

DOG AGILITY SHOW: The United States Dog Agility Association's Spring Festival of Dog Agility competition will be held today and tomorrow from 8 a.m. until finish at the Fredericksburg Field House, 3411 Shannon Park Drive, Fredericksburg. Dogs, mixed breed and purebred, must be preregistered to compete. Spectators welcome, but no unregistered dogs. For details, visit usdaa.com.

LET'S BARK! IT'S SPRING!



DEVOTED
TO
DOGS >>

SARAH A.
FERRELL

WELCOME, spring! Birds chirp and cheep at first light. Our dogs, Vivien and Gabriel, applaud daylight-saving time; bird patrol and deer-watch vigilance start early.

We forgot to close the bedroom blinds before we went to bed. Vivien commences hurling herself into the front windows, eager to run outside and patrol her fence line.

Do we wonder what mischief has riled watchdog Vivien to fever pitch? Do we ask ourselves what could drive her to slam her shoulder with the force of a catapulting linebacker into the bedroom window?

No. We instantly recognize her maniacal "Let me go outside!" greeting to spring. We heap blame upon the grizzled head of the dastardly squirrel, boldly leaping onto Vivien's much-watched bird feeder.

Gabriel, our big-headed, big-hearted springer boy, who at lights-out curled into an unobtrusive a fur ball as one 50-pound dog can curl, has mysteriously crept up to lay his head on my pillow while I slept. He raises his heavy, square spaniel muzzle to look with bored indifference at his bouncing, loud sister.

After a brief glance out the window, and with a little sigh, Gabriel drops his muzzle straight down over my eyes, as if to implore, "Ignore the beardie behind the curtains."

READING YOUR DOG

Dog class teachers advise that a key to training your dog to be your partner is to "learn to read your dog." How do you read your dog? Analyze behavior patterns in his actions, take note of eye movements, consider your dog's very varied vocalizations and



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A walk by a river in spring's early light starts the day for bearded collie Vivien Ferrell-Campbell.

note his reactions to new situations.

Have you ever heard a dog person describe a dog in his life as a "heart dog" or "soul mate"? Those dog moms and dads developed deep relationships and sensitive communication with the dogs they have studied and learned to read.

If you want your dog to listen to you, you must first learn to listen to your dog. Devoted dog moms and dads can interpret every bark, ear twitch, hard stare, tail droop and expectant look from the dog that shares their life.

IS A SIGH JUST A SIGH?

An astute dog owner easily recognizes the sigh that means: "You've been home a full five minutes! Did you forget this is my dinnertime?"

If your dog sleeps in a crate beside your bed, you know the precise sound of circling, scrabbling noises at 3 a.m. that shout: "Have to poop! Have to poop now!"

Owners of frail, older dogs are sensitive to the speed and velocity of their old canine darlings' breathing. You can't say how you know to wake with a jolt and lay a hopeful hand on your canine's geriatric chest,

afraid he has stopped breathing; you just know.

'SPEAKING FOR SPOT'

We scrutinize every nuance of communication received from our canine friends. The feelings of love well-returned and the deep connection we develop to our dog family members is a bond that brings deep feelings of belonging and satisfies a longing to be cherished.

Developing human-to-canine and canine-to-human communication skills changes our relationship from "Rover's just a dog" to "Let me introduce you to our family member Rover."

Learning to speak for our dog, to be his caregiver, trainer and companion, is a major accomplishment toward developing a deep, lifelong bond. Dog people just know when trouble is brewing. A major responsibility of dog ownership is to learn to read and translate your dog's needs to your veterinarian.

In her award-winning, best-selling book, "Speaking for Spot: Be the Advocate Your Dog Needs to Live a Happy, Healthy Longer Life," Dr. Nancy Kay shares life-protecting advice, urging pet owners to communicate openly with their veterinarian.

In her "10 Commandments of

Veterinary Office Visits," Dr. Kay's Seventh Commandment urges: "Thou shalt share thy concerns. Most veterinarians do what they do because they appreciate how much dogs mean to their humans. Who better, then, to empathize with you? To help you, your vet needs you to tell her your particular worries and concerns."

Kay's book is a page-turner; a curl-up-on-the-sofa-and-read delight for any pet owner who says, "I am willing to do anything humanly possible to give my pet the longest, best-cared-for, happy life."

Kay also writes a weekly newsletter, "Spot Speaks" that discusses pet health insights for developing the best relationships between humans and their pets. Subscriptions to the online newsletter are free at speakingforspot.com. Review past issues of "Spot Speaks" at Dr. Kay's blog (speakingforspot.com/blog).

If you buy one dog book this year, "Speaking for Spot" should be the one you part with your hard-earned cash to enjoy. To keep your dog healthier and feeling like waking you at the crack of dawn, "Speaking for Spot" will give you communication skills that may make your next visit to your veterinarian "aha!" moment for better health.

Get help to describe indelicate canine maladies like "scooting" and "flatulence"; learn to describe hard-to-describe symptoms like "panting" and "lethargy."

This is a book that will school you to obtain the very best health care you can for your pet. Resolve to spend several afternoons lying around the backyard reading with your dog.

May you always have a dog ready to bark to alert you to the coming of spring.

Sarah A. Ferrell of Spotsylvania County, author of "Devoted to Dogs: How to Be Your Dog's Best Owner" (available at shopamazon.com or amazon.com), runs Dog Manners and Obedience. E-mail her in care of gwoolf@freelancestar.com.

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