

Sophie's Dream

by Lynne Baker

Sophie Learns To Play

It's hard to believe that Sophie came to be part of my little family over a year ago, or that she is even the same dog. Her transformation to some is unremarkable, for me it's been nothing short of absolutely amazing. She came to us as a healthy 3 ½ year old but incredibly fearful, untrusting, prone to panic attacks and lacking any social skills. Today she has evolved into a nearly always confident, bossy, beautiful girl who wants nothing more than to please. She is still wary of men and people in general upon first encounter, but warms quickly to children, young adults, and women. Her panic attacks are few and far between tending to be her way of telling me she is uncertain and needs a little reassurance. What a far cry from the attacks that meant, "There is no way I'm going there or think again, if you think I'm doing that!"

Being new to the breed and the rescue world I needed advise and counsel. I've met a wonderful group of Berner owners who have been nothing short of wonderful, reassuring, and full of great knowledge and advice. Along with the great people there have been those who have made me feel I was doing a disservice to Sophie by allowing her to unpack and become part of the family before forcing situations that I knew would cause a panic attack. Those who know the breed and her history gave me useful advice, listened to my concerns, and convinced me that with time and continued work she could heal emotionally.

Credit must go to Tanner, a 2-year-old collie-shepherd mix for the part he has played in her recovery. Tanner is a happy, curious clown. He has shown her that life is good, play is fun, and doing what Mom asks is always the right decision. Sophie was given time to settle in and realize that this was her home, we were her pack, and sometimes the choice was hers to partake in our activities. She has always been included in our activities, but in the beginning waited in the car while we went to therapy visits, agility, or obedience classes. I wanted her to decide to join us. She made her decision and now attends obedience classes weekly, calmly watches agility class and patiently waits while Tanner does his therapy work. Our hope is that a CGC title and perhaps rally obedience class is in her future.



It hasn't been easy; our first obedience class was an absolute disaster. I was determined that she would attend and she had no intention of going in that building! We were covered in mud by the time we got inside. She was so frightened that her tongue swelled, her eyes glazed, and if her head wasn't firmly attached it would have been spinning around. Now many months later she heels off leash and stays in a 3 minute down with me on the other side of the room. Her recalls are perfect, although "finish" means flip and sit on mom's feet. My giggles haven't helped correct that behavior. We still have work to do together but she learns quickly and wants nothing more than to show me that she can and will do what I ask.

Sophie has weathered all the changes I've thrown at her like a trooper. Recently we moved to a new house in a new state. I spent a few sleepless nights planning the move and worrying about how she would handle this latest upheaval. I was so certain that Tanner would make the move without skipping a beat and Sophie might back slide a bit. I brought the dogs to the new house 3 times before we moved in for what I now call yard visits hoping to ease the transition a little. How wrong I was, Sophie nearly knocked me down getting into the house the first time and Tanner was glued to my side. Tanner worried for days until the boxes started to disappear. Sophie on the other hand reacted as if to say it's about time you brought us home. What a girl!

As I end this Sophie is leaning on my leg with a paw wrapped around my knee and her head on my thigh. She and Tanner have just finished an invigorating game of tug and chase. Not a day goes by that I don't smile in awe as she discovers toys, games, and a how wonderful life can be. There is nothing better than being greeted by a bouncing happy girl at the end of a day of work.

Update: 18 months later

Sophie earns her CGC!!

Okay, I'm back! A few months ago I wrote about my experience with Sophie my rescue, and how she was developing from a shy fearful girl into a beautiful bossy lady. Her emotional healing during the last 18 months has at times truly amazed me. It warms my heart to look into eyes that sparkle now and were filled with fear and distrust when she came home to live with us.

That is just about enough gushing, I think I'll move on to boasting. Sophie earned her CGC on Friday June 10th at Camp Gone to the Dogs. When we got home I wanted to march up and down the streets of Keene shouting "*Sophie earned her CGC*" not caring who knew what I was talking about or thought I'd lost my mind. Instead, I called all of my friends and family and now am telling all of you about Sophie's incredible accomplishment. We went to camp with hopes of giving the CGC test a try but thinking it might still be a goal that was slightly out of reach. This week was to be my vacation with the dogs, being with them and having fun!

After registering on Sunday I sat down with the list of classes and activities to decide what we would be doing for the next week. If you've ever been to camp you know you need to be 8 people to fit in all the classes and activities you'd like to try. Let's see, rally obedience for Sophie, agility for Tanner, CGC class for Sophie, TDI class for Tanner, lectures for Mom, and oh yea hiking, and leash making, and herding, and weight pulling, and, and, and. Luckily we were sitting on a grassy hill overlooking beautiful Vermont scenery and took a few really deep breaths. I decided that we'd hike early in the morning either with the group or alone just the three of us and then move on to more structured activities. The CGC/TDI class was important to me and unfortunately conflicted with agility and rally so we marched off to CGC/TDI. The week was so hot and muggy that we spent our afternoons sitting under a tent enjoying the breeze and listening to incredibly talented instructors.

As the week progressed I watched my shy girl begin to approach complete strangers. The girl who had even the day before we left for camp shied away from friendly hands was willingly approaching people. Treats run rampant at camp and are dispensed at almost alarming rates. Frankly I didn't care, she was learning to broaden her safety zone and I could cut back on breakfast and dinner to compensate for the extra treats. Construction was going on all week on the grounds, mid week blasting started. The dogs and I were sitting under a tent mid morning when horns started going off. Apparently if you've been in a construction zone before you know exactly what the horn means, I had no idea. A few minutes later the construction crew yelled something I couldn't understand and people moved to the other side of the athletic field. Hum, what was going on I wondered when the first explosion erupted. I reacted more than either Tanner or Sophie they just glanced at me and then went back to looking at the crowd on the other side of the field.



That was when I decided that perhaps the goal was closer than we thought. We practiced during the afternoon on Wednesday and Thursday asking other campers as they walked by to assist in one part or another. Thursday morning Tanner tested for TDI certification and passed with flying colors, although they tell me he is not a search and rescue dog. Friday morning I looked at Sophie and said, "Let's go have some fun!" I talked non stop through the test, my beautiful girl prancing at my side and looking up at me with amazing focus. I won't play by play the entire test but the 3 minute out of sight was almost painful for me, she was fine. When I walked back to join Sophie and the tester shook my hand congratulating us. I wanted to cry.

We will be going back to camp next summer. I'm going to try rally and weight pulling with Sophie and herding and agility with Tanner. We will hike again in the morning sit under trees on grassy slopes and just spend the week being together.

I am so proud of Tanner and Sophie that I will tell absolutely anyone who will listen!