

Valentino

A New Orleans travel tail

By Ken Foster

On Valentine's Day 2003, I was driving from Tallahassee to New Orleans to meet friends who were visiting from New York. I pulled into a truck stop just past Gulfport, because I didn't want to be stuck with an empty tank as soon as I got to town. On the way back from paying, I spotted a beautiful fawn-colored eighty-five-pound pit bull sitting patiently outside the station, and I watched as he scampered after a customer. The dog walked alongside the man, sat patiently as the car door was opened, then watched as the car pulled away from him. The dog returned to sit outside the station door and followed another customer to his car. Each time I thought, This must be the owner. Yet, as each of them drove away, I began to suspect that the dog didn't have an owner at all. On the other hand, he was too well behaved to have been abandoned—not that people who abandon dogs need good reason.

I continued to watch him as he followed customers back and forth from the pumps to the register. I saw him walk one man out to his truck and then accompany him as he maintained each part of the truck. "Is that your dog?" I asked. The man shook his head no. The dog went over the weighing station, and seemed to be craning his head to look into the cab of the truck there, but that driver returned and left without him, too. I headed back into the station and asked, "Does anyone belong to that dog out there?"

"Someone dropped him off this morning," the cashier said.

"So I can take him then?"

"If you want him, sure."

When I came back out, he was gone again. Part of me was relieved, but another part knew that I would continue to wonder what had become of him, so I kept looking. "He went over there," someone said, pointing toward the embankment down to the highway. I looked over the guardrail and there he was, wandering alongside the traffic exiting I-10. I climbed over the rail and down the muddy embankment after him.

This is not what you should do when you spot a dog along the road. But the closer I got to him, the more frightened I was at what might happen if I didn't get him away from the road. Fortunately, he was thirsty and drinking from a mud puddle, so I managed to catch up to him and take him by the collar.

Don't ever take a strange dog by the collar. It puts your hand and arm directly in range of his mouth. I sensed, against sense, that I had nothing to fear in this case, and led him back up the hill and into my van. I can't remember why I didn't put him into the back of the van, where I actually have a dog grid set up to keep the animals in the cargo area. He settled into the passenger's seat, and I pulled onto the highway, talking to him the entire time. After a few minutes he began leaning toward me. Then he put a paw on my lap. Next he was sitting on top of me, turning to face me, and settling down with his back to the road, his face staring directly into mine.

I couldn't even see the road. "What are you doing?" I asked, nervous, a little, to find out. I didn't think he would attack me, but we were in a closed-in space, on the road—not a place to find out. Out came his tongue, and the kisses began. Now I was laughing, and still unable to see where I was going.

"You're going to have to go back to your seat," I said, not expecting him to listen. Yet he immediately went back to the passenger's side and stayed there for the rest of the drive to New Orleans. At this point I was late, and was due at lunch with my friends. I called from the car to tell them the news.

"I may be a little late," I said. "There was a pit bull at the gas station . . ."

"What did you do with it?" my friends asked, probably aware of what the answer would be.

"He's here with me in the car."

"We aren't ever going to see you, are we? You're going to spend the weekend with that dog."

"I'm just running late," I said.

I tried calling other friends, who lived in New Orleans, and kept getting machines. "Hi," I said in their voice mail, "I just drove into town and I found a terrific pit bull. I'm trying to find a place he can stay, maybe just for a few days . . ." No one picked up. No one returned the call. And really, who can blame them?



The Louisiana SPCA is open seven days a week, and it is nearly always bustling with action. The dog was excited as we drove through the city and whimpered at little at the sight of dogs being walked just outside his window. I had decided to name him Valentino, because of the holiday, and because I hoped that a pit bull with a romantic name might get better treatment in the shelter. Better, certainly, than "Stray Pit Bull." The woman at the front desk patiently answered all my questions about what would happen to him after I left, and told me that he would be held in quarantine for five days before he was adoptable, that I wouldn't be able to visit him during that time, that pit bulls were hard to place, and that for a ten-dollar fee they would call and notify me if he was going to be put down. She told me all of this between answering the phone, tending to other walk-ins who were either looking for a dog or wanting to drop one off or, in one case, hoping to trade one in for a smaller model. Every time we were interrupted I tried calling people again to find him another temporary home. Meanwhile Valentino sat patiently at my feet, watching all the action around him.

Finally I signed him over, and the woman at the desk said, "We don't do this, but if you want you can come with me and check him in." So off we went, down the long hall to a room where a man and woman spent their entire day giving injections and wormer to the never-ending line of dogs checked in. I wasn't concerned about the people or the facilities. My concern was the dog himself. I had no idea what he had experienced in his life, or how he might respond to being shut into a kennel. I wanted to see for myself how he took it, so I could fight for him later, if it came to that.

At the time I had no idea why I felt so committed to him, so certain that he was worth whatever it might take to save him. The answer, of course, was Rocco.

Valentino behaved beautifully, following all of our cues down a narrow corridor, into a room where he quickly received shots and a worming treatment from a team of vet techs who clearly had the system down—who holds the dog, who gives the shots, who squirts the worming liquid in his mouth and sends him on his way. Next, we walked through the kennel, and Valentino ignored the barking dogs along the way to settle into his own little space before yelping a little as I forced myself to walk away. I told the volunteer that I was worried about the other dogs, that if they weren't friendly Valentino might respond—if they barked at him, he might bark back and then be labeled as a troubled dog. Everything I had seen from him suggested that he was no trouble at all, but that didn't mean that in a kennel environment things might not change.

From the SPCA I went to straight to the Three Dog Bakery on Royal Street, to order a cake for my dogs Brando and Zephyr, a giant frosted peanut butter bone decorated with their names. We would celebrate the anniversary, I decided, as soon as I got home.

The following day was the Barkus parade, an annual dog parade through the French Quarter that raises money for local animal groups. I had been to one of the first ones, ten years earlier, with a handful of people parading their dogs through the Quarter. I wasn't prepared for how large it had grown: They now limited registration to a thousand. There are floats, canine grand marshals, lavish costumes. The theme that year was the Wild West, and the parade began with men dressed as horses

pulling tiny stagecoaches driven by Chihuahuas in cowboy hats and plaid shirts. Although we hadn't made strict plans, my friends knew that if they stood in front of the Three Dog Bakery long enough they would run into me. When I picked up the dog cake Ben asked, "Do you really think the dogs will know whether or not you had their names put on it?" Sharyn was more supportive of the idea, insisting that I open the box and show the cake off for her camera while we sat in a bar ordering drinks.

After Barkus, I went back to the SPCA, where they broke the rules again and let me visit with Valentino. He seemed happy to see me, and sat at attention as soon as I appeared. He had obviously been trained by someone, and yet here he was. Did his owner get tired of him? Had he done something wrong? Could someone not realize

this wonderful dog was missing?

On the way back to Florida, I began to drive off at each exit in Mississippi, looking for the truck stop where I had found this little man. When I finally found it, I went in to ask if anyone had come back looking for their dog. No, they hadn't. On the way out, I looked up to get the name of the station to add to the dog's file at the SPCA.

It was at Love's Truck Stop that I met Valentino. It was like something out of a Tennessee Williams play.

Ken Foster is the author of the bestselling memoir *The Dogs Who Found Me* and a collection of essays, *Dogs I Have Met*, both published in the US by Lyons Press. His work has also appeared in *Salon*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Village Voice*, *Paper*, and dozens of other publications. His collection of short stories, *The Kind I'm Likely to Get*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book. He lives in New Orleans with his dogs: Brando, a pit bull/Great Dane mix; Zephyr, a rottweiler/shepherd; and

Sit Happens

Tips and Techniques with Trudi Thorpe



Photo by Animax

Hi Trudi,

I've just become the proud owner of a gorgeous 10-week old Golden Retriever puppy. We have a swimming pool in the garden which I'm sure he'll love when he's a bit bigger, and I assume that as he's a dog he'll automatically know how to swim, but how do I make sure he's safe around the pool?

Thanks,
Peta Stanford

Hi Peta

Swimming pools can present a real and serious danger to dogs that are unfamiliar with them.

The issue of water safety, especially around pools, is an important one that must be seriously considered and addressed. Just as it is vitally important to take all necessary safety precautions with children and swimming pools it is just as vital to do the same for our pets. Dogs and puppies can and do drown every year in the backyard pool and despite the fact that dogs are naturally better swimmers than us, it is estimated that more dogs drown in backyard swimming pools each year than people.

This is largely due to the fact once in, it's virtually impossible for them to get out. Falling into a pool creates panic and frantic response behaviour and all effort goes into survival mode. Dogs that are unfamiliar with a pool won't instinctually know where the stairs are or how to get to them safely. Struggling to keep their heads above water, it is impossible for them to see stairs because they are under water. They will naturally make their way over to the side of the pool (often to where they fell in) and to try to pull themselves out. This is manoeuvre is virtually impossible because of the steep edges of the pool and the more they try and fail, the more the panic sets in. Panic quickly leads to exhaustion and ultimately drowning.

You don't mention if your pool has a cover, but it is worth noting here that pool covers can be just as dangerous as an open pool. To a dog they can appear to be just another surface to run on but the weight of the dog can cause the cover to sink in the middle enveloping the dog or worse still collapsing and allowing the dog to slip underneath it. It is also a good idea to ensure that no toys are left in and around the pool that may encourage your puppy to go and get them.

The most important step in keeping him safe is to NEVER allow your puppy access to the pool or the pool area unsupervised. Being a golden retriever, chances are your little fella is going to love the water BUT this doesn't mean that he'll be a great swimmer right from the start or even that he'll instinctively know how to swim. You'll need to TEACH your puppy to swim. Be patient and take things slowly, this needs to be a positive experience. Start by gently placing him on the top step of the pool and rewarding him. Don't restrain or force him to stay there. Continue this over time until he is confident on that step then move onto the next step down. Remember to praise and reward him each time you practice each step. Once he is doing 2 steps comfortably, its time to get in the pool with him because on the third step down his feet will no longer touch the bottom. Pick him up outside of the pool and supporting his body with your arms underneath his chest walk down the stairs and gently lower him into the water. Allow him to swim over the third step and jump up the first 2 steps. As he becomes more confident at this step, you can slowly move further out. Doing it this way not only teaches him to swim but also where the steps are. The more relaxed he is, the quicker he will learn to effectively propel himself through the water instead of wildly splashing around.

Whilst on this subject, I thought it worth adding that water safety also extends beyond the backyard pool to beaches, dams, rivers and creeks and as we move into summer its worth considering that these other bodies of water can also prove to be hazardous to dogs with conditions such as currents, slippery rocks and submerged branches etc.

With a combination of supervision, precaution and appropriate swimming training your puppy will remain safe you will enjoy some great times together in and around the water.

Trudi Thorpe runs a dog behaviour and training company, dogLOGIC, based in Sydney. As Trudi says "DOGS, DOGS, DOGS... A childhood obsession that I never grew out of." She devises and implements individual behavioural strategies and obedience techniques based on 18 years of studying dog problems and problem dogs.

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