

WHO IS TRAINING WHOM?



Am I the one being trained by my dogs? I'm okay with the setup either way.

BY UDAY DEVGAN, MD, FACS, FRCS

As soon as I walk in the door, my two German shepherd dogs (Figures 1 and 2) are there waiting and ready to greet me—tails wagging, mouths grinning, and enthusiasm filling their eyes. Bella and Rico give me the warmest welcome possible each and every time I come home, multiple times a day. They never miss a day, and it never gets old for me.

I often joke with my kids that our dogs may love me more than they do because the dogs listen the first time I tell them to do something. This obedience, however, didn't happen automatically; I spend time every day training these dogs. We spend a few hours together every evening, incorporating multiple 5-minute training sessions, completing a 45-minute walk, and then having some quiet time.

MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

This breed of dog has long been used as service animals for law enforcement, the military, and disabled people. They are smart and can learn almost anything after just a few repetitions. German shepherds are fiercely loyal, family-minded, and full of energy. There is no magic trick to training these dogs, just the need for consistency, affection, and attention. It takes at least a year for these types of dogs to build a strong bond to a human, but once it is there it is a lifelong connection.

Initial training is done with tasty treats, usually morsels of beef, which I grill myself, and then I transition to providing primarily affection as the reward. The time I spend working with my dogs is mutually beneficial. These dogs have the innate ability to read my feelings (better than almost any humans can), and they provide support by being there with

me regardless of the circumstances. Just petting these dogs makes any stress in my life leave my fingertips, dissipate into their fur, and dissolve away.

Our dogs love having a daily routine as much as my family and I do. While we cook dinner, the dogs know it's time to catch a nap. When we eat, they are also fed. After dinner, we do a family walk around the neighborhood—the highlight of our day. The evening walk gives our dogs a chance to explore the environment while we get to enjoy the stroll and the cool Los Angeles evenings. This structured routine is important for our dogs to thrive and feel like part of the pack, and it also provides the exercise that ensures a good night's sleep for them.

PARTS OF THE FAMILY

Bella and Rico are integral parts of the family, especially now that my kids have left for college. It has been said that dogs are God's gift to humans, and I wholeheartedly agree. These canine companions make life much better, but I sometimes wonder if we are training them or they are training us.

We think that, if we provide affection, attention, and delicious treats, the dogs will obey and follow the training we provide. What if the reality is the opposite—that the dogs have decided to reward us with love and obedience to cajole us into providing a nice home, delicious food, a comfy bed, long walks, fun road trips, and even picking up their poops?

Are we training the dogs to do tricks, or are they training us to provide a home? The answer is probably both, and either way, I'll take it. ■

UDAY DEVGAN, MD, FACS, FRCS

- Private practice, Devgan Eye Surgery, Los Angeles
- Partner, Specialty Surgical Center, Beverly Hills, California
- Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology, Jules Stein Eye Institute, UCLA School of Medicine, Los Angeles
- Chief of Ophthalmology, Olive View UCLA Medical Center, Los Angeles
- Member, *CRST* Editorial Advisory Board
- devgan@gmail.com
- Financial disclosure: None

▼ Figure 1. Uday, Bella, and Rico Devgan.



◀ Figure 2. "We are ready for the road trip!" - Rico and Bella Devgan.