

Teaching Surf Instructors to Teach



National Surf Schools and Instructors Association Instructors and Coaches Training Manual



The Basics

Provided exclusively for NSSIA certified instructors.

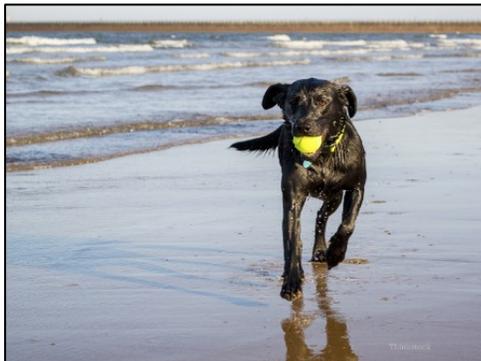
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Surf dogs from left to right: Rothstein, Brandi, Carson, Cherie and Derby, 29th St, Del Mar, CA, 5/30/20

Introduction

Dog surfing involves dogs that are trained to surf on surfboards, bodyboards, skimboards, windsurf boards, bodysurf and stand-up paddle board (SUP). Some dogs are natural surfers who love to skateboard. You may be lucky enough to have a dog that jumps right onto your surfboard and hangs ten all the way to shore. But not all dogs are prime candidates for surfing. They must love to run and play on the beach, and in the waves. They should also be able to swim freely without much coaxing.



You should include in your initial contact with the owner an inquiry into whether have already exposed the dog to water, waves, and surfboards before you attempt to get him to surf. Start slow and set expectations low. Knowing this will help you decide at what level you can start with the dog. And it will give you a starting point that makes it easier to train them to ride a surfboard.

It's also easier to start with a young dog or puppy so surfing and beach time becomes a normal playtime

routine that's fun, but many older dogs are very able to ride the waves as well. A large variety of breeds can and will go into the water, and even the ocean waves. And most can easily sit on a board, be pushed into the waves, and many truly enjoy the experience as they play in the waves with their owner. Either way, make sure the dog really wants to be out there on the board. Some dogs are perfectly suited for being surf companions while others would prefer to stay on the shore.

Teaching a dog to surf will take a lot of time and practice anywhere from one to three months of practice and consistency. You will be working, at first, to be sure you give the dog enough time to get used to the idea and get comfortable with the board and its movements. Coupled with positive reinforcement and positive association, the benefits will include having fun, and building relationships for dog owners and their four-legged friends.



This module is written for certified surf instructors who wish to become a surf dog instructor. Your certification and surf instructor background will now make it possible to show a dog owner and their dog to how to surf. In addition, if you are helping an owner who doesn't surf, but still loves to be in the ocean, can swim, and play in waves, you may be able to take the opportunity to give the owner a surf lesson too. As you see this certification can be applied to all surf instruction situations.

THE BASICS

The first thing you'll need for a beach surf dog lesson is a beach where you can take the dog, ideally where dogs are allowed *off the leash*, at least for part of the day. You don't want to risk getting a ticket for having a dog running loose on the beach. There are several beaches in Northern and Southern California that are off leash (see list of off-leash beaches), plus there are beaches all along both the East and West Coast of the US designated for *on leash* use.



Still water bays, river outlet to the ocean, and other rivers and lakes are a great training ground for beginners and others when the surf is too large. These places allow the owner to make sure the dog likes water before subjecting them to the waves and dynamic ocean environment.

Safety and beach hazards

Just like regular surfing it is important to know surf and weather conditions before you go. Look out for hazards in and out of the water i.e. reef breaks, rip tides, rocks and creatures, such as stingrays, that live in and near the shore of the ocean. Sting rays are a common nuisance in dog surfing. During the summer months the rays are attracted to warmer waters in Southern California and Baja California. Because you are spending a lot of time standing in the water, near the shore while catching the inside waves with a dog, it is important to show the dog owner how to shuffle through the sand. This reduces the risk of getting hit by the sting ray's poisonous dart like tail. Surf booties may also help to reduce injury. (For further details, refer to *Dangers in the Water, Part 9* of NSSIA Surf Instructor's Manual.)



Perfect Waves for Learning

The single most important element in getting successful surf dog rides is good wave judgment and selection. This is true at every level of the instruction.

For the initial wave riding the water should be 2-3 feet deep, providing enough water for a long ride, but not too much so as to injure the dogs when they wipeout, yet shallow enough to make it easy for the dog owner/launcher. The wave needs to be powerful enough for a clean run into the beach. Beware of the shore breaking waves to prevent dogs from running their boards straight into the sand and risking injury to the dog.

You and the Owner on the Beach

Set-up and gear

- Water bowl/squirt bottle. Drinking fresh water is an essential part of your gear. It is recommended that you bring enough water, for the dog, the owner, and yourself. Because the dog will be exercising, working with you and in salt water, they will become thirsty quickly. The challenge of giving the dog water in the sand is minimized by having a water bottle that can be squirted directly into the dog's mouth. You don't want your dog to drink salt water. Drinking too much can be dangerous and even fatal. (see drinking salt water section).
- Training treats. Check with the owner prior to going out to the beach that they bring the dog's favorite treats. You should also bring these with you, to every session enough training treats. You don't want to have the dog in the water longer than an hour. Take frequent breaks.
- Towels are essential to dry off and stay warm.
- Beach chair.
- Go pro video camera to capture your session.
- First-aid/medical kit for dogs.



It's important not to overwhelm the dog with the new environment and regime, so prior to the beach lesson, and in the interest of **safety first** for the dog, check with the owner regarding the following:

- If the dog is comfortable and loves to be in water, loves the beach and playing in ocean and waves.
- Knows how to swim.
- Knows basic commands i.e. sit, stay, wait, come etc. Will follow your command.
- Has it had experience in a pool and floating “on” things like a boogie board, body board, soft-top board or pool floats.
- Has it had mat and dog platform training.

For dogs who fulfill the above criteria then your beach lesson should go much smoother. If you have a dog that loves the beach and ocean, follows their owner all around to be with them, and the owner surfs well, it will be easy for you to show the owners they may simply take their dog along with them on the board whenever they go out. Some surfers have found their dog jumping right on board as they hit the water. If the

owner has this type of dog, then you, as an instructor have an instant surf dog in the making.

Then, after determining what type of dog you have to teach you can then work with their particular behavior and choose one of the training methods set forth in the section entitled Methods Used in Surf Dog Training, either a click method, or lure and treat method, or a combination of both.

For dogs who have no experience with the above criteria then you can still have a beach lesson, but you will need to start slow, keep expectations low and watch for the following.

1. If the dog is apprehensive, seems bothered, nervous, jumps off the board, runs away or just overwhelmed, then it's probably a good idea to stop and rest, try again, and/or stop the lesson. Never coerce or force the dog to do anything. Remember, for the dog, it's about building confidence and feeding off your confidence with lots of positive reinforcement, praise and/or treats. It may take several tries, breaking down the exercise into a baby step approach to achieve a successful outcome rather than rushing into the water with the dog, and the dog having a negative experience. In dog training, taking small incremental steps is called “shaping” a dog's behavior. (See section on Shaping). If he just can't get used to the water on their own or won't go in the water at all, you can suggest to the owner they may want to consult a certified dog trainer for advice.



If necessary, prior to giving a beach in-wave lesson, it's possible to get them ready for the beach lesson first by practicing other methods of training explained in this manual. (See section on Additional Methods Used in Surf Dog Training).

Step-by-step Beginning In-wave Training

1. Check that the dog is outfitted properly with a life vest, otherwise known as a Pet Floatation Device (PFD), as required. They can also have a rash guard for extra warmth if desired. If the dog is used to wearing a harness then wearing a life vest should be easy.

If the dog has never worn a harness or a PFD then introduce the life vest to the dog. Let them sniff the life vest and get acquainted with it first. *Slowly*, put the life vest on the dog, by draping it on their back making sure the dog is comfortable and doesn't seem bothered by it. Then buckle the straps one at a time and give treats. *Giving them treats redirects their attention and creates positive association with the life vest.* If the dog exhibits hesitation at any time STOP and give him time to get use to it. Continue with this process until you have the vest securely on the dog and is comfortable with wearing the PFD.

2. Next, it's time to introduce the surfboard to the dog. Just like the life jacket, let the dog sniff the board and put a few treats on board to lure the dog over. Direct the dog to sit on it and give the dog treats. Then lure the dog to the proper position on the board and have it stay. Treat the dog each time it stays in the proper position continue the exercise until the dog is comfortable staying on board.



Once the dog is getting on the board, positioning themselves in the right spot, staying in position no matter where you are, or what distractions, you can start making the board unsteady simulating how the water moves in the ocean.

3. Riding the board exercise. If the dog needs more confidence with the board before going into the waves, you can use this technique. Build up a mound of sand large enough to place the board on top, with the fins clear of the sand, so that it can teeter up and down freely and move around simulating ocean water. Ask the dog to sit and stay on the board in the designated spot. Kneeling in front of the board, grasp the nose of the board and gently move it around. Go slow getting them comfortable with being on an unsteady surface that's moving around. Remember



to give positive reinforcement and praise the dog and/or give them treat rewards for offering the behavior in this case, staying on the board.



Keep using positive reinforcement, praise and/or treats (high value and tasty) each time the dog offers the requested behavior of staying “ON” the surfboard. You want the dog to understand that good things happen “ON” the board. See below section *More on Board Movement* if more practice is required.

4. Once the dog is comfortable, has shown consistent behavior, and they have their life jacket on, now it’s time to hit the water. You and owner will be in the water with the dog, just like when you are giving human lessons.

5. Check out the waves. If they are big, forcefully breaking onto shore, with rip currents or are overhead, forget it. Just like with people, if these conditions are present it’s not a good dog surfing day, especially for small dogs and you. *The prevention of risk of injury to the dog is your number one concern.* Next find waves that are breaking inside from the farthest outside set, but far enough from the beach to allow for a long ride and for the board to catch some of the re-form waves closest to shore. This is where you want to work with the dog.



6. Gear up and take dog and board into the water. You can paddle out with dog on the board, walk the dog on the board into the water, backwards at first until you are past the inside white water, or carry the board while holding the dog in the other arm or by the PFD handle and walk to the waves.



7. Take the dog into calm water first, where the wave doesn’t break onto the beach but just rolls in, or at a beach bay, or river channel. In shallow water, position the dog on the board. Gently push or pull the dog, along with you to get them used to the movement, and continue the procedure until they are comfortable. After you are confident that they are ready, then, you can move on to an area where the water rolls in gentle whitewater waves. This means they stay on the board, are confident with the movement, and not tired or distracted.



- When in the whitewater, make sure the dog is facing forward on the board. Depending upon the size of the dog, you can use the handle on the back of the PFD jacket to secure their position. Hang on to the board and the dog in this position while watching the waves. Just as in human surfing, never turn your back on the set waves coming in as you move further outside. You are the one in control, and you need to stay on your feet so you don't lose sight of the dog when they're not on the board when a rogue wave hits. Remember to be patient, as we will say many times, good wave judgment and selection is the number one key to getting a great ride. Be selective of which wave to launch and push the board and dog into. Experience is the best thing to teach you to choose the correct waves, but the next step will guide you.



- You are watching for a wave that will a) break a little behind you so that b) you have time to position the board with the dog on it, immediately in front of the white water. This placement is the next most important thing in getting the dog to ride a wave into shore with the best result. And c) the wave needs to be the right size. If it's too big the turbulent water-water may knock your dog off the board. If it's too small there won't be enough wave power to push the dog and the board (see Beginning Wave Training video 1 and 2)

The goal is not having the dog get tumbled off the board. With the dog in his designated spot, hold onto the rails at the tail or handle, if installed, and slide the dog into the whitewater for a smooth and stable takeoff. On some takeoffs, you can hold the tail block down as you push in bigger waves, so that the dog doesn't pearl; or hold on to the back of the board with both hands keeping the board steady until you get through the bouncy "take off" section and then let go while "riding behind" the board. The dog will use their own balance, and will then shift on the board to stay up and riding upon release. Some dogs will turn around and ride backwards to keep their eye on the owner/launcher. This type of maneuver will get you extra points in competition.



- After you push you need to keep an eye on the dog and the board. This is where having an assistant, or the owner, on the shore, is useful.



You both can watch where the dog goes, and if he/she tumbles, get to them as fast as possible to get them up out of the water and back onto the board. This is especially true for small dogs. It's best to keep small dogs on the board as much as possible. Most dogs can "doggie paddle", meaning they can keep their head above water naturally but it's tiring and they risk taking in too much water. Medium or large dogs, can more easily fend for themselves, and can get back to shore after tumbling more often, than not, without any help.

11. Consistency of method is important to get a dog to surf in a consistently successful manner. This is attained by always rewarding success with lots of praise and/or with their favorite treat. Be consistent in your treatment of the dog, making sure they are having fun and not in distress. If they are not running out of the water, when they hit the shore, back up far from the surf, then they are fine being pushed into the waves.
12. If you see the dog shaking at any time he's probably cold, take a water break, rest, and let them run around a bit before continuing. Make sure you give the dog a break after a few rides. Short haired and smaller varieties get cold quick, so also make sure to have several dry towels with you at the session. After being in the water, for a while, it helps to take breaks, and warm the dog up by spending some play time on the beach, and getting them to run.

At this time make a determination if the dog needs more "at home" practice. If so, suggest scheduling more beach lessons in the future so the dog can work on acquiring confidence and consistent behavior. For additional lessons, or if you need different methods, depending upon the dog's needs, prior to beach training you can use additional methods. (**See section on Additional Methods of Surf Dog Training**).

More on Board Movement

Some dogs can jump on a board in the ocean and surf the first time they try. Others use the surfboard as a diving board, and jump off when the board starts to move. Others are a little freaked out by the movement of the board, and it takes them a little longer to get the hang of it. Still others are just used to going to the beach to play ball and aren't quite sure what this new game is all about, and so tend to exhibit less confident behavior when introduced to the board in the water.

Dog surfing is very different from other board sports like skateboarding, skimboarding or snowboarding. One of the main reasons is that the board is riding on top of water. This means that the way your dog positions itself on the board, and how it distributes its body weight, will have a very important impact on the surfboard's reaction on the water and whether the dog will ride the wave all the way to shore.

Some dogs may be apprehensive when they feel the



movement, at first, so go very slowly with the exercises, especially if the dog hasn't had experience on un-even or un-steady surfaces.

Further Board Movement Training

Start out with having the dog step onto the board in the shallow water as you hold it secure by putting your foot on top of it to stabilize. Give the dog treats as they're stepping onto the board, as this will re-direct their attention to the treats, and away from thinking about the movement of the board.

If the dog is nervous, do it only once and build upon that. As you continue working with the dog their confidence will increase. Show the owner how this is done so they may continue to use these techniques at home.

Don't overwhelm the dog by going too fast with the exercises. Go slow. You are showing the owner how to build a bond, and you don't want a bad experience to threaten it. If your dog has one bad experience (in their mind), they may never get on the board again. Help the dog be successful with lots of treats and praise.

When you are releasing the dog from the un-steady board, put your foot on it again to stabilize it. After they build more confidence you won't have to do it anymore, but at the beginning this will help to eliminate any chance of the dog getting scared or startled.

Once the dog is more comfortable getting onto an un-stable board, you can begin moving the board very slightly as you give the dog treats and praise. This is helping the dog build confidence on the board, and their bond will deepen as they feed off your confidence

Go slow with these exercises, and before you know it you'll be able to rock the board more and more, and each day the dog will be more and more confident on it.

Instructor Tip: be patient. Not all dogs were born to ride. If it isn't clicking, don't force it. Getting frustrated will make the experience unenjoyable for both of you. Let the owner know that the dog is not a good candidate for surfing.

SUMMARY

Dogs surfing involves dogs that are trained to surf on a variety of types of wave riding gear. It's important to know that not all dogs make successful surfers. Primarily, they should love to run and play on the beach and in the waves. They also need to be able swim. The first thing you should do after getting a dog to train is determine at what level you can start by evaluating these things in the dog. This will also assist you in choosing the best training method as set out in this



section. And this determination will help you decide if it's necessary to suggest to the owner practicing other methods of training that start off the beach. The basics include a off-leash beach, awareness of safety and beach hazards, and being able to identify the perfect waves for learning. Good wave judgment and selection is the single most important element. This section also lists the basic gear and set-up. The step-by-step beginning in-wave training section sts out twelve steps that includes guidelines, and requirements for your lessons on the beach. Checking that the dog has a pet floatation device, one with a handle, is the first step. Make the owner aware this is a requirement for your surf lesson. Board positioning and movement are the two elements that need to be mastered for successful dog surfing. This section fully addresses both of these concepts. Remember, teaching a dog to surf will take a lot of time, practice and patience, getting them comfortable on the board and its movements, and consistency in their behavior is what you are working towards. One of the most important ideas from this lesson is to never coerce or force the dog to do anything.