

The Rottweiler - Assistance Dog

A True Companion in Any Situation

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I am a Swedish writer and clicker trainer who has been asked to share my experiences with the readers of TTRM. I live my daily life with a Rottie lady, "Nova", who came to the family in June 2003. By then, she was an 8-week old furball with a strong eagerness to chew on almost everything. Being paralyzed in my left side, I have one arm to work with. So, you can guess that this smart puppy sometimes was cheap when she decided to bite in my hand, knowing I had no physical possibilities to throw her away.

Why did I choose a Rottweiler as my service dog? When the "normal" thing would have been to ask for a Labrador, maybe even previously trained? In the July issue of TTRM, I think I have answered most of these questions; Rottweiler has been the breed of my heart ever since the first one (Bergsgårdens Happy) scratched her initials in my heart with her claws...and, yes, it is easy to fall in love with a good Rottie! So, I decided to give it a try again, in spite of the handicap I live with today. My male life companion did not have much experience of the breed, but said "If you tell me that it is the right dog I have no objection. But, where do we find the right puppy?"

We did not know how right he was when he was feeling doubt in front of the great amount of Rottweiler puppies that are for sale in different contexts. The more I learn, the smaller my surprise is... and, when it came to my knowledge that there are breeders who still actively use animals who have left puppies suffering from for instance epilepsy, deafness or other illnesses not shown in the official registers - well, then I feel great gratitude that I was lucky enough to find my dog in that "jungle".



Nova - carrying pot; she then puts it in the sink

Nova (registered as Grozzos Hertan) was from the beginning, "the retriever of her litter". Her interest for things (all kinds of things!) has always been something extra, and at the age of 4 months, she pulled out a

hidden treasure from under the bookshelf; Some weights belonging to the bar bell. After that, the step was not a very big to start retrieving other things made of metal. For instance, tin cans which she carries from the pantry and delivers close to the stove, where I can get use of them.

The ability to retrieve big and heavy things is important - but an assistance dog also needs to be careful with more fragile things. Of course, the training has required some material during the education (...) and some of my favourite socks and scarves are not exactly in mint condition after Novas' youth.

But today, she picks up everything I drop, no matter if it is a stamp, a banknote or a small coin. And I need not worry that she would drop or "kill" the things. When she is working in the kitchen, she also carries paper bags with flour, milk tetras and packages with eggs without breaking anything.

In her daily work, she helps me with lots of tasks. Maybe the most important is that Nova serves as an excellent "starter motor" that motivates me to begin dealing with another day, defying pain and other inconveniences. Her very expression gives me strength and I wonder how many times a day she makes me laugh. When someone comes with your shoes, and reliably puts them under your pillow to remind you that it is time to stop snoozing...and when you look at that someone; ears carried high, bright eyes and the tail slowly waving...she turns around to get your pants and carefully folds them before draping her lips over them and delivering... Well, it is not easy being a stubborn bore when your dog gives you so much, is it?!



Nova closing a cupboard door



Nova - helping me take off my shoes and socks

So, I force myself to get up and out. On our way through the house, Nova helps me to close doors, which is important since we live in the north of Sweden where the winters are heavy. And with me walking at the speed of a snail it would require one extra hour if I should have to turn around and close all doors by myself.

Except for "practical tasks" such as emptying the washing machine and lift up logs for the fire when my balance is so bad I do not dare bend my knees close to the hot stove, Nova also is an inspiring "star" when it comes to "useless" party tricks. The first thing I taught her was to shake her head when she was

asked "Are you a fighting dog?" Another of her greatest show pieces is when she picks up small coins and puts them in the slot of a money box. To work with waste sorting, separating plastic from paper and metal is something we started training this summer, just for fun. (Don't tell Nova, but, actually, I could make that without her...).



Nova getting firewood for the stove

We have also trained some freestyle moments. I cannot "dance" - but, Nova can. And, with the inspiration of communication, she runs around me in all directions, whirling, dancing forwards, backwards and bowing at the words "Let's play!"

To get new challenges is often rewarding in itself, but, sometimes she is also reinforced with a high praise voltage in the shape of a tug-of-war-rope. Without knowing it, Nova at the same time, serves as a physiotherapist, far more inspiring than most human medical staff. And when it comes to dog training, this can be an excellent way to "sharpen the on/off button". Thirty seconds of total attachment - then, I whisper "Break!" and get the rope. Back to work, now at a more intense speed.

A short pause when she lays down. Back to work again and - yes! - finally she is rewarded with one more minute of playing. After completed session, she puts her beloved toy in a drawer and closes it.

When Nova was 2½ years old, we passed an examination arranged by the Association of Nordic Assistance Dogs. Personally, I did not exactly need to gain an official title - I already knew that Nova was my perfect companion - and living in the country does not exactly require an official insignia to be allowed to leave home. (If you live in a town where dogs are not accepted at all places, shopping centers, buses etc., you are more likely to feel extra handicapped if your service dog does not have any certificate on its competence).

On the other hand, I regarded it important to show that the Rottweiler could very well serve as a competent assistance dog - and that was my main goal with our 500 kms one-way-trip to get through the test. She was the first Rottie to be examined in Sweden; but, today we also have 1 hearing dog, 2 diabetes dogs and 2 more service dogs who are Rottweilers. So maybe, we helped to open some carefully closed doors...

I have heard prejudices from people who refuse to believe that Nova (and her fellow companions) are "real" Rottweilers. But, with my experience, I definitely do not think we need to worry that Rotties working in this branch will lose "the basic qualities of a



*Nova - "Flower power?!"
Photo by: Zandra Dahl*

typical Rottie". We have passed through the Mental Description as well as the Mental Test (gaining the Swedish title KORAD) with good results. Nova is - no doubt about it! - a Rottweiler and a competent working dog. The only "remarkable" things with Nova is that she is exceptionally interested in following me; but, on the other hand, she has all the time reacted positively to contacts taken by the judge/leader of test.

Today, Nova is 6½ years old, grey under her chin but otherwise a very happy and go-ahead dog with an unflinching wish to "read my thoughts" and tries to find the solution when I (step-by-step) teach her something new.

One of the fascinating things with clicker training is that we both have the same goal: I want to explain my wishes, for her to do right and give me a reason to click. She, on her hand, always strives to find out what I mean and what made me click. A small amount of treats (maybe a slice of carrot or some pellets from her tight breakfast ration) really is a low price to make us both satisfied. This is definitely what I would call "a win/win concept"!

Sometimes, I am asked if the Rottweiler is an extremely easily trained breed since a handicapped person like me has been able to teach a dog as much as Nova can? I dare say NO! Actually, there are very few people that I recommend buying a Rottie. They are headstrong, personal and know their own value. They are bred to work as farming, herding and guarding dogs - when it is needed. On the other hand, a stable, grown up Rottweiler can relax in any situation, which is a great advantage when talking about assistance dogs.

The life as an assistance dog provides several positive things that go very well along with the origin of the breed. The opportunity to live together with "the flock" 24 hours a day with relevant tasks to work with is the normal circumstance for the German farming dogs. Unfortunately, that is something quite unusual in today's society. Way too many dogs spend seemingly endless hours alone, waiting for their beloved family members to come home. Waiting for something to happen, getting a chance to help their flock and feel that they are needed.

In many ways, I can feel that we are privileged that can live and work together in this way. But that is another story, far behind my intentions for this article. So, for today, I stop here - and send you all lots of greetings from us in the North of Sweden!



*L-R: Basse, Asa & Nova
Photo by: Goran Ericson*



Asa & Nova sharing an apple