



Top dog

MARK TAKES TRAINING TO NEW HEIGHTS

THE ANIMAL BEHAVIOURIST TELLS HOW TO GET YOUR PET POOCH OFF TO A FLYING START

Mark with four of his ruff but well-trained buddies.

Dogs can't fly – right? If you're Mark Vette, they certainly can!

The renowned animal behaviourist, who you'll probably recognise from the hit series *Purina Pound Pups* to *Dog Stars*, has definitely taken dog training to new heights – and that thought was never more real to Mark when he found himself sitting in the back of a Cessna 172M, while his Labrador-German shepherd cross Reggie took the controls.

"It's something else when you're sitting in a plane and the dog's banging the plane into a 70-degree bank and doing a figure eight all by himself!" Mark confirms. "It's pretty amazing, I must say. Next to a dog driving a car, it's probably the most amazing experience I've had."

Mark has taught dogs to fly planes and to drive cars. And while your average dog owner might not be able to recreate these experiences, they can create a harmonious life-long bond with their pet with the help of his book *Dog Zen*.



PROFILE

The book is a dog-training handbook, with tips that Mark, who has been a Buddhist since he was 17, has picked up from 40 years of clinical practice and research. When he's not teaching dogs to do amazing things for the telly, Mark runs a behaviour clinic from his large West Auckland property that deals with, among other things, aggression, separation anxiety, overeating and problem barkers.

"We run a three-week in-residence clinic for the really difficult cases," says Mark. "I also consult on the less difficult cases and give people advice on what to do."

Mark's top tip for would-be dog owners is to get your pup at about seven to eight weeks.

"That's the start of the formative period. The critical piece of information that people need to understand is that two-to-four-month period is the time. Get them at two months and in the next few months do lots of socialising with all sorts of people – gender, race, age, especially kids and different species – cats, sheep and chickens, as well as other dogs.

The more you get them to interact and socialise, the more their true dog nature comes out and the more docile and sociable they'll be."

In *Dog Zen*, Mark explains how to train and understand your puppy, along with how to treat the 10 most common behaviour problems in dogs.

"If we actually did the right thing in that formative period and everyone was educated to know what to do in that formative period, then we would decrease the 13,000 bites we're seeing each year. It's unnecessary and it's largely due to people not doing the right thing in that time. It's not rocket science, it's quite simple."

He also points out the pitfalls of putting the wrong dog in the wrong environment. Choosing a breed to match your lifestyle, activity level and size of your property is crucial.

"I see it a lot in the clinic where there's a mismatch of dog to owner. An older person, for example, with a big mastiff that pulls them around or a border collie that needs lots of running and exercise, and that's not what he or she does."

Mark strongly advocates choosing dogs that easily fit into our society. "We need less of the guard function, less of the fighting breeds and to wind back from status symbols or protectors we have in our society. Certainly dogs can and will do that, but it often leads to more problems.

"I encourage people to try and cultivate the dog's qualities of sociability, which we've selected for more than 40,000 years to live happily in our society and community. It is a predator, so to raise a predator well and have a sociable animal in our lives, you need to make sure that formative period is treated in the right way."

However, if you miss that crucial early period, dogs can be rehabilitated. After all, Reggie – who can fly a plane – is a rescue dog.

"A lot of people are interested in a bringing a rescue dog into the home and the book is designed with that in mind. First of all, you should have a little bit of experience. If this is your first dog, don't

jump straight into a difficult dog. However, I encourage people who have compassion for canines to definitely take on a rescue dog. It does take more effort, but it's very rewarding."

As well as the skies, Mark has taken dog training into the cyber world. He has a 30-video series online that is a companion to the book, where you can watch him working with a dog on a particular problem. Also Reggie is on mobile messaging app Snapchat (Reggie Does Snaps).

"He takes his own snaps and downloads them onto Snapchat. It's all a dog's eye view, of course. There are a lot of dog bums, feet and fire hydrants," laughs Mark.

"The point of it is about trying to see the world through a dog's eyes so you understand they perceive and sense the world differently to us. Gaining an appreciation of their world helps you to understand your dog and therefore truly love it."

Amy Prebble



A salute from the clever canine, who has become a social media star and was the world's first dog to fly.



Reggie with his specially modified Snapchat glasses.

Mark & Reggie ON TOUR

Meet Mark and Reggie when they make appearances around the country. If you're struggling with any dog behaviour issues, this is your chance to come and have a chat with Mark after the event. Gore (March 13), Dunedin (March 14), Oamaru (March 15), Hokitika (March 16), Blenheim (March 19), Wellington (March 20), Masterton (March 20), Levin (March 21), Palmerston North (March 21), Dannevirke (March 22), Waipawa (March 22), Hastings (March 23) and Taupo (March 23).

For full event details, visit penguin.co.nz/events/

PHOTO: GUY SPENCER/GETTY IMAGES