

Cat Training the Retired Racer

Many people have asked me how I achieve results teaching retired greyhounds to get along with cats so I thought I'd share what my experience has taught me.

Remember, these are only my methods; they are not the only ones and maybe not

the best for everyone. But they work for me.

Success will not come overnight so the very first thing you'll need is patience.

And hopefully a cat that doesn't run at the sight of a dog. These athletes were,

after all, trained to chase a small furry thing as fast as their legs could

carry them and now you want to untrain them. I have a sixteen-year-old Siamese

that will hiss and growl at a new dog and most of them don't like that at all.

They seem to recognize it as "Get away from me, you big galoot!"

Before you bring the dog into the house, make sure the resident cat population

is safely locked up in a separate room and let the dog explore the house. If he

comes to the closed door let him sniff and get used to the scent. You want to

take this time to develop a good relationship with the dog, lavishing attention

on him, but also letting him know you're the boss. This is the time I like to

teach the dog the "three voices." (If you've raised kids you know what I'm

talking about.) First, the soothing, loving tone you'd use with a baby, showing

him you love him. Second, the happy, excited voice of praise that you want him

to strive for, and third, the 'alpha bark' that he will know immediately as

disapproval. When you use the first two it helps to accompany the tone with

physical affection so he learns more quickly. The third is a sharp "FIDO! NO!"

If you were to observe a pack of wolves you'd notice the alpha using very

similar communication. And these voices will come into use long after the dog is

cat-trained, too.

Once you have established the pecking order and you're convinced the dog is

comfortable in his new surroundings, it's time to test his reaction to seeing a

cat up close. Again, here it is essential that the cat doesn't or can't run and

hide but DON'T HOLD THE CAT! You could get seriously hurt doing that. Since

racing hounds are collar trained I find a good grip on the collar is useful and

normally all it takes to keep the dog reined in. And I like to introduce the animals without muzzling the dog; I want to watch his mouth and eyes. Bring the dog within six feet of the cat and observe him: Does he point like a bird dog? Does he get a locked-on "radar eyes" look? Does he drool and lick his chops? If the answer to any of these is yes you've either got a project on your hands or a dog with too strong a prey drive. The reaction may be more like wanting to play: ears perked up, tail wagging, a little whine or whimper -- maybe even a bark. Or it could be something in between the two (or no noticeable reaction), which is what we hope to get and what I will concentrate on in this guide. It might be advisable at this point to take the dog out of the room again and let him think about this new 'thing' in his life. (And let the cat calm down!) He'll probably want to get back in the room and that's okay; he's curious. But you want to wait until he's forgotten it before you take him back in there. Distract him with playing or going outside. When you take him to visit kitty again the work will begin in earnest. During the second visit that relationship I talked about will come into play because you and the dog MUST trust each other. He is going to want to stare at the cat and you are going to stop him! How? Step in his way (while keeping a good grip on the collar) and, with your free hand, cup his snout and lift his head so your eyes meet. Firmly say "NO!" and step back out of the way. He will look again so repeat the procedure and keep repeating it until he lets you know he understands he shouldn't look. Oh, he'll still WANT to but he won't want to hear that disapproving voice. Now take him out again. This lesson will need to be reinforced at least a few times before going to the next step. Now it's time for the muzzle. Bring the dog into the cat's room, holding the collar again but giving him more slack this time. If he doesn't try to go after kitty let him loose but stay between them. If he moves toward the cat now, repeat the previous step and let him go again. Do this as many times as necessary but give the poor cat a break, too. Once you feel these first two lessons have been learned you can allow the muzzled dog unrestrained access to the cat's area but with your supervision.

Given enough time even a muzzled dog could do a lot of harm to your smaller pet.
If nothing happens here you're well on your way to a cat-safe greyhound and you can gradually let the two spend more time together -- including sleeping at night. And eventually without the muzzle.
So far, we've been working on the premise that the dog isn't desperate to play with kitty and that kitty doesn't try to run away immediately. If either of these circumstances comes about it will mean the process will take longer and the methods will differ slightly. If the dog wants to play and chase I'd recommend using the leash for the first step rather than just the collar. When the dog stares at the cat or lunges (again, we've already determined that it's play he wants) jerk back sharply while barking "NO!" at him. Repeat as needed, until he no longer goes for the cat. Now, if the CAT won't cooperate, that's a whole different story. You'd have to train kitty and we all know how impossible THAT is. That's where the patience is saintly. You'll just have wait until the cat isn't as fearful.
I had one foster dog that completed every lesson but will still bite a cat that gets too close, as he will a small dog. Sometimes instincts are just too strong.
But that particular dog is one of the most loving, gentle animals I've ever known. He adores my daughter, gets along wonderfully with my two greyhounds and he loves to cuddle. I still baby-sit him on occasion; I just don't let him near my cats without being between them. A failure? No, he's a fantastic pet. He just can't live with any small animals.

Owen Johnson, 1999