

Owners should use TLC to train family watchdog

By Christopher Lewis
Record Staff Writer

Gandoff was your average docile, friendly golden retriever — not the chained “beware of dog” type with a big bark and a bigger bite.

At least, that’s what his owners thought. One night, they returned home from dinner to find Gandoff cornering an intruder in the closet. An intruder who would need 200 stitches, courtesy of Gandoff’s sudden watchdog prowess.

“He was as sweet as could be. He would not hurt a fly,” said Lisa DuBois of Stockton, a dog trainer who knew Gandoff’s family. “The owners were shocked.”

They shouldn’t have been, DuBois said.

The best watchdogs have a stable, easygoing demeanor — until they sense something is wrong or the owner gives the command to attack.

The secret to training such a dog: Just a little lovin’.

Forming a close bond with your dog and taking a general obedience class together often is more effective than strict protection training, said DuBois. Like Gandoff, a good watchdog is a family-oriented pet that intrinsically senses an owner’s fear and reacts.

“It will be perfectly normal until you turn it on or it’s turned on,” said Marion MacDannald, owner of Guaranteed Dog Training in Stockton.

“People think (the dog) has to be out in the yard, lunging at everybody, barking at the fence,” DuBois said.

That better describes the “area” guard dog that sleeps all day and secures a lot of a business at night, said Janet

Borgens, owner of Delta Guard Dogs in Stockton. Such a dog is easier to train because it needs to be short on manners and social skills.

“They’re barking and carrying on. They cannot wait to get in the van to get to work,” said Borgens, MacDannald’s daughter.

A family watchdog doesn’t need to develop this guard dog mentality, Borgens said. Obedience training and building the dog’s loyalty at home is enough.

“You can teach it to bark for the right reason,” Borgens said, without spending big bucks on a professional “agitator.”

Borgens said most of her protection-training clients call from Stockton as opposed to bedroom communities, such as Manteca. They typically own German shepherds, Rottweilers and Doberman pinschers, which were bred as watchdogs because of their size and temperament.

There’s so much cross-breeding today that temperament is the more trustworthy criterion, trainers say. Even little terriers can sound the alarm — and they’re easier for senior citizens to handle.

“Most terriers have ‘little man syndrome’ — they think they’re big, tough, macho dogs,” DuBois said.

Many protection trainers are profit-minded and don’t truly understand animals, DuBois believes. They turn dogs into overly aggressive animals or “loaded guns” that attack without warning.

It doesn’t help that many people are eager to train their dogs as puppies, DuBois said. Watchdog training should begin no earlier than age 1, and even then at a slow pace, MacDannald said.

“It’s a long process,” MacDannald said.

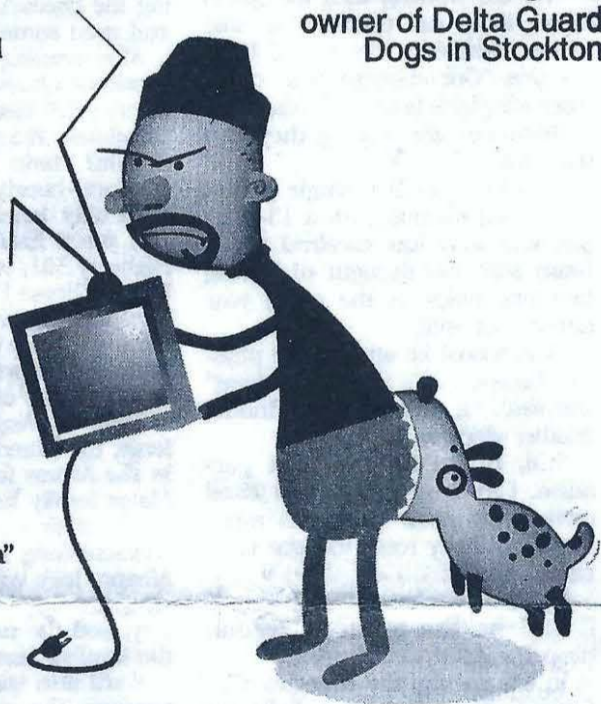
Watchdog training requires an expert with at least 20 years experience, DuBois said, and it demands an owner who will cuddle with a dog that’s still a social animal at heart.

Otherwise, she advises, “Get a goldfish.”

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“You can teach (the family dog) to bark for the right reason.”

— Janet Borgens
owner of Delta Guard
Dogs in Stockton



Choosing top dog

When picking a potential watchdog from a litter, the temperament often is more important than the breed.

Stockton trainer Marion MacDannald has a few suggestions for scouting a trainable dog:

- Pin the puppy upside down, then cup your hand under its stomach and hold it in the air. Too much struggling and wriggling is the sign of a hyper or unreliable watchdog.
- Make a loud noise behind the puppy to make sure it’s not too jumpy.
- Drag a rope or toy in front of the puppy to test its curiosity. Does it sniff or chase the toy?
- Clap your hands and beckon to see if the puppy comes to you.
- Stroke the puppy when it’s standing still — Does it stay or scoot away?
- Look for an independent dog in the litter — although not necessarily the leader of the pack.