

How's Tricks, Gracie?

CatChannel humor columnist Peter Gerstenzang tries to teach his cat some tricks. But who's the teacher and who's the student?

By Peter Gerstenzang

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Gracie will sit and stay, but only when she feels like it. Having taught my dog, Happy, a grand total of three tricks — two of which are giving me his paw — I wondered if I could teach my cat a couple. Gracie's twice as smart as Hap, so she should be able to learn five tricks easily. I mean six. What follows is the story of my attempt to train Gracie. Six! I really meant to say six!

We started with the old standby, How to Sit. Which I planned to follow with another old standby: How to Stand. See, I taught Happy to sit recently and he hasn't stood up since. I put Gracie on a table, got a training clicker and a treat. I passed the treat over her head, figuring that if she reached back far enough, she'd have to sit to get her balance. Instead, Gracie leaned all the way back, ate the treat and somersaulted off the table. I then clicked so furiously I sounded like a demented flamenco dancer. So, sitting was out. But considering how well Gracie somersaulted, she seemed ready for gymnastics.

Next, I thought we'd try lying down. This is something Gracie can do, but strictly on her own terms. If I say, "Lie down," she chooses that moment to stand up on her hind legs and do the Twist. I got her on the table again and put a treat just out of reach. The idea is that the cat reaches for the treat, essentially lying down, then when she's down, she's rewarded for her "trick." However, like all geniuses, Gracie's too original for that. She did stretch out. Then she flicked the treat off the table like she was shooting marbles. Next, she jumped off the table to get the treat, thus turning a simple trick into a choreographed ballet that Baryshnikov would have envied.

Since the little weenie tricks weren't working, I thought I'd go for the big weenie trick: training the cat to come. I got my clicker out, put Gracie's food bowl down and called her. The cat wandered suspiciously in and went to her bowl. I then said, "Come! Good. Come!" In other words, sounding as witty and articulate as the Frankenstein monster. The hitch? Although it was mealtime, Gracie sensed a scam. She just sniffed her bowl and ran from the room. I stood there, pushing my clicker enough times to cause carpal tunnel syndrome. I guess I was supposed to say, "Go. Bad. Go." But I was afraid my neighbors might hear.

Well, I tried. And failed. To torture me, Gracie now walks by me and without any commands, she sits or comes without my talking like Rain Man. Gracie may not be the best-behaved cat in the world, but you can't say she isn't funny. Which begs the question: Do you think the cat might have a future in comedy? Maybe. Just not the stand-up kind.