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Shaping A Savvy Swimmer Through Island Hopping

By Deborah Lee Miller-Riley

When Denise Grimm a New Jersey dog trainer and owner of a Search Response K-9, decided to train her young female Rottweiler Tori, for Search and Rescue work, she put swimming on her list of behaviors to accomplish. Searches near water are common for rescue teams. Certainly any dog owner would feel more comfortable taking walks near water with a dog that could swim. Having trained her water-loving German Shepherd Dog for his Search and Rescue achievements, Denise was disappointed when Tori indicated her preference to be a land-loving Rottweiler. However, Tori showed some very desirable attributes for a swim student. On occasion Tori waded into shallow water, she loved to chase toys and she was comfortable climbing on agility tables.

When it comes to safety, Denise always makes the extra effort to train her dogs so it was well worth her peace of mind to train Tori for a life saving skill. Denise went to work on a plan to shape a savvy swimmer from a landlubber.

Canine compliance without joy is like steering a sailboat without wind. If Denise was going to prompt Tori into experimenting with buoyancy, she knew she had to keep

her relaxed and in a playful mood. To do this Denise would model water pleasure by venturing into the water with Tori. She avoided devices and methods that compelled compliance. These means tended to inhibit play and prolong Tori's reluctance to experiment in the water. To further protect and avoid unpleasant consequences during water training, Denise fitted Tori with a life jacket and removed her throat collar.

Food and toys for reinforcement were selected based on their value to Tori. The time and place for water exposure was selected with care as well. Denise not only wanted Tori to be safe, but to feel safe and to be able to experiment at a pace Tori controlled. For the first goal at the top of the lesson plan Denise wrote, "JOY."

Wading is to swimming, as crawling is to walking. Tori's comfort level was ankle deep wading. Denise began in very shallow water and generously paid Tori treats for following her as they waded back and forth parallel to shore. Pressure to wade deeper was minimized, while a joyful attitude and increased intensity were met with celebration and gobs of tasty morsels. Moving quickly in the water helped Tori learn how to make the transition from

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Tori's desire, for the toy and the island, became a powerful motivator as she forged into the new water depth.

touching bottom to riding her momentum and swimming on the surface. Wading is also one of the fastest ways to build strength for swimming. Once Tori was comfortable with "wading" games, Denise returned to shore to introduce her to a very special water play station.

*Premack's Principle** works even when wet. The play station was a table built from PVC pipes and a 26 x 30 inch plastic lattice top. It was designed for use in the water to serve as a small island for resting, reflecting and reinforcement. Denise let Tori sniff and touch the 12 inch high novel piece of equipment before asking her to hop on board for a treat fest. Tori immediately recognized this as a targeting game and offered another hop on the table to press Denise into chucking pieces of hot dogs towards her. With each reset on the table Tori earned another score. Within a few minutes Tori was running for the table from 15 to 20 feet away. She really liked being on the table.

Building on this eagerness Denise moved the table into the water. She placed it at a depth that was easy for Tori to wade over and hop on. With an excited tone Denise asked Tori to race with her to the new table location. There she showered her with treats for hopping onto the table. Comfortable with the change in location Tori was challenged next by requests for solo travel to the table, gradually increasing distances from shore and parallel to shore. Denise then added speed to

the behavior's criteria. The table was gradually moved to progressively deeper locations after Tori mastered each new challenge. It was Tori's focus on getting to her pleasure perch that kept her in the island hopping game.

Finally the table was set at a depth that would cause Tori to experience buoyancy. Because the table was fully submerged at this point, a floating marker was placed in front of the table's location to help Tori locate it. To add to the fun, Denise tossed one of Tori's favorite splash toys above the platform's location. Tori's desire, for the toy and the island, became a powerful motivator as she forged into the new water depth. She stiffened briefly as her body momentarily lost contact with the lake bottom. Then she reached for the island with her toes pulled herself forward onto the platform and snatched up her treasure. The challenge appeared to be both exhilarating and exhausting for Tori. Denise recognized the degree of emotional energy this step took from her dog and she appropriately opted to help Tori back to shore for a rest period. This gave Tori time to reflect on her accomplishment and normalize her adrenaline levels.

Floating is a sensation that begets contentment and trust. During another session Denise introduced Tori to a large towable float. Looking much like a large lily pad the float would be used to move Tori around in the water and allow her to experience the pleasure of floating and observing



Tori was soon happily running toward the island, launching herself forward to reach the island and stepping off the island in different directions, experiencing a moment of buoyancy before reaching land.

things from the seaward side. The floating island also gave Denise an opportunity to prepare Tori for boat-work.

Denise first encouraged Tori to explore the new bounce pad on shore. Over a series of moves from shore to free floating, Tori learned to board and ride the island while it bobbed under her shifting weight. Denise further increased Tori's abilities by asking her to perform "sits" and "downs" until Tori was comfortable standing, sitting and downing on the unsteady watercraft. The canine first-mate was soon touring the lake 50 ft. off shore, standing to scope out her territory and relaxing into the sway of the lounge pad. Denise's steady support and coaching had created a content canine sailor.

For the next lesson, a tall (3 ft) water table was placed in the water, its platform level with the surface. A floating marker was placed next to the table and Tori, riding on her floating island, was brought to the table. Denise then encouraged Tori with food lures, to move from the float to the table and back onto the float. This transfer game let Tori experience jumping downward to the water. It also expanded her trust for work away from shore and provide additional strength, balance and stretching exercises.

Back at wading depth Denise set up the short

water platform for another session of travel games to the island. After a few successes of bounding onto the table at the surface, the table was placed below the surface and gradually moved deeper over the next few trials until Tori was experiencing moments of buoyancy before reaching the island.

The table depth was changed one last time and Tori found herself standing in elbow deep water on her island. The shore was a little further away and the step off was now a drop into swim depth. Stepping off the island into swim depth was a scary challenge. Motivation for this leap of faith included support from her human, floating toys and Tori's desire to return to shore. Denise was aware that this leap from the island was as much, if not more of challenge as Tori's buoyancy challenges when headed toward the island. Denise watched Tori for signs of frustration and was ready to step in to support before she became overwhelmed. Tori had learned to trust the environment that Denise set up and she leaped for shore to make a game winning touch down. Dogs do seem to show pride, Denise thought, letting her smile beam her pride too.

After a number of comfortable platform leaps toward shore, Tori was asked to step off in a direction parallel to shore. Denise offered another

er round of meat and squeaky toys to lure Tori into this new experience. Confidence came quick. Tori was soon happily running toward the island, launching herself forward to reach the island and stepping off the island in different directions, experiencing a moment of buoyancy before reaching land. Training breaks at this stage were frequent, which helped Tori recharge her enthusiasm. Her island hopping games continued, and after a while Tori built stamina and tolerance for longer water sessions. She enjoyed water fetch games and gained confidence for short, quick paddles to a swim depth toy and back to shore or the safety of an island. Tori was also doing a good job fetching grins for Denise. Progress was indeed a delight.

Swim confidence is the right blend of physical ability, experience and desire. The float rides continued and offered the team time for shared relaxation. Denise would swim along side the island and look up into Tori's eyes. Tori laid contently on her Lilly pad surveying her water kingdom. Sometimes only their eyes would tell all that needed to be said and sometimes Denise would find words for her admiration of Tori's courage and success. If Tori never became a good swimmer,

Denise knew she was richer for the time they had shared in the water and the joy she saw in her dog's effort.

One day Denise took Tori for a ride and docked the floating island next to a tall table stationed 35 ft. out from shore. Tori took the deep step off the float and sat on her submerged island. It was a beautiful warm day. Being wet was such a comfort that Denise was in no rush to get back to shore. As she fell into a daydream and drifted away, she was unaware of her increasing distance from Tori. However, Tori was aware and she accepted the cue. She stood up, jumped off the island and swam.

**Premack's Principle: More probable behaviors will reinforce less probable behaviors. The dog will perform a less desirable activity in order to do a more desirable activity. DS*

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Why We Train ...

To minimize fears and maximize trust.

To ensure safety and freedom through cooperation.

To increase confidence through manners and domestic order.

To provide enrichment and play for emotional wellness.

To nourish mental and physical growth by facilitating challenges.

To strengthen healthy social behavior and guide innate ability.

To bear witness to moments of canine brilliance.

To share an awareness from which love grows.



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