

A new way of training - the Canine Good Manners course

Up until 1998 the Tararua Allbreeds Dog Training Club used a fairly standard training programme. Classes were divided into Grades 1-7, giving in theory a smooth progression from totally untrained to Test C winner. In practice it didn't work quite like this. Not only did we never produce a Test C winner, but we drove most of our "customers" away while trying! While we tried to teach precision heelwork and the retrieve to handlers and dogs who had no need of either, they got bored and we got frustrated. One or two dog/handler combinations out of every fifty actually went on to use the training in competition. The rest gave up after failing Grade 3 (the dreaded retrieve) for the umpteenth time.

We decided there had to be a better way; and sat down to decide what was really needed in a training course. A small proportion of those turning up wanted to compete. OK - we'd run competition classes for them. All the rest just wanted their dog to walk on a lead without pulling and to come back when it was called - nothing else. However, we decided that, for a dog to be a well-behaved pet that we as a dog training club were happy with as a final product, a few more skills were needed. Eventually we decided on a four-part Canine Good Manners (CGM) course, loosely based on the American Canine Good Citizen course and other similar courses in Australia and the UK, but with modifications and additions to suit New Zealand needs and expectations.

The four sections of the CGM course are Home Manners, Street Manners, Travel Manners, and Grooming/Veterinary Manners. Each section is further subdivided into self-contained segments. To pass the Home Manners section of the course, the dog must accept isolation, behave itself at feeding time, do a long downstay, allow its handler to precede it through doors and gates, and give up a prized possession to the handler. To pass the Street Manners section, the dog must walk nicely on a lead (passing people and other dogs), sit patiently while the owner has a conversation with a person the dog is unfamiliar with, allow a stranger to pat it, stop on command while ten metres away from the handler, and come when called. Passing the Travel Manners section of the course mean that the dog enters and exits the owners vehicle only on command and travels quietly under suitable restraint, even when passing people and other dogs. Finally, for the Veterinary/Grooming Manners section, the dog has to allow all-over handling and grooming and claw clipping by both the handler and a stranger, and the handler must demonstrate his/her ability to give the dog a tablet (yes a vet did have a hand in formulating the course!).

All segments of each of the four sections of the course have to be passed before a dog/handler team receive their Canine Good Manners Certificate. Some segments are internally assessed by the instructor, others are assessed by another senior instructor. The guidelines for the course are very specific, describing exactly what standard has to be achieved for each segment. This has a two-fold purpose. Firstly, both handler and assessor know exactly what standard has to be achieved to get the coveted pass mark. There is no indecision and no arguments, and no possibility of slipping standards. The second reason for the guidelines is more subtle. All our instructors are obedience competitors at some level. Without the guidelines, it would be easy for a competitive obedience bias towards excessive precision to slip into the course, and we are trying to avoid this. In writing the guidelines, care has been taken to ensure that this doesn't happen. For example, in the "Walking on a loose lead" (note that it is not called "heelwork") segment, the guidelines specifically state that "close heeling is not required". Similarly, although the recall is called a recall, the guidelines state "This is not an obedience recall. Sit in front or finish not required."

Although the course is designed so that it can be entirely handler-taught (and some handler/dog teams have achieved their Certificate without belonging to a class) most handlers prefer to work in a class

situation so that they can receive assistance from an instructor; and for the companionship and the extra "edge" that working in a class gives. Handlers are given a self-teaching manual at the start of the course outlining the requirements and giving a weekly training programme (with homework!) so that they can work alone on segments that require extra attention, or if they can't make it to class. Most handler/dog teams take at least fourteen weeks (two seven-week terms) to pass all the segments. Some take considerably longer.

For those of you in the obedience world who are inclined to sniff and state "that's easy, my dog could pass the course with one paw tied behind its back", we suggest that you get a copy of the course and grading standards and try it. You might be very surprised. While a number of Tararua's competition dogs have their CGM Certificate, all have required quite an amount of extra training to get it, even those competing in advanced tests. It certainly is not an easy option. Those who pass it get a real sense of achievement - and they deserve to.

We still run the equivalent of our old Grade 1 course (now called Basic), which dogs must pass before they enter the CGM course. We find this pretraining necessary to get full value from the CGM course. About half of our clients are happy with the Basic course alone and don't go further. We did intend the CGM course as an alternative to competition training, but now we actually prefer potential competition dogs to pass this course before starting their competitive training because it makes them much easier to work with, and nothing in it interferes with competition training. If handlers aren't interested in competition, after getting their CGM certificate they can join the Social class, also known as "fun and games for you and your dog". This means that those dog owners not interested in competition work can still be involved in the club and do something with their dogs.

Any club interested in using the Canine Good Manners course is invited to contact us (contact details for the Tararua Allbreeds Dog Training Club are published in the Official Notices section of the New Zealand Kennel Gazette). We can give you copies of the course guidelines, class handouts, and grading standards; and our publicity material.