

When I became the proud but humble owner of my first Bolognese, I thought I knew just what to do.

Months of research had told me what type of dog he would be, the grooming involved, the exercise needed and the general personality. What sort of health problems to expect, his life expectancy and the breed standard were all closely looked at and committed to memory. I hardly bothered the breeder for fear she would change her mind at the last minute, having discovered someone far better equipped to care for this special little dog. I must have held my breath for over 3 months just waiting for the day we could bring him home.

The first few months were a whirlwind of getting used to new routines and each other. Showing him off to friends and family and the neighbourhood. Suddenly we realised he had received only home schooling for the some of the most informative months of his life. We needed to find a proper school for him and enrol fast.

We shopped around, asked friends and family and finally made our choice. It was the closest one to us and had a great website. Not the 2 best reasons but what the heck, we could always move on.

It was decided I would be the trainer as I spent the most time with him. Now, I'm not the most people orientated person you'll ever meet so added to the pups general excitement at something new was added my own trepidation. Not what you would call a calm assertive atmosphere. Nor was school.

Dog owners fall into 2 categories – dog handler and dog lover. At puppy school the difference is obvious to the experienced eye. The dog handlers are followed by their charges a nose behind their left heel never exceeding the walking speed of the handler, quick to heel, responding to any command learnt. Dog lovers are usually chasing their charges around the field shouting the dogs name hysterically, pleading with them to heel, whilst being shouted at by the trainer not to chase.

I spent the first 15 minutes of the day in the exercise yard with several other people joining us as they arrived. Some had been there for a few weeks, others a full 8 weeks and some like us just embarking on our new adventure with our pups, nervous and full of expectation. It's amazing just how quickly you can adapt to seeing various breeds and size of pup descend in an avalanche on top of your dog and not rush in screaming at the top of your voice to catapult them bodily into the next field to rescue him. Trust me, it takes a lot of self control. New dogs to school can often be identified by their owners, rooted to the spot with a fixed smile and a glassy stare.

The class begins. Collars in the high position, leads held in both hands with no tension, dog on your left side. Suddenly your dog is blanking you completely, fixating on the Pointer cos his owner has such a high voice. (The shattering glass can be heard 100 metres away.) You are getting a headache. The dog that the owner assures you is toy driven and not treat driven is trying to tear your coachies bag open because you made the

mistake of bringing too much chicken this week. The Sheltie, a very shy bundle of nerves is cowering in the corner because one of the Labradors has decided he's in love. Your puppy is being subjected to a barrage of commands involving sitting, staying, downing, coming and recalling on all sides and is beginning to look a little confused. He seems to be hard of hearing and developing an interest in the handler to your left. No amount of chicken will get him to do what you want. You can see the trainer looking down at him. You feel yourself cringing. The class ends with a bit of light agility. The pups streak through the tunnel and over the jumps. Your puppy leaps forward, stops, sniffs the area and the humiliation is complete. He has committed the cardinal sin. He pee'd on the agility equipment. The trainer stares hard at you both.

Over the next 16 weeks I subjected us both to the same basic training. He responds to a very high pitched voice, mine is much lower, but is praised by all for his ability to sit for 60 seconds or more not moving when told to stay. (No one's realised that if I sit him facing the exercise yard he would sit and watch the other dogs for hours.) Some weeks go like a dream, others like a Stephen King novel. I particularly love the windy days when all the handlers at some point in the day, grasp their puppy by the snout and shoving their faces into the pups shout – Will you focus and watch me?! The number of times I've had to rattle the tunnel to get my pup out before the trainer could look down and see him peeing... Then when we started to release the lead he realised if he was especially quick he could shoot right past me and out into the field looking back with a grin on his face. He was usually streaking past the Alsatian that only had to see the colour black before collapsing on the floor, howling hysterically. His handler told us he was attacked by a black dog as a younger puppy. What type of black dog she didn't specify. Must have been big though.

He developed a crush on a Red Setter and would spend the whole time under the Setters legs, head up sniffing and yes, licking – much to the handlers disgust. That friendship never blossomed. Neither did the one with the Border terrier's handler after my puppy swiped him across the face. The terrier had made a weird little squeaking sound. I think he wanted him to do it again. There was the Rottweiler that hated dogs who mine loved dearly-and always up for a challenge chased him . The Rotty was deemed too dangerous for puppy school and left glaring at everyone.

We were told he couldn't stay any longer in puppy school as he's too old, to continue would mean he being left in La La land. It was a sad time, dogs don't socialise the way puppies do.

It's been the most frustrating, exasperating, nerve shredding, embarrassing fun I've ever had.

Roll on Elementary school!