

Dog Park Wisdom: Real-World Advice on Choosing, Caring For, and Understanding Your Canine Companion

By Lisa Wogan

Introduction

Dog Park Wisdom is a book of practical advice, homespun tips, and stories—direct from the dog park—for and about living with your dog. It's a grassroots approach to pet care gleaned from everyday "dog people." I didn't seek out vets, trainers, behaviorists, or anyone else with advanced degrees or training in canine-ology. Not because they don't provide excellent counsel but because they write their own books, and let's face it, sometimes the best advice comes from a wise friend.

This book is not about studies and theory, but personal experience and trial and error. My sources are family, friends, friends of friends, and many dozens of complete strangers who have stumbled onto unorthodox and sometimes quirky insights in the course of living with dogs. Out of necessity or ingenuity, they have improvised solutions for everything from shoe-chewing and barking in the car to keeping a dog cool on hot days and learning to swim. These people know how to get stains out of carpet and how to keep dogs out of the garden, always with a distinct emphasis on the doable. Leave it to busy non-pros to be reasonable in their expectations.

The idea of the dog park here is both real and metaphorical. It's not just an off-leash area. It's all parks, sidewalks, trails, fields, lakes, agility barns, training classes, confirmation rings, and homes that we share with our dogs. It also includes a vibrant, dog-centered Internet universe, which has the communal-feeling of a park without the actual romping, barking, and pooping. In these environments, guardians share their rescued dog stories, confess to bad habits, complain, and give and receive advice on every possible topic from homemade snacks to fur dyes—some of which is scooped up in my net, although not the fur dyes.

What this book is not is comprehensive or systematic. How could it be with random conversations as my guide? Instead, the topics on the minds of the dog people around me, their concerns and joys, are my topics. In this way, I don't answer every possible question or address every facet of doggie life. Plus, I avoid diet, nutrition, and medical advice. It's not that these aren't priorities—they are. And folks at the dog park are certainly talking about everything from cancer in dogs to corn in diets, but addressing this sensitive advice requires context and education beyond the scope of this book.

In the last few days writing *Dog Park Wisdom*, I made my daily dog trek to a local coffee shop. My dog, Lulu, was snuffling around for scone bits out front, where two women were chatting over lattes. While I looped Lulu's leash around a post, one of the women told me about her snack-oriented beagle, who got a cookie from a bank teller one time, and for the next seventeen years always pulled toward the bank every time they passed. Clearly, I could relate. While I ordered my coffee, she walked out to her car and brought

back an enormous peanut butter snack for my dog. (She offered it to me, out of Lulu's vision, which I appreciated.) I never got her name, nor she mine. But the idea that a perfect stranger would give me a gift seemed emblematic of the dog park community—generous and convivial.

This book is intended as much to recognize and celebrate that community as it is to provide concrete information. It's one reason nearly everyone who shared some tidbit with me is acknowledged as a Font of Wisdom at the back of the book (see "Fonts of Wisdom: Our Dog Brain Trust"). While many of my tipsters hail from Seattle and the Northwest, where I live, there are shout-outs from all around the country, with a variety of perspectives and even species represented. There are a few individuals, whose names were never known to me, like the man who lost his pants at the dog park (you'll have to read about it). While they can't be officially acknowledged, they are here with us in spirit. As are the experts—the trainers, behaviorists, veterinarians, and writers—whose knowledge has filtered down to us.

What constantly surprises me is that for so many of the dog people I talked to, love of an individual dog translates into love for many. Guardians with already full plates take time to reach beyond their immediate furry concerns. They help with rescues, at shelters, and in parks. They agitate for no-kill policies and legislation to end cruelty. These commitments enrich our relationships with dogs and with each other. As part of the wisdom in this book, I tell some stories of canine-oriented volunteerism and activism, with a dash of you-can-do-it-too.

In the midst of thinking about all the choices we can make to keep our dogs happy and healthy, it's important to remember the myriad things they do for us. They provide perspective, protection, loyalty, and motivation. They inspire us to try new things, even to the point of dramatically changing our lives. You'll meet several people in the coming pages—a development worker, a dog-treat baker, the inventor of the Kong, a dog day-care owner among them—for whom life was transformed through canine intervention. In these cases, the wisdom of the dog park comes not from those shuffling around with plastic bags and Wubbas, but directly from the dogs.