

For My Next Trick

With consistency, caring and patience, you can teach your cat new tricks.

Arden Moore

Veteran dog trainer Tanya Roberts gets bulldogs to bark on cue and beagles to sniff out hidden treats. At the Oregon Humane Society in Portland, Roberts also improves the chances of shelter dogs finding homes by teaching them basic obedience and tricks. But it took an abandoned kitten named Alley to help her to recognize the hidden trick-training abilities of felines.

Roberts adopted Alley when the brown-striped tabby was approximately 6 months old. Now 9, Alley comes running on cue, sits for treats and revels in sprinting, leaping and then landing on a flattened paper bag on the kitchen floor, sliding in total contentment.

When I first got her, I noticed she would come running when I called her name, Roberts says. Whoa, I said to myself. This cat does a recall reasonably consistently. It got me motivated to see what else she could learn.

Despite their long-standing reputation for being aloof, cats like to ham it up, perform and steal the spotlight like their canine counterparts.

In general, people have developed the notion that a cat's independent nature makes them virtually impossible to train, says celebrity animal trainer Joel Silverman, of Valencia, Calif. People need to realize that a cat's indifference doesn't mean they can't learn cool tricks. It simply means you haven't convinced them yet that doing so is in their best interest.

Know the Species The trick for you comes in knowing what makes cats tick. First, acknowledge that cats are not small dogs in body structure, personality or attitude. Their solitary hunter ancestors did not want, or depend upon, teamwork to survive.

A dog naturally wants to please you and will work simply for you, but a cat needs a 'paycheck' to be motivated, Silverman says. Usually that paycheck is a special food treat, since cats are highly food motivated.