



# SDT Training News



**SERVICE DOG  
TRAINING**

Volume 3, Issue 4

June 2011

## LEILA & PHILLIP'S BOND

Leila, our 9 month old groodle, is not reluctant to display her happiness when a member of her pack returns to the fold. Like a dolphin delighted at seeing a boat, she will jump, seemingly, a metre or so into the air, when I come home from work or when we say good morning to each other. Her enthusiasm is boundless; running and jumping with endless energy.

A groodle, as you no doubt know, is part poodle and part golden retriever; and Leila's mix is 3/4: 1/4, and as a result she looks like a black smallish full-size poodle with a slight brownish tinge in her coat round her nose; the latter being slightly less pointy than your average poodle's but no less interested in the smells of her world. Running, she has those cartoonish ears that seem to move independently of the rest of her body, and flip over her head.

Phillip, my 10 year old son, shares her enthusiasm but, unlike most boys his age, never jumps or runs. He would love to; in fact, a couple of years ago, in the early days of his steroid treatment, he proudly showed that he could jump and even if it was no more than a couple of centimetres it was still a great achievement for our brave boy. At that time he could kick a ball around and, within the limits of the disease, showed great ball skills. If only! Now even the ability to jump 2 centimetres has gone and he can barely walk unaided.



Phillip suffers from Duchenne, a form of muscular dystrophy. Only found in boys [1 in 3,500], it is the mutation of a gene on the X chromosome. The gene is responsible for the production of a protein called dystrophin in our muscles that keeps them strong. Without dystrophin the muscle fibres break and lose their strength.

Young children use another protein, utrophin, as well as dystrophin but this phases out around the age of 6. As a result Duchenne boys seem a little slower in getting around than their healthy counterparts but nothing seriously abnormal emerges until around 6 when most are diagnosed. Phillip now gets around in a wheelchair.



A few years back I thought of having an assistant animal for Phillip but discovered the minimum age for being granted a fully trained service dog from Assistance Dogs Australia is 18 years of age. We decided to select our own dog and get advice from a trainer on how to mould her into a service dog. This turned out to be a lot of fun: choosing the right puppy, the right breed, the right sex, waiting for the puppies to be born, then bringing her home and now training her. The choice of dog was very important as we regularly visit relatives who are asthmatic and very much allergic to dogs as a rule, except for Leila, the Groodle!



Of course, it was wonderful when trainer Hans agreed to train Leila. His experience and enthusiasm is rapidly moulding Leila from a cute puppy into a real service dog.

Leila's role will be to assist Phillip with everyday tasks such as opening doors, picking up objects, moving around, getting help, but most of all to provide devoted companionship for many years to come. She and Phillip play together like brother and sister. However, she knows that once her training jacket goes on - she may no longer be silly. Her jacket means "working" and she does her job beautifully. She walks attentively next to the wheelchair, she patiently waits in queues, she pays attention to Phillip's commands and needs. In particular, she remains calm and undistractedly in crowds now. And she tries very hard!

Not yet one year old, Leila still has much to learn such as fetch things or summon help for Phillip. These require really expert training and this is where Hans, an expert in training service dogs, has begun to create such a difference with Leila. Already she is able to perform well with the tasks that she has been trained in, and we expect, with Hans' assistance to expand her skills to getting items for Phillip and summoning assistance for him when he needs it.

She is becoming such a competent and useful animal. Hans manages this without losing any of Leila's bright personality: she knows clearly when she is working and when she is at play. This is important because a ten year old boy needs a lively friend as much as he needs assistance. At her current rate of learning, it will not be long before Leila will be picking up dropped objects and summoning help for Phillip.

Hans is very skilled at identifying Leila's weaknesses and correcting them - when he notices a shortcoming in her behaviour he plans training lessons specifically to address them, and he persists with his training lessons until it is resolved. For example, Leila had trouble with tight spaces: she became very jumpy and wouldn't go into these, so we did a lot of tight space training and now she maintains her professional demeanour in these situations.

Another shortcoming was Leila's reaction to sudden noises, particularly cars driving past. These would distract her attention from Phillip. With Hans' help, she has become totally ambivalent to sudden traffic sounds. Leila is always very excited to see the wheelchair --- becoming professional is fun to Leila. It is nice to see someone happy about the wheelchair, believe me! It gives me a boost at an otherwise bad moment.

### COOKIE'S TIP:



**My mum taught me to put my toys away by holding a treat over the toy basket, when I bought her a toy, I would drop the toy to get the treat. At the end of a busy day everything is put away and mum hasn't had to do it.**