on his leash for a walk. Have him sit each time you are about to put his bowl down for dinner. Have him sit before you open the door to go on an outing. The commands themselves become reinforcing when there is a context to make them meaningful. Always keep lessons short enough to avoid the "I'm bored so I'm going to screw up" pattern but long enough to challenge his ability. Know your own dog's threshold.

Another training issue related to the Chesapeake's genetic heritage concerns his relationship to the trainer. The Chesapeake has always largely been a one-person dog. He may love all the members of his family but he will bond and respond to one person better than the others. The person he bonds to will be the one he responds to in training and he may ignore commands from anyone else. He may ignore any kind of overture from others and some dogs seem to resent being handled on a leash by anyone save their owner. This makes him frustrating to pro-trainers and Chesapeakes have received a "bad rap" from the professional dog training community. There is nothing more insulting than being ignored by a Chesapeake; they have an uncanny ability to look through a person as if he didn't even exist. For people adopting an adult dog, there is a caution to make sure that the dog has truly bonded to you and consistently obeys you before taking risks that may jeopardize the dog's safety.

In summary, the Chesapeake is a complex dog with many characteristics that seem to be at odds with one another. Physically tough, he is often a very sensitive animal who is easily overcorrected with harsh training. He has an excellent memory for what he learns, for what frustrates his owner, and for any trauma that occurs during the course of his learning. Being fair with him is essential. He needs gentle, firm, and consistent handling to be his best. He needs to be mentally challenged in training and in his daily routine or he can become bored and get into mischief. He will "sass" his trainer at times and try to do things his way just to see if it "works". He lives in constant hope that everything is negotiable and that you will someday see it his way. He needs reminders that the rules have not changed. However, he also thrives on working together and really engages. Sometimes, we do have to accept the little quirks in the way he does things and pick our battles. In all your training endeavors, never forget to praise. Each little accomplishment should be greeted with enthusiasm by the trainer and a job well done should always be acknowledged, even if it's the thousandth time.

To be successful with a Chesapeake, the trainer needs to bring his own "genetic heritage" to the equation. The Chesapeake trainer needs to be a flexible person who is intrigued and challenged by his dog's intelligence and who is willing to work with that intelligence and personality rather than to dominate it. The Chesapeake trainer needs to have a sense of humor, a creative streak, controlled emotions, and perceptive observation skills when it comes to behavior. If you are an owner who feels more comfortable with a submissive attitude and absolute obedience from your dog, do yourself a favor and get a Golden Retriever.

Redlion Kennel - Chesapeake Bay Retrievers and Labradors
Jane Pappler, 7 Easton Way, Southampton, NJ 08088
609 859-3570-H - Email: NoFleas@aol.com - <http://redlionkennel.com>