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# DOG Sport

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## Water Sports Highlighted:

- Splashdogs
- Teaching A Novice Dog To Swim

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By Deborah Lee Miller-Riley

# I can lead my dog to water, *but how do I teach her to swim?*



Well, it's not so much about teaching a dog how to swim as it is about supporting and motivating her and setting her up to succeed at learning how to balance and paddle on top of a liquid field. It's like learning to ride a bike. Someone may have held the seat until you were on and falling off may have slowed you down, but it was your persistent DESIRE to ride that taught you to balance while peddling. All great canine swimmers

began with the DESIRE to play in the water. Lucky for us, desire for water play can be nurtured. So swim coaches, here are some tips to increase your canine's splash desire and balance:

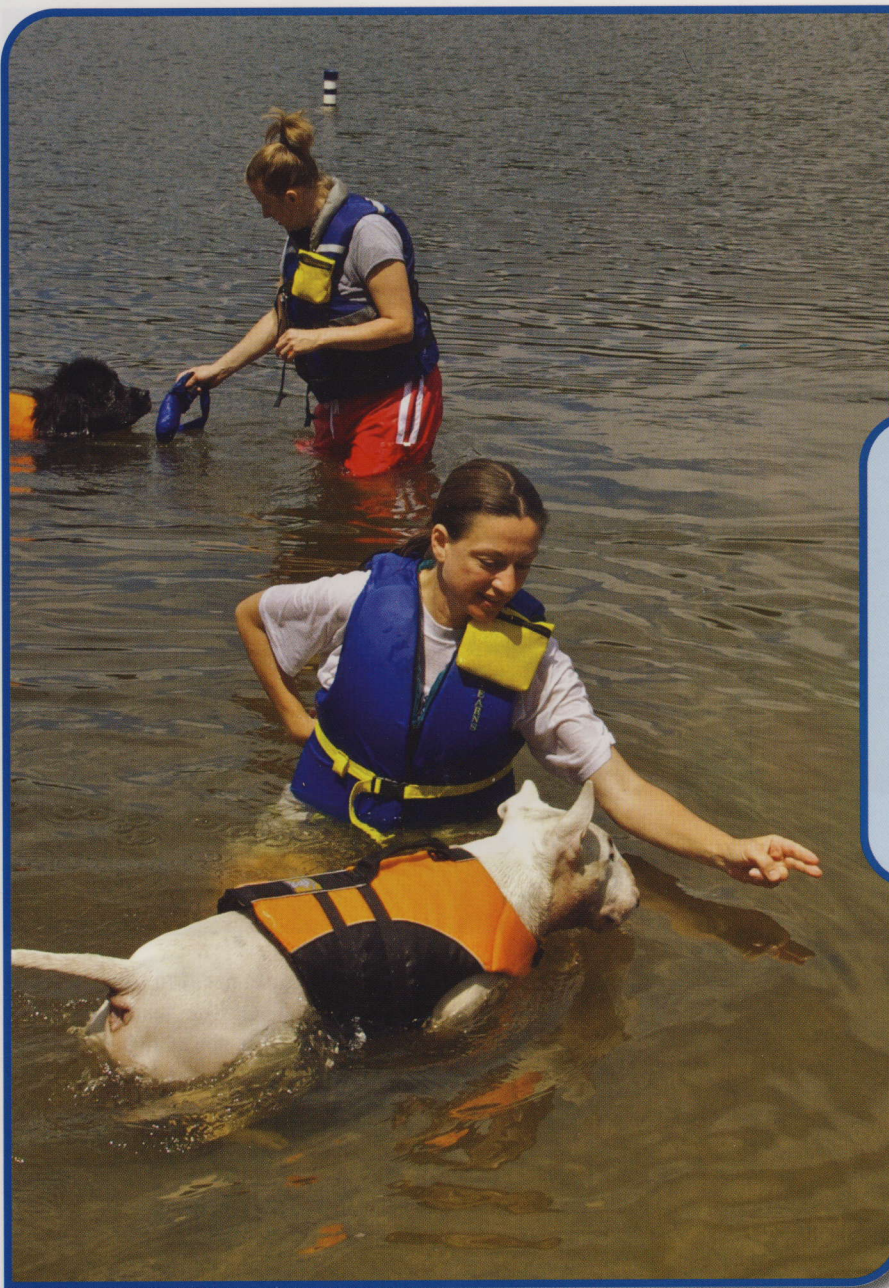
## **Physical Safety Promotes Emotional Safety**

The trainer's job is to create an environment in which the dog feels safe to play and explore and welfare risks are removed or reduced. Get the dog fitted

for a quality fear insurance plan — USE a canine life jacket. Remove all throat collars to keep that airway risk free. Avoid dangerous long lines in the water; instead use a 3-4 ft piece of brightly colored floating line that attaches to the dog's life jacket. Leads are used to protect a dog from unsafe or rude choices, never to compel a dog to enter or work in the water. Know your environment; including wildlife, like attractive prey or dangerous snakes and other reptiles,

Photography by: Deborah Lee Miller-Riley





Not. Seek to understand her reason and resolve your frustration without using compulsion. Dogs appear unwilling to cooperate for a variety of reasons from illness, injury, confusion, fear, fatigue, competing and undisciplined drives, to dissatisfaction with the trainer's treatment. If you respect your dog and treasure your relationship, you must stop and reflect when she gives you an I-don't-want-to indicator. Reflecting gives

“The Smooch is a two finger hand target used to guide the dog to or around the handler when the team is in the water.”

you the serenity to discover respectful solutions to heal, restore and motivate your dog's DESIRE to work with you.

#### Intentional Joy

Let gratitude drive your actions. Swim coaches who keep their intentions positive find joy and reasons to giggle when working with a dog. They notice their dog much more relaxed and willing to cooperate when they maintain those intentions too. Look for a reason to praise. Great trainers appreciate the dog's desire to be with them. They see the intelligence and humor in a dog who offers a creative version to a desired behavior, because they value and foster canine curiosity, creativity and playfulness. These are huge indicators of a healthy attitude and are the bedrock of creating desire.

When a dog is first introduced to swim depth water we can help shape her attitude toward water by offering pleasant consequences for water curiosity. A

plant growth too thick for swimming, deep mud, toxic algae blooms, sharps to snags like fishing hooks & line, glass, and rusting metal. If the water is not safe for you, DO NOT send your dog in.

#### Choose the Conditions for Water Pleasure

Select a pleasant planet day: delightful weather, comfortable water and air temperatures. Consider the water quality, waves and currents, the water entrance

(firm footing for you is essential) and a gradual slope to swim depth to encourage exploration. A private, municipal or state swim beach is a great place to introduce a dog to water. Pools can work too, especially with the addition of a ramp so the dog can determine her descent.

#### Noncompliance is Valuable Information

Absent a safety intervention, trust your dog when her message is NO, I'd Rather





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coach needs to see the slightest interest in water, like a working nose pointed seaward, eyes that scan the water's surface, paw steps toward the shoreline, any contact with the water, interaction with things and plants in and around the water. Then the dog needs immediate feedback to realize how water exploration leads to good things. A coach may join the dog in play at the waters edge or Mark & Treat the dog for each act of water exploration. The objective is to really see and celebrate curiosity, playfulness and duration in the water. Avoid luring, a cautious dog may become more concerned, instead reward brave exploration efforts. One might be surprised

by how fast desire grows if treats are simply tossed at the dog for unprompted splashing.

#### Balancing on water

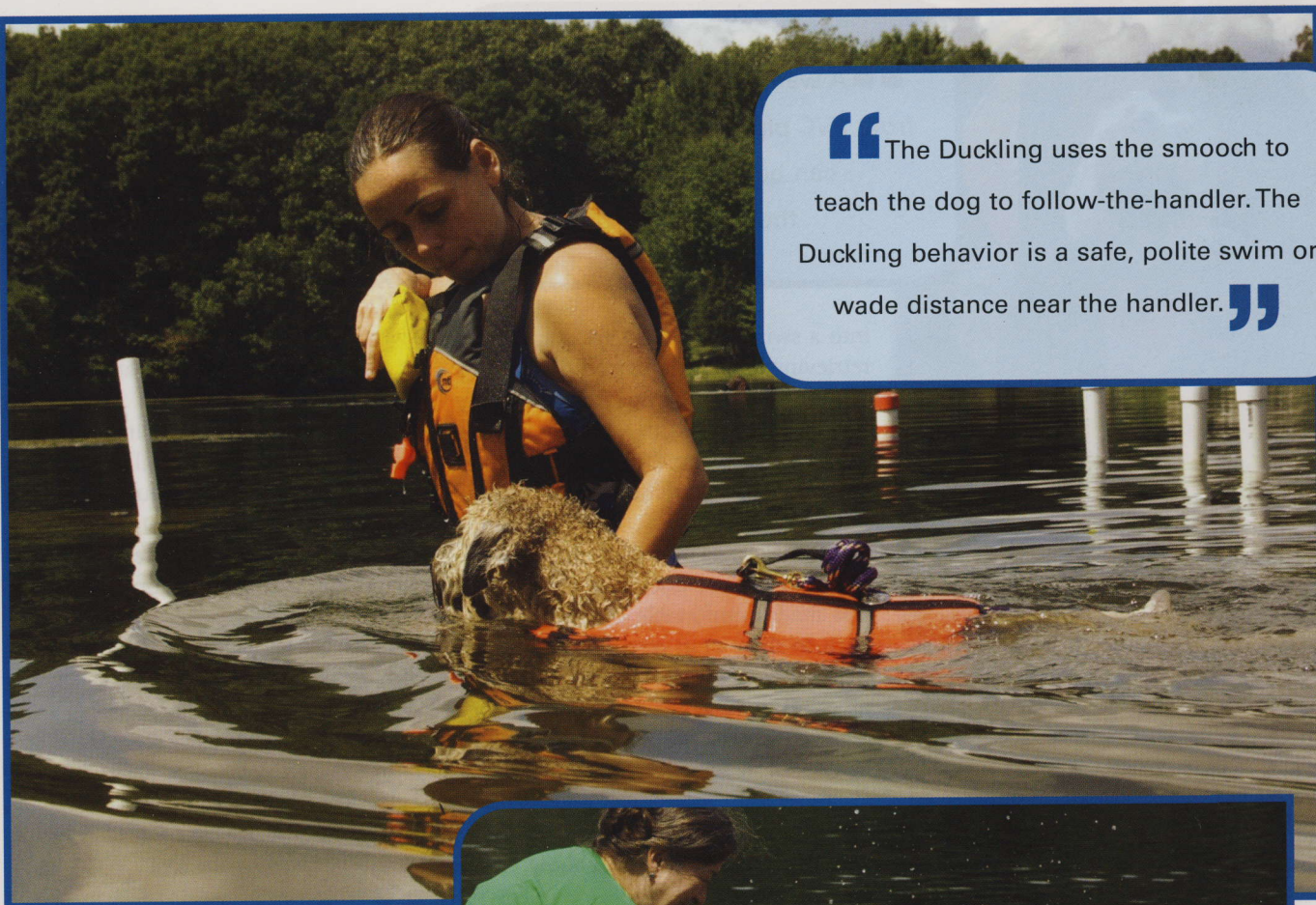
The team is ready for paddle practice when the dog is confidently frog-ing around at that magical point when buoyancy lifts paws off the water bed. Behaviors that build directional guidance and inspire paddle work include targeting games such as Smooch, The Duckling, Looping and Island Hopping. These water based targeting skills motivate and focus dogs, especially dogs who are cautious or have little desire to play in the water.

The **Smooch** is a two finger hand tar-

get used to guide the dog to or around the handler when the team is in the water. Its called a smooch because the dog performs a nose kiss on the index and middle fingers of the handler when the target is present. **The Duckling** uses the smooch to teach the dog to follow-the-handler. The Duckling behavior is a safe, polite swim or wade distance near the handler and looks very much like a duckling following or orbiting her hen.

The duckling game is practiced parallel to shore until the dog is happily wading and following the handler for a smooch at faster and faster speeds. Next, with the dog wading at a fast pace, the handler, still moving parallel to shore, drifts into canine swim depth. Some dogs begin swimming without realizing they are no longer wading. A novice swimmer thrashing at the surface fears submersion and is panicking about the loss of contact with the water





“The Duckling uses the smooch to teach the dog to follow-the-handler. The Duckling behavior is a safe, polite swim or wade distance near the handler.”

bed. If needed, the handler may place the back of one hand gently under the dog's belly to help keep the dog balanced in the water. The dog needs to learn what it feels like to stay moving forward on top of the water. Keep her rump just below the surface of the water, let the life jacket work for the dog. Avoid pushing her forward this creates more vertical struggling. Guide her chin down to the surface while encouraging her forward and to shore. On shore assess her reaction to this experience. If she remains in or near the water, fantastic. If she leaves, its time to dry her off and put her in a safe place for a rest. Avoid the temptation to lure her back into the water with food or toys. Wait for her to engage you, (eye contact or movement toward you) mark & treat that moment. Invite the dog to follow you again, if she says yes, continue your game. If she says NO, its



time for a rest or perhaps a land game.

While the smooch and duckling teach the dog how to follow or move around the handler Looping teaches the dog to move away from the handler. A 3" diameter piece of PVC pipe makes a great directional target for looping. It can stand on end in shallow water and when capped and anchored it bobs nicely in the water. The dog is

taught to travel around the pipe and return to the handler. The loop game is great for dogs who are sensitive to social pressure and or like to work away from the handler.

**Looping** is started on land then in shallow water. Canine confidence is sought by reinforcing speed, then distance. When looping is moved to water the target distance is shortened and get-





“A water table, usually made from PVC pipes, is a platform that can be submerged in the water.”

into a swim. Dogs who are crazy about retrieving can be motivated to swim by playing this target game with a favorite toy. Start parallel to shore with the retrieve game and gradually build enthusiasm and ability before tossing into deeper waters.

**Island Hopping** inspires both independents and natural ducklings. The dog is first made comfortable boarding a platform on shore or in very shallow water. A water table, usually made from PVC pipes, is a platform that can be submerged in the water. Various table heights allow for swim work at different distances from shore. The water table is positioned so that the dog can easily climb on when submerged, about elbow

ting a fast game becomes the handler's focus. The target is placed gradually in deeper waters. When the target is finally placed in swim depth water a dog is so enthusiastic and focused on performing the game quickly, she will often just run

deep for beginners. Used as a place of rest and safety an Island platform encourages the dog to remain playing without returning to shore. Multiple tables are used to teach the game of hoping up, hopping off, then wading or swimming to the next table island. Dogs who enjoy this game are soon launching into a swim to get quickly to the next island.

Dogs who pull away and refuse the swim opportunity just need more time in shallow water. Be patient. During a future session they may become so focused on a follow, looping or island hoping game that they will lift off and swim. After lift off, continue reinforcing your dog's efforts to target and balance and it won't be long before your dog is swimming with greater confidence. **DS**

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## Splash Safety Tips by Canine Water Sports



Five minutes of swimming is equivalent to twenty minutes of running - be observant for signs of fatigues. Fatigue is a leading cause of sports injuries. Help prevent injuries by setting gradual and reasonable goals for distance, intensity and duration.



Life jackets keep you and your dog safe and help build confidence and endurance. Wear life jackets because you care enough to be careful with someone you love.



Buoy up confidence and trust by gifting your dog the choice to participate in water adventures or not. The real power to influence or direct a dog shall not be gained through a device or a demand, but through seeking the dog's choice to cooperate and benefit from human leadership.



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[www.CanineWaterSports.com](http://www.CanineWaterSports.com)  
A leash and collar free team sport.