

Fall 2011

## The Dog Whisperer

Laura Davis  
*Linfield College*

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### Recommended Citation

Davis, Laura (2011) "The Dog Whisperer," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 8 : No. 2 , Article 12.  
Available at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield\\_magazine/vol8/iss2/12](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol8/iss2/12)

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# The dog whisperer

## Bond with dogs key to success

Lucy gazes indifferently around the Linfield College Oak Grove, but the minute she hears the gentle command, “Lucy come,” she’s all ears – literally. Her 5-inch corgi ears shoot attentively into the air, ready to listen to Zachary Davis ’14.

Davis and Lucy, his 11-year-old rescued Pembroke Welsh corgi, have received the most American Kennel Club titles of any junior handler or dog team in the U.S. Lucy has 39 titles while Polo, Davis’ border collie, has 14. For his efforts, Davis was one of 27 students nationwide to win a 2011 scholarship from the club. The renewable scholarship can be awarded through graduate school.

While most competitors get their dogs as puppies, Davis adopted both of his animals well into their adulthood. Lucy was almost four, and Polo was two. Davis, then a middle school student, joined a 4-H dog club to bolster training and progressed to AKC shows within a year, competing in obedience and agility competitions.

Now, Lucy is a star student and has even mastered scent discrimination. She is able to choose from a pile of 12 bone-shaped objects and find the one Davis touched. She can also trace the path of a person walking a random route, up to 1,000 yards. Patience, cheese and lots of praise are key to scent training.

“Practice is the secret,” said Davis without hesitation. “I put in the time. You have to keep rehearsing your performance with your dog. You’re working as a team together.”

At Linfield, Davis is studying math, elementary education and music. He is a pianist with a Linfield chamber ensemble, participates in the Mathematical Contest in Modeling and has also volunteered at Sue Buel School, Kids on the Block and the Linfield Pre-kindergarten.

Even with his busy Linfield schedule, Davis still finds time to work with his dogs and compete in AKC shows, such as obedience, rally, agility and tracking. Polo is currently working toward his master agility championship and was recently recognized nationally by the Border Collie Society of America for having the highest combined scores in rally obedience.

Davis’s success as a trainer may stem from the fact that he is a model student, according to Jill Timmons, professor of music, who encouraged him

to consider Linfield after hearing a piano performance in high school.

“He’s a very fine piano student,” she said. “He’s always prepared, but more than that, he’s humbled by the music and comes to each lesson ready to learn something new. It’s an ideal approach to one’s college education.”

Davis said a number of dog training strengths transfer to other areas of his life, including academics. He is better able to handle stress, remain calm and juggle multiple tasks at a time. He’s also learned the importance of advance preparation.

“I prepare months in advance for a dog show,” said Davis, who hopes to one day teach at a college, but will continue to train dogs as a hobby. He may also become an AKC judge. “That’s similar to my vector calculus homework. I know there will be a test in a month, and I have to prepare now.”

Over correction is one of the most common training mistakes, according to Davis. Aggressive handlers often yank on the leash or yell if the dog doesn’t perform correctly.

“Dogs will become discouraged,” he said. “It’s best to use positive reinforcement such as food or toy rewards, instead of over correcting.”

For those wrestling with a disobedient dog, Davis says there’s hope.

“Stick with it,” he said. “You just need to work with them enough. All dogs have potential.” 🐾

– Laura Davis

