

Telling Tail Tales

A Journey Through Time with Mocha

By Daniel Wu



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Like every other young child, I used to beg ceaselessly with my parents to get a dog. I agreed blindly to every promise: “Yes, I’ll clean up after her; Yes, I’ll walk her no matter how tired I am; Yes, I’ll have time to play with her.”

After spending hours with my friends’ German Shepherds, some of the calmest and most well-trained dogs I’d ever met, I was confident in my knowledge of the breed. I also cited my experience caring for our pet fish as sufficient proof that I knew how to properly care for animals. However, none of my prior experience could prepare me for the daunting task of handling a German Shepherd puppy.

Owning a pet completely changed my feelings. I realized how different the everyday tasks of walking, feeding, entertaining, and training a dog came from the idyllic vision I saw from the outside.

When we first drove home with newly adopted “Mocha” in the backseat, we hadn’t yet seen her wild side. I thought the cautious and timid persona that she displayed when sprinting into the house after hearing the neighbor’s dog would stay with her as she grew up. While she was well behaved at first,

she also didn’t fully trust us. We hired a professional trainer to help us with basic skills but soon realized that the task of training her was not to be taken lightly.



Mocha enjoying a walk

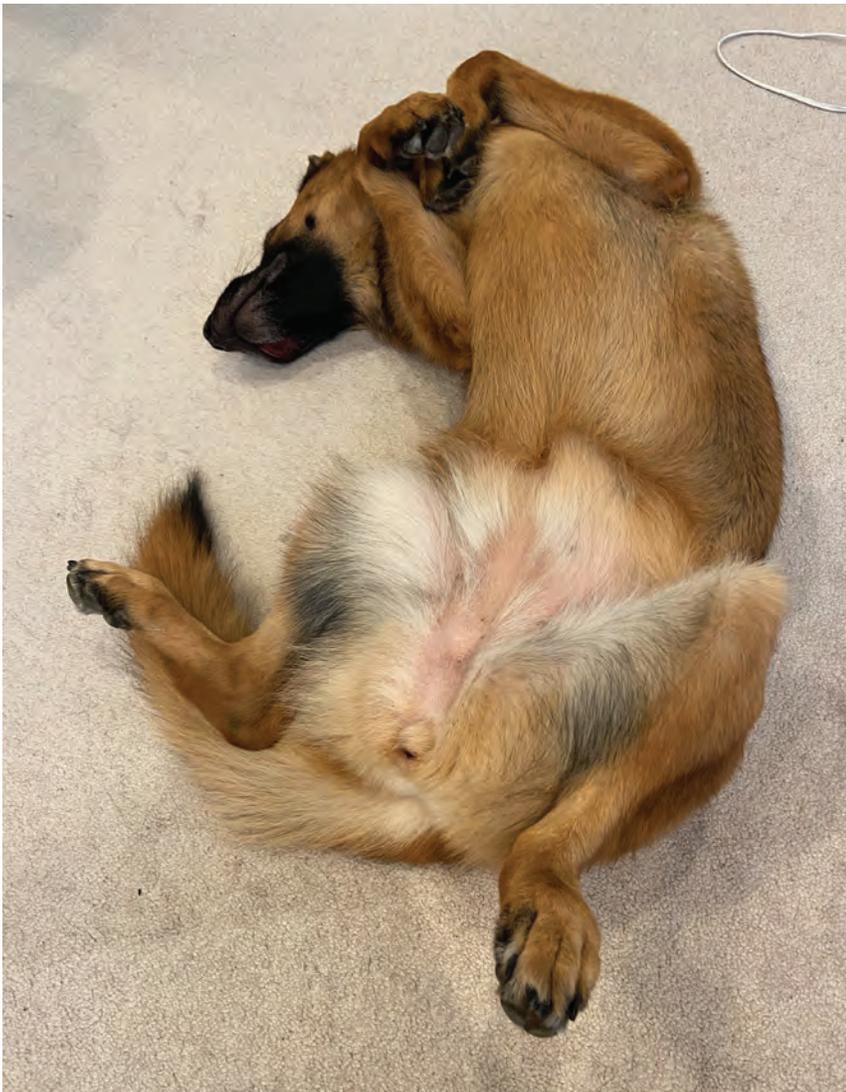
We started with the basics. In order to leash train her, my mother would drive us to the end of the street and drop us off. From there, my sister and I embarked on an exhausting trek to guide Mocha back home. At first, we tried to forcefully drag her along in her harness.

“Why are other German Shepherds so much easier to work with?” I wondered.

After countless attempts, I realized that we had failed to establish trust and we did not offer incentives (treats) for her to walk with us. I began brainstorming ways to leash-train Mocha.

The first (that I found online) was to use food. I realized how food-motivated our dog was, attentive to even the slightest hint of a snack package opening. We dangled treats in front of her as we walked, and while it still took about an hour to travel our entire route home, Mocha enjoyed herself more, willingly exploring the path with her curious nose. She was also much more enthusiastic about going outside when we were patient enough to allow her to enjoy it. Apart from feeding her as she trotted down the sidewalk, I gradually picked up on the unspoken communication that Mocha hinted to us. The subtle gestures of her head toward a plant indicated her need to pee, while a different leash tug simply meant that she was curious to sniff something. When she bowed her head and looked up at me while craning her head away, I knew that we were done for the day and called my mother to pick us up.

Having Mocha has made me realize that owning and caring for a pet involves a lot of responsibility; we adopted a living, breathing creature, not a robot or an object.



Now, after three years, making sure Mocha listens to me is an ongoing process that depends on communication and patience. Most importantly, while I taught Mocha how to walk with a leash and where to use the bathroom, she taught me empathy. I came to recognize whether Mocha wants company, physical activity, or solitude based on her actions and body language. By sacrificing time and patience, I gained not only a lifelong companion, but also the capability to understand what she says without uttering a single word. That's special.

Mocha at play



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