

Puppy training

It was a Saturday morning. At Olastorp in Gullbrandstorp Ben Olander stood outside his house with a supermarket bag in his hand, ready to go to puppy training. In the bag he had some banana bread for his coffee break along with some doggie treats, and a football with hamburger and onions. If you're wondering about the latter rather bizarre item, it's the kind of doggie toy that helps a canine while away his endless leisure time. Nils F. (Son of the Wolves) and I were going to an obedience class.

When the bitter October chill nipped at my cheeks I reflected that this idea of a puppy training course is an invention of the devil. Does a dog really need to be any smarter than it already is? Smart dogs must cause problems. Smart dogs scare me. Personally, I love dumb dogs. Hence I came quickly to the conclusion that it must be society's purpose to train ME instead of the dog. That was the day the dog's master was going to learn how to survive cold. That's something that every dog owner has to learn how to do. That day, then, the course was called "butt-freezing course".

I was given a map of Halland. I was told to take a long drive exactly 30 miles straight into the woods from my house in Gullbrandstorp, northwest of Halmstad. The dog was going to learn how to track. You teach dogs this for two reasons:

1. So he can find his way home if he gets lost in the woods, and
2. So he can nose out various animal colleagues for the dog's master to murder with a convenient squeeze of a trigger.

As we drove along in the deep, deep woods, both Nils F. and I sat and thought about what the two of us could possibly need these skills for. We never get lost in the woods, since we never venture into the woods. Nor do we have any master who pulls triggers to murder animal colleagues. The most easily motivated of the two of us was me, since the subtitle of the day's schedule was "Learn to be chilly together with your dog".

When we got to the meeting place in the woods we were met by a shocking sight. Arrayed in front of us was a whole roster of dog owners, from polished Dalmatian ladies to Wally Woodsman himself. Each owner had a dog that matched in style, clothing, and taste. But they all had one thing in common – that day (and all other days) they were clad in the entire product line of *Fjällräven* (the Swedish equivalent of LL Bean). The colors of their clothes thus varied from green to green. I reflected as I looked them over in my colorful Tommy Hilfiger jacket that these green outfits must be terribly practical for use in the woods. What happens if one of these people gets lost, as I did once during my military service, when my platoon had to organize a search for me? I learned then that wearing camouflage-colored clothes was an obvious handicap when people are searching for you.

I was the only one in today's "butt-freezing course" to be wearing Bally shoes with "tonsils and cape" from Fifth Avenue to impress those around me. No, on the contrary, these people attract admiration from each other by having boots as big as those Carl XII wore at Fredrikshald; he tried to impress those around him by having disproportionately big boots (and stuffing the legs with cotton to make his legs look heftier). "Wally the Woodsman", who kept his dog in what looks like an armored truck at the course, told me that it's i-m-p-o-r-t-a-n-t to wear big boots in the woods – though he never mentioned why it's important.

The day's coffee break snack, which I brought in a plastic supermarket bag, was brought by all the other participants in 12-gallon backpacks from *Fjällräven*. Each one of these backpacks had a push button that released a folding stool of some sort. I picture Jacques Tati tangling himself up in exactly the same kind of construction in the French film "Mr. Hulot's Holiday". The only difference was that these were all green instead of merrily striped.

This forest was the densest I've seen! The spaces between the trunks of poker-straight pine trees that stretched upwards to flight level 55 were no more than six feet. Since the forest floor had never seen the light of day, it had a sort of sickly, otherworldly look to it. Nothing grew here except a little moss. The animal life consisted of a few anemic-looking ants...and that day...dogs. Fairytale writers specializing in trolls and ogres would have wept with joy at the sight of that forest – it's almost certainly inhabited by all sorts of grim creatures.

The day's tasks were outlined by the nice course instructor. She handed out red bows that each dog owner was to tie along a path that he and his dog were assigned. The distance between the bows was to be about 90 feet. Under the last of the bows the dog's favorite toy was to be placed (in our case, a squeaky football with hamburger and onions). The toy was to be appetizingly garnished with doggie candy (a cute name for slaughterhouse waste products sold at a per-pound price higher than that of filet mignon). Dog candy is used to bribe dogs to do various tricks, like follow a marked path in a forest that's far too dense.

The great moment arrived; Nils F. was taken from the car to the starting point to follow the scent of his doggie candy and his favorite toy, hidden deep in the forest. Since I seemed to have been paying something less than total attention to the directions, the team of "Nils F. and Ben B. Olander" was the last one out from the starting point. Confused, I watched Labradors, German Shepherds, bloodhounds and all the others tear off into the forest with wagging tails and happy leaps, heading straight for their toys and treats. Their owners hung onto their leashes, flung back and forth like dishrags as the dogs raced purposefully towards their goals.

Then it was our turn to demonstrate that we too can find things in the woods, and thus in an emergency find our way home. Nils F. and I stood at the starting line. And that's when it happened! I thought to myself as panic spread through me, "No! No! Please, Nils F., not now... not JUST now! Wait a while, you miserable little dog!"

But Nils persisted. The truth is that he, unlike all other dogs, can speak. Yes, he can! Just then he decided to deliver one of his speeches, just exactly when it was least appropriate. Nils F. (Son of the Wolves) looked deeply into my eyes and bespake me:

"Listen, Old Man! In the first place, you know how that old French guy Louis XIV, the Sun King, who was also a best buddy of Carl XI, decided to raise little lap dogs that his queens and their ladies-in-waiting could tickle under the chin. This was to distract the ladies and allow him and his pal Carl from the north to fiddle in peace with top-level politics. That was when they started to breed my forefathers, and gave us the name "Bichon Frisé". Our only, and I mean ONLY duty here in life is to amuse royalty, as well as people like you, who THINK they're royalty. The only environments we're meant for are palaces, manor houses, and boudoirs. Other dogs may want to track, hunt, kill, herd flocks, track drugs, or whatever. But I, I was just meant to amuse people

who live in castles. Even though you know that, you're still trying to take me out in the woods and expect ME to find the way home – and even hunt up a bunch of things. You can darn well do the tracking yourself – and besides YOU'RE the one who has the map and the car!"

And with that he leaned grumpily against a 400-foot pine tree in a nonchalant pose, as though it were the base of a gilded pillar at Fontainebleau. Trying to reason with Nils at a time like this is pointless. And besides, I really had no argument with his logic. He was absolutely right that I held the trump since I was de facto the driver, the possessor of the map, and moreover was used to heeding calls of nature in a WC. Thus a general cheer arose when I appeared from behind some bushes with Nils F. under my arm. The Son of Wolves was licking his chops expectantly, since he knew that he'd get some banana cake after this performance.

All of the dog owners gathered around a stump that was big enough to serve as a coffee table. "Wally the Woodsman" locked his dog into the armored van, and things got quieter. He had just explained to us all why his poor dog wagged its tail when it hunted its favorite toy. Wally's dog's favorite toy was a murdered bird on a string. The bird was about the same size as Nils F. himself. It was dragged around barbarously by its string, looking rather like a newly harvested scalp after an Indian skirmish. Wally told us that his dog was happy when it could be out hunting (that is, tracking down murdered birds tied to strings). Nils F. and I understood, though, why the dog was happy when it could be out hunting. These were of course the only times he didn't have to cool his heels in the armored car with its padded walls and barred windows.

The day's events were almost over when Ben's butt had become numb with cold. Not even banana bread with hot coffee helped. "Wally the Woodsman" munched contentedly on his moose meat sandwich. Both Nils F. and I noticed that it was about the size of an old-fashioned vinyl LP. Wally was pleased that his cottage-sized dog had learned to track a thoroughly dead animal colleague. Nils F. (Son of the Wolves) and I were mostly happy that we could finally climb into our Mercedes Benz and turn the "fanny grill" on, then drive at a leisurely pace home to our fireplace and the leather-covered Fröding book that the used book dealer in Ystad had kindly supplied for us. Nils F. changed his outfit from his tough collar with the stainless steel spikes to his black velvet collar with four 1-carat diamonds. He passed a satisfied gas bubble and went quietly to sleep in front of the crackling fire. He'd found his way home at last!



Nils F. (Son of the Wolves) where he's happiest. (Note how the species adapts to its environment).