

Training can keep Fido from getting snakebit

by Ed Zieralski

For Maxwell Smart, everything suddenly became a rattlesnake as he hopped over a stick, danced around a log and watched closely where he gingerly placed his oversized front paws.

GETTING RATTLED - Lamb Chop, a 1-year-old cocker spaniel, recoils from the jolt of an electronic collar after approaching a neutralized rattlesnake during training. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. PET PERIL - Taking your dog for a hike this spring? Live in an area with rattlesnakes? If so, enrolling Fido in a rattlesnake-avoidance class might save your pet's life. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. "He's got it," said Tracy Jenson-Presson, a world-class dog trainer and on this day teaching a snake-avoidance class for dogs on her High On Kennels Ranch in Mesa Grande, Calif. The big 20-month-old German shepherd had just received a jolt from an electronic collar, a bit of stimulation that let him know a rattlesnake can be dangerous. He understood.

Polly Pickering, who was holding Maxwell Smart's leash, called on her vast horsemanship and dog-training skills to rein in the big shepherd, who wanted nothing to do with snakes or anything resembling the slinky critters.

"We wanted to make a good first impression on Maxwell, and we did," Jenson-Presson said. "Every year I hear horror stories from dog owners who either lose their dogs because of a snake bite or have to pay a huge veterinarian bill to save them. We have good success here with our snake-avoidance teaching methods."

As his name implies, Maxwell is one smart German shepherd. His master, Mary Poe, drove him to Jenson-Presson's ranch with the hope her 20-month-old pet will learn to avoid rattlers. Vet bills can run into the thousands of dollars when a dog is bitten by a rattlesnake. There's a chance dogs won't die from a bite, Jenson-Presson said, but the pain and suffering will be hard on the dog, and vet bills could be a financial hardship for any dog owner.

"I often take Maxwell to a friend's house ... and they have lots of snakes there," Poe said.

Lamb Chop, a little 1-year-old cocker spaniel owned by Bob Linehan, was the next student. Brazen and unaware, the furry pup put her nose right on the snake and touched it. That resulted in a slight jolt from her collar, and she yelped and bolted away.

"She put her little face right on it, and you know she would have been bitten," Jenson-Presson said. "She does her gun-dog training here, so she was trying hard to do the right thing. But she smelled the snake and was curious."

Jenson-Presson mostly does gun-dog training, but also specializes in dogs with obedience problems. Though gun-dog training is her passion, she teaches snake-avoidance classes because she knows how serious snake bites are for dogs.

Her method is safe, simple and involves the use of an electronic collar that simulates a snake bite when the dog gets too close to a rattlesnake. Two live rattlesnakes, which are neutralized and can't bite, are placed along a path or trail and the dogs are walked toward them.

Once the dog alerts, touches or gets close to the snake, Jenson-Presson stimulates them with a shock from the collar, and the dog then associates the snake with the pain.

At no time was that lesson driven home better than with Maxwell Smart.

After taking a break, Maxwell was ready for his second tour of the two planted snakes, which were relocated. He was much more wary this time, and though he clearly smelled, saw and heard the snake, he wanted no part of it.

"He saw it, and I don't need to stimulate him anymore for him to realize what it is," Jenson-Presson said. "He got the point from the first lesson. He may be jumpy for a while with sticks, hoses and strange noises, but he'll avoid snakes."

Jenson-Presson removed Maxwell's electronic collar and instructed Mary Poe, his owner, to pet him on both sides of his back, to use "touch praise" to settle him down and let him know he was safe and did well in the class.

"He'll be good to go until next spring," Jenson-Presson said. "I recommend dog owners put their dogs in a refresher course every spring to reinforce the training. That's when these snakes come out of hibernation and start moving around."

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