

LIFE WITH THE SIX PACK

Semi-successful multi-dog ownership explained

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It's a lazy Sunday afternoon. As I write the first draft of this article, I'm surrounded by snoozing Dobermans: Hannah, Jane and Luther on the couch; Tilly, Ludwig and "honorary Doberman" Doc (actually a German Shepherd but who's counting) on the floor. Each is in his or her customary spot: a position decided and agreed upon by all members of the pack and condoned by the real top dog, yours truly.

Dog-owning friends are often amazed when they visit or see photos of the "Six Pack". Even my colleagues in the training profession tell me they don't know how I manage six young, active, high-drive working dogs in a home situation. While the bottom line is that each one of my dogs has a very clear picture of me as the firm but fair undisputed leader, there's more to it than meets the eye. Six dogs is too many for most pet owners to consider, but many DRU adoptive families seek to double or even triple their pleasure by having multiple dogs. If you are among them or are considering adding a second or third Dobe to your home, here are a few pointers that I've gained through years of personal experience.

1. Matchmaking. Age and gender are always the first considerations. While it's true that two males will spend a lot of time posturing and warning one another, that doesn't mean that two females are necessarily the best alternative. They can really live up to their proper name (you know, the one that begins with a "b") at times. A dog aggressive female will follow through on her threat with less display and more sincerity than many male dogs. The good news is that females tend to have a more cooperative nature and will usually follow the lead of their human owner when it comes to changes in the home or pack. A mixed pair tends to be the most successful combination although same-sex pairs can do just fine with supervision and common sense on the part of the owner.

Agewise, most people find it easier to add a younger dog to their home. This is decidedly not due to the old wives' tale that the older dog will "train" the junior one. On the contrary, the younger dog will usually remind the older one how much fun it is to run around like a madman and ignore The Boss. However, if approached with sense and patience, the older dog who has a strong bond with you will accept this new arrangement due to the trust and respect he has for you; surely this newcomer must be OK if you say he is, right? Right, as long as obedience training is in the picture. It should be mandatory for both dogs: to set the ground rules for the new guy and to remind the old guy that you still call the shots.

2. Don't interfere. Your newly formed pack will spend a lot of time figuring out a pecking order. During this period, it's best to let them sort things out for themselves. Raised hackles, stiff legs, low growling, even a quick snap and scuffle are all common. Most of this is posturing even though it sounds terrible, and even though it's usually over in a matter of seconds, it will feel like hours to any human beings who are watching. The best way to bring the introduction about is to have the dogs on either neutral territory or at least in your enclosed yard. Dogs should not be on leashes, as they will often feel more defensive when being restrained. Any type of training collar or device (choke, slip collar, prong collar, halter or harness) should be removed so that no one gets tangled up. Have a friend with you, but

remember to stay at a distance. If the initial skirmish evolves into a full-fledged dogfight, stay away from the dogs' heads. Sounds like common sense, but you'd be amazed at how many experienced dog people I know who have gotten themselves bitten by doing just the opposite.

Luckily, most quick skirmishes are just that. Very few dogs enjoy fighting and most will admit it when they've been dominated. This brings us to the most difficult rule of multi-dog ownership: DON'T PLAY FAVORITES. Once your dogs have established the pecking order, let it be, even if your human sensibilities are hurt by it. Picture the little kid who gets bullied at school.: if his mommy comes to his rescue too many times, the one schoolyard scuffle becomes chronic bullying. By stepping in and "saving" your underdog, you simply perpetuate the conflict and sometimes intensify it by giving the alpha dog yet another reason to put the other one in his place. Dogs are a lot more primitive than human children and holding them up to human expectations of social equality is blatantly unfair.

3. Make sure there's enough attention and help to go around. If my husband Chris wasn't such an enthusiastic "dog man", we certainly wouldn't have the number of dogs we do. Although the Six Pack is ours, there is a definite "his" and "hers" division. He focuses his attention on the three dogs he enjoys for agility and AKC style obedience, while as a full-time trainer and handler, I devote my attention to my more demanding, higher-drive dogs with whom I do more intensive canine sports like Schutzhund and personal protection. By taking a personal interest in the welfare and progress of our respective dogs, we guarantee that they get all the work and attention they love and deserve. If you are the one "hard-core" dog lover in a household of several less committed people, make sure you're able to give both dogs the same quality time you would give just one. If you're lucky enough to have a partner or family member who's as gung-ho as you, then that's even better.

4. Don't create the dog with two heads! While part of the joy of multi-dog ownership is the companionship the dogs offer one another, the downside is an overly strong bond between them which results in separation anxiety and a lessening of respect for the human members of the household. It's extremely important to recognize and respond to the different personalities of your individual dogs. They should spend time apart from each other on a regular basis and you should have one-on-one time with them daily, even if it's just a few rounds of fetch or a quick ride to the corner store. This will strengthen their individual bonds with you and will also make them more secure and confident away from the pack. When one of life's sadder occasions comes up (divorce, unexpected relocation, veterinary problems and the tragic inevitable: the death of one of the dogs), the remaining dog will still grieve but will be able to weather the storm more successfully than if he's never had to be apart from his canine brother or sister. We systematically separate our dogs by crating one or two, putting another two out in the yard, and letting one hang out with Chris as he putters around the garage while another "helps" me in the office or the kitchen. One might go to the pet supply store while another goes to work with me. Maybe early in the morning Chris will take one for a quiet walk in the woods while one of "mine" goes tracking with me. You get the picture: each leads a fun, full doggy life apart from his pals.

Another thing to watch for when dealing with multi-dogs is the "pack mentality". Like any animal (including humans) dogs tend to think less and act out more when in a group. While one dog will happily chase a cat, two or more dogs will actually hunt the same cat, sometimes with tragic results. By constantly separating and nurturing them individually, you can appeal to each dog even when he's in the company of his canine family. Hence the

peace and quiet that accompanies the writing of this article even with all six dogs out together.

5. Do the math. It might seem to be the most mundane of things to consider, but money is certainly part of the equation. Beyond the usual feed and vet costs, can you deal with double or triple the cost of emergencies? How about kennel arrangements? Your generous friend who doesn't mind baby-sitting your single dog might blanch when presented with two or three. It's usually advisable to kennel multiple dogs with professionals in the first place, as an innocent dog-loving relative or pal might be overwhelmed if pack order decides to shift while you're away.

How about health issues? Take your last dog-diarrhea experience and multiply it by however many Dobs you intend to have. Like little kids, they tend to share all their germs. If, like us, you own several young dogs, enjoy the more innocuous emergency room visits while they last. When our dogs all become old together, the cost will become prohibitive. We take our dog ownership so seriously that we set up the "Doberman Retirement Account" at our bank, a chunk of money set aside specifically for vet costs. It might seem frivolous (especially to non-dog people), but it affords us some much-needed peace of mind.

Finally, if after considering the time, money and commitment that multiple dogs require, you still feel as though you're ready and willing, we say **go for it**. Nothing is more rewarding to one's sense of being tuned-in with the canine nature than having a pack of one's own. The joy our dogs bring us as they play, thundering across the yard like a herd of horses; the education in behavior we get from observing their subtle exchanges of body language; the pride we feel when complimented on how happy and well adjusted they are and this, the simple peaceful contentment of being surrounded by their warm, snoring presence this afternoon...all of this makes the time and effort worth it.