



ELTON'S EXPEDITION: *The pup attends his first Puppy Raiser Workshop*

Story and Photos by
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This is the fifth of a monthly series that will follow the progress of Rebekah Kuper's Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) puppy. The dog is ex-

pected to be in her care until the age of 18 months.

Weighing in at 50 pounds during the first week of April, Elton III began the month in his new uniform. As a general rule, CCI does not graduate a puppy to the two pocket vest until six months of age.

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The smile on Elton's face let everyone know that he was enjoying his break from training he got during the video presentation.

Laura Dubecky demonstrated how to examine a dog's mouth while Rebekah held Elton on the grooming table.

With his wife Rita and his CCI Service Dog Garnett III by his side, Chuck Rich told the Puppy Raisers how much the dog has enriched his life.




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Although he was not taught the command and he needs some training to learn not to stick his head between a person's feet, following the lead of the other dogs at the Elton executed the "under" command.



CCI Puppy Raiser Mike Hartsky provided some one-on-one coaching to Rebekah Kuper during a break at the seminar.



Elton's size practically overwhelms Rebekah's petite frame as she cradles him on her lap.



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Elton goes to school

From **ELTON**, page 12

However, they made an exception in Elton's case since his cape was beginning to look more like a bandanna against his large frame.

THE JOURNEY

Elton received his new uniform while attending his first CCI Puppy Raiser Workshop in Columbia, Md. Rebekah and her mom Pam made the two-hour trek with Elton early on a Sunday morning for a day-long seminar that began at 9 a.m.

Upon arriving at The Coventry School, Inc. For Dogs and Their People, the pup was able to join in a bit of free time with about 30 other dogs in attendance.

REUNIONS

There is recognition between some of the dogs as they are again acquainted with their littermates, some of whom have not seen each other since their arrival together in an airline-approved kennel. Still others have become playmates because of attendance at CCI training classes conducted in their area on a weekly basis. For those, it was like a play date.

For Elton III, he got to see his pal Wheeler again, who lives with Michele and Jim Purton in Falls Run. But it was also a reunion with his sister Elizabeth, the other half of the royal couple that arrived in late December at Richmond International Airport Cargo Terminal.

They had seen each other only one time prior at a CCI puppy training class in Fairfax, where she was able to easily "take him" as they romped and rolled together on the floor. However, although Elton has always been bigger, Elizabeth did not seem quite as interested in en-

gaging her now considerably larger littermate in play.

INTRODUCTIONS

The room full of pups had run off some energy, taken "Hurry" breaks, and had a drink of water while their caretakers had a continental breakfast.

But then it was time for the pups to get put through their paces as a lot of ground had to be covered in one day.

CCI Northeast Region Instructors Laura Ann Dubecky and Lisa Moran introduced themselves to the pups and their Puppy Raisers and gave an overview of the day's activities.

STRESS TEST

One of the most basic elements the puppies need to learn is to remain calm even when approached by someone in an excitable state.

To determine how the puppies are progressing, Laura and Lisa brought a number of the puppies individually to the center of the room and ran through several different scenarios that they may encounter. This included using loud and high pitched voices, reaching out to touch the dogs, and rapid hand and body movements while greeting the dogs.

The CCI puppies are trained to remain calm during any encounter with a person regardless of their level of excitement. The two instructors used the dogs to demonstrate different training techniques that could be used for management at home, class, and in public.

GROOMING

The next facet of the seminar demonstrated different methods that could be used to groom the dog.

One method is to cradle the dog

as they are being groomed. This method can be used for cleaning ears, feet and pads, and trimming nails. If the dog has been cradled on a daily basis since he arrived at the Puppy Raiser's home, he should easily submit to being groomed in this position.

The instructors also demonstrated grooming techniques that could be employed from a standing position.

Laura said this was particularly important because some dogs behaved better when being groomed in a standing position rather than a cradle. "There are also some dogs that are more willing to be handled while on a grooming table," she said.

They demonstrated proper nail care both with the use of clippers and the use of a Dremel tool, again noting that certain dogs may not particularly like the filing method or noise of the power tool while others submitted to it quite easily.

Lisa and Laura teamed up to demonstrate how to handle the feet, ears, and tail as well as mouth manipulation and restraint.

Laura pointed out that the Puppy Raisers should subject the dogs to grooming in a standing, sitting, cradling, and down position on the floor as well as standing, sitting, and down positions on a table. She emphasized that this is important because the person with whom the dog is finally partnered may not be able to groom the dog on the floor and some will send the dog to a professional groomer who may put the dog on a table.

HOME BEHAVIOR

The next session addressed the importance of managing home behavior. Although the dogs must meet strict criteria when they are out in public, it is still extremely im-

portant that they maintain behavior standards within the home.

The instructors explained that even in the home the dogs need to follow the rules because the person with whom they are partnered may not have the same physical capabilities to control the dog as the Puppy Raiser.

An example of this would be if the dog picked things up from the floor to eat. An able bodied person would be able to remove a harmful object from the dog's mouth, but a person with a disability may not have that capability.

Assistance dogs as a rule should never be fed anything except prescribed dog food and dog treats. This helps keep them from developing a taste for table food and lessens the likelihood that they would eat food dropped on the floor.

To evaluate the dogs and help ensure that they are progressing toward the established CCI goals, Lisa and Laura "set up" the dogs in different scenarios to test their ability to resist stealing, bolting on their lead, and other assertive behavior.

PUPPY RAISER OUTREACH

According to CCI Northeast Region Director of Public Relations Dina Ghram the Puppy Raisers are always in touch both by telephone and on-line with the puppy coordinator.

But in addition to the resources supplied by CCI personnel the Puppy Raisers form their own network and become a team in and of themselves.

For Rebekah and Pam this network proved invaluable while they were at the workshop. Mike Hartsky of Fairfax, who with his wife Michele are currently raising their 8th CCI puppy, noticed that Rebekah was struggling getting Elton to respond properly to the stay and heel commands.

Without being asked, he approached and offered his assistance. Both Pam and Rebekah gladly accepted his offer and they all stepped outside with Elton. Working on a grassy area away from the distractions of the larger group inside, Mike ran Elton through a few commands to which the pup immediately responded.

Both Rebekah and Pam were amazed at how quickly Elton learned the proper behavior. But Mike didn't just show them how to run the commands. He coached Rebekah as she took Elton's lead and gave the pup the same commands in the same manner. "It was really amazing that Elton learned the commands so well when Mr. Hartsky helped me," she said.

Like one of their earlier experiences after Elton arrived in Decem-

ber, both Pam and Rebekah were again grateful that the CCI Puppy Raisers are a community and everyone is ready and available to reach out and help.

Mike also stepped up to provide assistance with Elton's training during the afternoon session. Both Pam and Rebekah said they were extremely grateful for the one-on-one assistance Mike gave them that day. "Once he showed us the technique and we practiced it that day, we haven't had a problem with getting Elton to respond properly to those commands," said Pam.

TEAMWORK AND A MOVIE

The pups and their caretakers participated in a team training exercise in which Laura and Lisa put the group through a myriad of scenarios. This gave their instructors the opportunity to gauge the puppies' progress individually as well as within the group interface.

The morning session concluded with a movie that addressed facets of the current CCI program to include Service Dogs, Facility Dogs, Hearing Dogs, and 3 unit teams.

BLUE VESTS . . .

After a lunch break the Puppy Raisers were introduced to two dogs in blue vests with yellow CCI logos. Their vest colors are the inverse of those for the pups in training, because they are part of CCI graduate teams.

Whenever possible, graduates are asked to attend the workshops because of the distinct impact it has with the Puppy Raisers when they share their personal experiences. This is especially true for many first time Puppy Raisers who are concerned about their ability to break the emotional tie and easily relinquish the dog at the end of the training period.

Chuck Rich arrived with his wife Rita and Garnet III. Chuck, who is wheelchair bound, does substitute teaching.

He demonstrated how Garnet helps pull his chair, but impressed upon the Puppy Raiser teams that "The dog's assistance changes the whole dynamic in a family because I can ask Garnet to do something instead of Rita."

Chuck said in addition to giving him more independence, the dog has improved his quality of life. "Many people will shy away from interacting with someone with a disability," he said, "But Garnet has made it easy to meet people because they do not hesitate to approach the dog."

Rita, with her eyes visibly misted, was extremely appreciative of the efforts of the Puppy Raisers and said, "What you do with these dogs could make me cry."

Chuck agreed and concluded his

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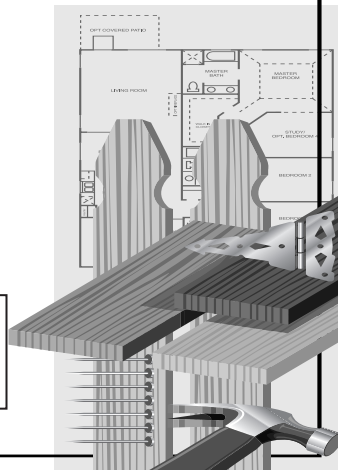
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remarks by saying that his life would be much different and less fulfilling without his CCI dog.

... AND AN ORANGE LEAD

The Puppy Raisers got an additional learning experience through Maya, who wore the CCI graduate team blue vest with a bright florescent orange lead attached to her collar.

An orange lead, collar, or Assistance Dog vest provides universal recognition as a hearing dog.

At the other end of the orange lead, Cara Miller demonstrated how her CCI hearing dog Maya alerts her to sounds she cannot hear.

Using a training device she placed on the floor, the Puppy Raisers were amazed to see Maya's immediate response. Her ears moved so rapidly in response to the sound that they seemed to vibrate along with the

device that danced across the floor to the sound it emitted.

After her recognition of the tone, Maya demonstrated how she alerts Cara to a particular sound. The dogs are taught to alert to a sound and then alert their partner and lead them to the source of the sound.

Unlike the other puppies that are trained at regional centers throughout the United States, all CCI Hearing Dogs are trained at their headquarters training center in Santa Rosa, Calif.

The personal testimonies of the graduates reinforces the goals of the program and lets the Puppy Raisers learn first hand just how the dogs enrich the life of the persons with whom they are partnered.

FINE TUNING

The dogs were then put through their paces as Laura and Lisa dem-

onstrated different ways to deal with behaviors to get the dog under control. They showed how a particular behavior could be corrected or modified through training.

They also demonstrated different techniques that can be employed to teach a dog the "back" command. This reverse movement is extremely important for if the graduate team is in a tight spot, the dog may have no other way to get out other than backing up.

Lisa demonstrated one technique by placing a ramp on either side of a dog to create a narrow pathway between the barriers in which he could not turn around and had to back up between the two ramps.

Using several chairs, Laura demonstrated a method of blocking all access to forward movement which can also be used to teach the "back" command.

Their demonstration showed that although all the pups must meet this standard command, there are different methods that can be used to elicit a proper response.

The instructors also worked with some of the dogs to demonstrate how to get the dogs to respond promptly and properly to the down, stand, and under commands.

CONFIDENCE BUILDING

After giving the pups another break, which many still need quite frequently while they are still in their young physical growth stage, the topic turned to building confidence.

Lisa and Laura again brought a number of dogs individually to the center of the floor to demonstrate different body languages they exhibited and discussed the importance of being able to read that body language.

They showed how to divert a dog from jumping up by turning away before he has a chance to jump on you. "The point is to be able to catch the dog at the thought, before the action," said Laura.

They demonstrated how your leadership can help build the dog's confidence. This was done by both verbal and behavioral methods. Although most of the Puppy Raisers were aware of how to use their voices, the instructors showed them how to use their own body language to get a point across to the dog. The most obvious one is to stand as opposed to being on the dog's level at this puts the person in the leadership position.

Laura also emphasized to the teams that it is incumbent upon them to build upon that leadership position to instill confidence in the pup which is done by rewarding him for proper response through praise.

TRAINER INTERFACE

The final session of the day allowed the Puppy Raisers to ask the CCI instructors questions concerning any issue about raising their dogs as well as any training situations for which they needed guidance.

During this group question and answer session, the teams learn from each other's questions, as some have the same experiences and others learn about issues they may need to watch for in the future.

To close out the day, the trainers are available for brief one-on-one sessions with the teams.

ANNUAL WORKSHOPS

According to Dina Ghram the purpose of the workshops is to allow the CCI instructors to see the dogs in person and observe how they interact with their Puppy Raisers and each other.

"Although the dogs go to training classes on a regular basis all year long, the workshops are for the benefit of the Puppy Raisers," she said. "It gives everyone in a particular area an opportunity to come together and ask questions and it also gives CCI the opportunity to disseminate information."

The workshops which occur at least annually are an opportunity for the Puppy Raisers to fix any

problems on the spot with the help of the instructors and an opportunity for the instructors to spot areas of concern that the Puppy Raisers may need to address.

In Elton's case, Rebekah found that both she and her pup still had some things to learn. Despite frequent scheduled "Hurry" breaks, after having to clean up a "spill" she realized that as big as he is Elton is still a young pup with a young pup's bladder. But she also found a lot of help.

At the end of a very long day Rebekah and Pam learned a lot from the experience. Both found the information and training tips to be invaluable and said it was extremely helpful to be able to work with the CCI trainers as well as the other pups and Puppy Raisers.

And although it is up to the Puppy Raisers to train the dogs, it was also quite evident that when brought together the dogs themselves are mutually beneficial to their learning process. Elton demonstrated his ability to carry out the "under" command by crawling under Rebekah's chair and quietly laying there throughout the lecture sessions.

Rebekah said, "I haven't even started to work with the "under" command." The only explanation for his action was his own observation of the other dogs around him that had quietly assumed that position under their Puppy Raiser's chairs.

And although he undertook this behavior without command and remained quiet and well behaved Elton did stick his head between Rebekah's feet, which is not the proper response to the command.

But then again the British aristocrat and rock star, Sir. Elton John, whom I at times believe the pup is trying to emulate, never quite played by the rules in his younger days either.

There seem to be some other personality similarities, as the pup has been busy Blogging about "himself" again (<http://rebekahkuper.blogspot.com/>). And although admittedly he really is extremely cute, I'm beginning to think that it is quite possible that his large box like head common to his breed mix, may be more from "egotistical swelling" than Elton's physical growth.

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