

# Don't give up

Who said you can't teach an old dog new tricks? **Rebecca Green** meets gundog trainer and qualified behaviourist **Lez Graham** to see if she can solve Rio's possessiveness...

**W**hen a relationship with your dog goes wrong, as it did with me and my working cocker Rio, it can be hard to admit and harder still to seek help. Gundog trainer and dog behaviour specialist **Lez Graham** understands this. More to the point, she understands dogs. And now, thanks to her common sense approach to training, Rio and I are back on track.

Based in Marlborough, Lez is a full-time,

qualified canine behaviour practitioner with a penchant for gundogs. She uses behavioural work to help gundog handlers get a deeper understanding of the way they train their dogs. For me and Rio, this meant getting to grips with Rio's possessiveness.

Regular readers will know Rio as a bit of a loveable rogue. But over the past year he had become possessive and his tendency to steal objects around the house had escalated to the point where I was no longer able to take things off him if he really wanted to keep them. In any dog, this is not acceptable, but even less so in gundog. I knew it was ridiculous but I couldn't find a way to take control, and I found myself making excuses for his behaviour. I admit I was close to giving up on him. Then I met

Lez and she showed me that it is never too late to turn things around.

Lez works on a simple steadiness exercise with Rio...



Rio stays glued to the spot as dummies land all around him...



Then watches patiently as Lez, not Rio, collects them all again. Result.



PICTURES: REBECCA GREEN



With behavioural issues like Rio's, Lez comes to your home and spends several hours so she can observe you and the dog in your everyday environment and see problems as they occur. Lez specialises in training pet gundogs – working dogs that are living at home in a pet environment. “The gundog breeds are high energy dogs that need strong owners, so it's very common to be called out to deal with a working dog in a pet home where there are a million and one distractions making it harder to manage that dog,” says Lez. “I've seen dogs that have bitten 20 or 30 times and the owners say “but he's such a lovely dog”, and they're usually right. The dog is just being a dog, doing what dogs do. It's just that his behaviour is not acceptable in our world with our rules; like don't hump the guests, don't pee on the furniture, don't bite me. But all those things are just a dog being a dog. Dogs like this just need demoting a bit.”

And this is exactly what needed to happen with Rio. Like most dog owners I understand the need to be my dog's ‘pack leader’. But somehow I had lost my way and Rio clearly thought he was in charge. Lez explained: “Dogs need leaders – a low ranking animal does not challenge a high ranking one. But if a dog feels that their leader isn't strong enough to protect them or guide them, they will step up and take on the role.”

Lez explained that Rio's possessiveness centred around his heightened status, together with the importance he placed on ‘things’. “All dogs have certain things that are of very high value to them – food, toys etc. It really depends on what the resource means to the dog,” says Lez. A few growly incidents over things that

obviously meant a lot to Rio had made me nervous to put him in his place and every time I failed to take something off him his status was raised. Lez showed me how to correct that. I couldn't believe how simple it was, or how quickly his behaviour changed.

Lez laid out a leadership programme designed to raise my status and diminish Rio's. The essence of the plan was simple: “The leader is fair, consistent and has no grey areas – it's either black or it's white, Rio either can or he can't.” The plan included basic ‘manners’ within the home, offering controlled affection and game playing, together with new walking and training routines. Lez showed me how to correct Rio's unacceptable behaviours without the need for confrontation, instead offering consequences – good and bad – for Rio's actions.

“The important thing is that you have to believe in what you're doing and you have to be a leader

possessiveness, although they are not suitable for all dogs. She conditioned Rio's response to the sound of the discs, used together with the word ‘no’. We then put them into practice with a tennis ball (Rio's favourite item). True to form, he wouldn't give it to me when I asked. I immediately threw the discs and said ‘no’, upon which he dropped the ball. We repeated the exercise several times and each time Rio delivered the tennis ball to hand – I couldn't believe it!

The discs are now my ‘set of teeth’ and allow me to confidently enforce the drop/leave it command without confrontation. Lez explained that in time the word ‘no’ on its own would be enough to stop the behaviour and she was right. Since that day Rio has readily and happily given up most things. I only needed to use the discs a handful of times in the early days (on ‘high value’ items). Now, the ‘no’ command is enough to stop him even thinking about stealing something.

## ‘If a dog feels their leader isn't strong enough to protect or guide them they will take on the role’

all the time,” says Lez. “If a dog tries it on with you, you have to correct or discipline the dog and you have to mean it, but without aggression. Discipline just means enforcing every command you give – it's not about beating your dog up with a stick. That's harsh handling and we're not into that. What we're doing is laying down the rules and ensuring the dog follows them.”

Lez felt that the use of dog training discs (small metal discs that make a noise when thrown on the floor) would be the solution for Rio's

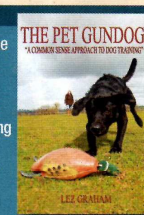
After Lez's initial visit, we had a follow up gundog training session working on steadiness and delivery. In the past, because of his possessiveness, I haven't tried to insist Rio delivers to hand: just releasing it was enough for me. But now it's time to sharpen things up.

Again, Lez's common sense, no nonsense approach works wonders. We work on getting Rio coming right in with the retrieve. I have been crouching down with my arms outstretched, thinking this will encourage him in, when in fact

### BUY THE BOOK

Lez Graham's book, *The Pet Gundog*, blends traditional gundog training methods with behavioural work, giving the handler a deeper understanding of their dog, both in ‘pet’ and gundog scenarios.

Priced £15.50, *The Pet Gundog* is available directly from Lez at [www.thepetgundog.co.uk](http://www.thepetgundog.co.uk)



it's confusing him. “We taught him to return to the hand – which one do you want him to come back to?” asks Lez. “Keep your hands down and in, pat your inner thighs and give plenty of praise.” Sure enough, Rio comes right in with the dummy, even managing a few deliveries to hand.

I end the session believing there is hope yet for Rio – in the field and at home. But there can be no half measures. I know I've got to commit to the leadership programme and stick to it 100% of the time, which isn't easy. But from the results so far, I know it's worth it. And I'm not alone – as part of the service Lez is always at the end of the phone or on email if you go through a wobbly patch, and I have her report to refer to. With Lez's guidance I've managed to turn things around with Rio just when I feared he was a lost cause. Perhaps you can teach an old dog new tricks. ■

Contact Lez Graham, *Trained for Life*, on 07927 420049 or go to [www.trainedforlife.co.uk](http://www.trainedforlife.co.uk) and [www.thepetgundog.co.uk](http://www.thepetgundog.co.uk)