

## Becoming A Dog Trainer: Training Tips Talk With Canine Diva, Laurie C. Williams

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

LW Laurie C. Williams

### Transcript

00:00:10

**SG:** I am going to read an introduction to my next guest. Her name is Laurie Williams. We're kindred spirits in that we've been around this game of dog training a long time the two of us.

Laurie's a professional canine educator, behavior counselor trainer, writer. She owns [Pup 'N Iron](#). I love that because I'm a gym rat, Pup 'N Iron (and I got to ask Laurie if that relates to being a gym rat) Canine Fitness and Learning Center in Virginia, and she's an AKC judge, a Canine Good Citizen evaluator, and she is hosts a podcast on dog sports, on [Pet Life Radio](#), contributing editor to APDT Chronicles, and also on the board for the Dog Writers Association of America. So, Laurie what a resume, that's impressive.

**LW:** I look real good on paper.

**SG:** That's amazing. Laurie is on social media. Canine Diva is her name on [TikTok](#). Is that where you on or in [Instagram](#) as well?

**LW:** Yes, The Canine Diva.

**SG:** And I love the conversations. She says it as it is.

So, it's, I think when you get to a place in life, it's okay to do that. And Laurie, I wanted to talk about, because we've been doing this for so long the two of us, about starting out.

So, if you're a young person starting out, and you might not even know you want to be a professional dog trainer but somewhere in the back of your mind, wouldn't that be nice? What do you see as like qualities as a person rather than a dog trainer that would lead to somebody being able to be good as a dog trainer or have it as an [actual career](#)?

**LW:** But you know what the thing is this, the way people need to come up now is completely different than how I did it. Now, don't know about you but like I came up through the Kennel Clubs when I first started dog training via signing my Irish Setter up for a class at the local community center that was run by the local community, Kennel Club. It was Jacksonville, North Carolina, Kennel Club.

So, I just, and I was super young, had a very biddable dog that caught on like this, but then they took me under their wing because they saw something in me. They said, "This girl has got it."

So, I mean, this was back in the early 1980s. So, they, I just hung around and hung around and learned mostly from women. It was mostly women kennel club members.

Completely different training. Of course, it was in the Eighties. I mean, truly it would be categorized as compulsion in today's terms. Because you know, a choke chain was standard equipment with when you signed up for a dog training class.

**SG:** Twelve-weeks-old in 1988 when my puppy got her choke chain.

**LW:** Absolutely. That's the way it was. We didn't know any better back then, but anyway, I just hung around and hung around and they allowed me to hang around.



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**LW:** And here I was, I was 21 years old with an infant and toddler at home, leaving my husband and my babies at home and I would, after the kennel club class I would go with them. They'd let me go to this little like diner and sometimes I would stay there till like midnight, one in the morning just talking dogs.

**LW:** So, there's that's not the way things are done anymore. So, it's a whole different route now.

Today, I think still you need to start with your own dog. I'm very adamant about that. You need to, because I get a lot of people who actually want to be dog trainers and don't have a dog. I'm like, you have to get a dog, start taking classes as many as you can, become like a gym rat, but with dog training.

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**SG:** Is that where that came from? Were you a gym rat?

**LW:** Yeah, it is. I used to be in fitness before I had dog training was my primary occupation, I was a fitness director, managed gyms, and I said to everybody in the gym, I vowed that I am going to have a dog gym one day and they laughed. I said, "I going to call it Pup 'N Iron, I'm telling you." And they laughed but I got the last laugh. So yes, that is the reference for sure.

But yeah, you got to hang around. You got to learn as much as you can. You got to train your own dog and maybe train your second dog and hang around as much as you can, find a mentor.

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**SG:** But what do you think, Laurie, their personal characteristics need to be?

**LW:** Oh okay, good. Yeah, that's very important because also a lot of people come to me and say, "Well, I want to be a dog trainer. I love dogs." They express their love of dogs. They're like, "People not so much, but I love dogs." I said, "Guess what, you need to like people. You need to be able to build a rapport with people and it needs to be authentic, and you need to be sincere about it."

So, actually dog training, unless you happen to find a job that you have no contact with people that you're only training hands-on with dogs, this might not be for you because we are training people, by and large, or at least that's what I feel we should be doing.

Yeah. Because if we can't train the other end of the leash, if we can't show them how to [build a relationship](#) with their own dog, how to execute with their own dog the skills and learn the techniques and, the dog is not going to be okay because we have to eventually, even if you do 'board-and-trains', eventually you have to give that dog back to them.

And they need to be prepared. So, I tell them you have to be a people person or at least figure out a way to fake it as authentically as you can.

And I don't really know that you can fake it. I think the one of the reasons we might still be in this is because we probably, we like people, and we like teaching people.

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**SG:** And for me that was an, I liked people, but I only liked my people. And when I would see somebody, when I would be, there is another problem with me in that I was teaching people as a world champion. So, I was given instant authority and instant respect.

And I think respect really should be earned. But I, you're given this instant respect. So of course, it's your ego, like it pads your ego.



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**SG:** So, I knew I could help anybody train their dog, but if I saw somebody being mean to their dog like correcting them or like one girl stomping on her dog's foot when it wouldn't go into a down when she asked, like I would go all spider monkey on their ass.

And I would make them feel bad about themselves, and then they'd [get in their back brain](#), and they couldn't learn a thing from me.

And so that was my big evolution is you got to love people.

And if you love people, then you're going to recognize they're doing the best they can. So, the stomping on the dog's foot, somebody taught them that.

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**LW:** Right, [breaking old habits](#) is probably one of the biggest challenges.

I think we talked about this before where like some of our best students have been novices, complete novices. I have so many people who it is their first dog, and I'm like, ah, thank you. Because they're a clean slate.

They're going to accept the program that you're telling them. They're going to accept it right from the beginning and follow it step by step. They're going to trust the process as opposed to 'Well, I used to do it this way.'

And then also some people just have knee-jerk reactions. The pop, the pop of the leash. They've been doing that their whole lives.

So, coming to me where I'm saying to them, "Now listen—." So, I definitely have a way to finesse that. I can't necessarily, I mean definitely it improved through time, but actually when I was in college, I actually majored in communication. So, I took a lot of interpersonal communication classes.

**SG:** Oh, you got a leg up, girl. Come on.

**LW:** Yeah, I did. And so, I mean being able to build a rapport with people and—.

**SG:** I went to the university of hard knocks to learn my rapport. I can tell you that much.

**LW:** You know what, this is something that's very interesting and I'll ask you this question. Now dog sport people, you can do that to. Like me when I started learning through the kennel club system I said, "Well, I want to compete." Because I stayed after and watched them doing their dog obedience. They were, a show was coming, a trial was coming up, obedience trial. And I watched them doing utility and I was like, "Oh my God, I need to do this."

So, what they were the most, they browbeat the heck out of me. But I didn't care because I wanted it. I was, I am able to do.

The clients that I have today, the clients that I have, they cannot be browbeaten. Like regular every day average pet owners, which is the majority of what I teach.

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**SG:** And me, too, now, for sure. But no, you're right.

Like I think when I look at how I taught back in the early Nineties, it was, and through most of the Nineties, because I was tired and overworked, because I was on the road 200 days a year, either teaching or could have been competing. And I didn't, and literally I was, I had to be shaped by the response of the people.



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**SG:** And when I knew I'd lost them, I knew I couldn't help them with their dog and that broke my heart. And so yeah, it was, it was an evolution for me, and it was true training dogs and shaping behavior that I learned that I actually like working with people. I actually like people.

And so, no. The sport people, they'll put up with your bullshit because they want to know what you know. But the pet people say, "I go down the road."

**LW:** Absolutely. They're not going to put up with it.

**SG:** I had to be as focused on becoming a good educator as I had become focused on being a good dog trainer. That was my education for sure.

**LW:** That's the key. And I do think that's the key to longevity because if you, I mean if you really like, have a disdain for people, first of all it shows like you can't hide it. Like I see it on social media.

I see a lot of trainers on like TikTok especially. I'm like, "Do you even like people?" I think not, but it shows.

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**SG:** Yeah. And people think it's funny when they wear these shirts, like the more people I meet, the more of my dog. But you're [rehearsing for your subconscious](#) if you really want to be with you know teaching people then you've got to help them.

You've got to help them understand what you understand. And sometimes—. So, let's talk about the young trainers on social media then. And there's more and more of them, and I think it's great. Because it's tough because you're in a goldfish bowl.

But if you could you know get them all in a room and give them like a couple pieces of advice, what would you like to say to the young people that are on social media trying to train in front of the world?

**LW:** All right. So, the Broadway musical Hamilton, there's a line in it where Alexander Hamilton was telling Aaron Burr, no Aaron Burr was telling Alexander Hamilton, "talk less, smile more."

And I don't like that.

But what I do like is "Talk less. Train more."

And I think there should be a lot less talking about things that you may not know as much as you think you do. You might know a little. Okay.

You know that saying a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. You know a little but train more. Improve your skills more, train more, learn more before you speak.

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**SG:** Get better with your skills. Especially before you get on soap boxes about it.

**LW:** Yes, because I do see a lot of people and they mean well, that are speaking about things, and they're being asked questions that I know they really don't have an answer to. And if they hadn't started the fight to begin with, they wouldn't have been backed in a corner.

So, I do see unfortunately quite a few people looking a little foolish and walking right into it because they spoke on things that they may not know.

I really don't think that the answer is us necessarily always saying, "Well, this person's doing it wrong and here's why. This person's doing it wrong and here's why."



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**LW:** Show what you're doing that's right. And talk about what is correct and talk about what worked for you and talk about what worked for your clients. And I just think that is more the way that I would love to see the face of positive reinforcement on social media. But unfortunately, quite a bit of it is trainers coming on and you know tagging people that are doing it wrong, showing clips that are the wrong or in their mind the wrong way.

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**SG:** Yeah, especially if you're trying to be, or if you're saying you're a force free trainer. Like I always say that I want people to be able to see who the reinforcement-based trainers are by the way they treat other people. By the way they talk to them in a chat or comment on their video, that it's clear you know who they are because it's clear what their beliefs are about learning.

And I think though, and also your line about 'speak less and train more' is also for those people teaching in person. Because I see that with a lot of young people who are teaching classes, they talk forever, and these poor dogs are sitting against the wall and not doing anything. And they get out and then the dogs start biting on their leash or rolling on their back and, yeah.

Give instruction at first, we're in the era of computers, so give them their 'this is what we're going to work on for the first five minutes' and get the dogs out there doing stuff. So, I think that comment could be used for people on social media and for people in real life.

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**SG:** You have like 500 students a year that go through your school. So, what is the biggest stumbling block for getting the information from their heads down to the leash? What do you think that is?

**LW:** Huh, that's a good question. So, here's the thing. This is another thing and I think we could maybe talk about this a little bit.

The average student will stay for eight weeks.

**SG:** Wow.

**LW:** On the average. Absolutely. So, say if you get a hundred people that are all starting at a certain time. They'll like maybe 80% will do eight weeks.

That's really all the average everyday dog owner is willing to give. I know it's yeah, it's eight weeks that's about it. So, you got to make those eight weeks so packed full of information. Now I have something called, I do a Levels program.

So, dogs all start in level one and then there's a puppy level one if they're younger than six months, but they start in level one and then they progress through the levels, but each level's offered three times a week. So, if you sign up for classes at my facility, you can come three times a week. It's all for the same price. You can come three times a week.

**SG:** So, they can get their training in a classroom.

**LW:** They can get their training in. I changed to this Levels program I think about 10 years ago. Because one summer I said, "You know, I'm going to try something." I did a program it was called Total Dog. And I offered it three times a week.

One of the days we did obedience and manners. One day we did intro to dog sports. And then the last day we did probably just mostly impulse control exercises, one after the other. Okay. So, we had the three different things. I did that just for a summer and I had people sign up for it.



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**LW:** The progress those dogs made was incredible. It was night and day. And it was because they paid a certain price, so they were going to make sure they came all three days, and it was only for the summer. So, these people trained so much and not hard, they just trained smart, and they kept coming.

It's kind of the same concept with when you send your child to school. They don't go to school, well like what if kids just went once a week to school? I mean, they would love it. Absolutely they would for sure.

**SG:** I like that. That's outside-the-box thinking about education, Laurie. That's a great idea.

**LW:** I'm not the creator of the Levels, there were other places that were doing it before me around the country and I was reading about it and I was kind of like, but—. And here's the thing too with the levels is it is open enrollment, so people are coming, going all the time.

So, you might have one person that came in that night and is starting, you'll have another person that's on their third week, another person— so you had to become a multitasking instructor like nobody's business. So, boy did that make me a better trainer and everybody who works with me a better trainer, and I had some trainers could not do it. Their brain couldn't work in that way, and I get it.

**SG:** Would you get like a lot of people on one day and a not so many people on another day?

**LW:** It kind of is, but it kind of evens out, which is weird because I had so many fears before I started. I thought that was going to happen. Like we're going to have like 25 people on Monday and nobody on Wednesday. Believe it or not that did not happen. There were times when we just got extra, like the class just got big and I had to add more time slots, but it never got to where I couldn't handle it.

**LW:** Let me tell you what, this is really kind of funny.

When I first switched, people actually called and said, because I was in a panic before I switched. I was like, I don't know if people are going to want this.

I had people call and they said you know, and they ask questions you know, and so, how much does it cost and blah, blah, blah. And then I said, "Yeah and you can come three times a week." And I actually had probably about a good many people that said "Three times a week? Oh no, I don't want to do that."

Like they did not, the prospect of having to come three times a week made them completely retreat. I can't do that.

But listen Susan, yeah, I was scared then. I was like, "I don't know if people are going with that." And it did drop momentarily. The registration's kind of dipped for a second and I said, I'm going to hold steadfast because you know what, maybe those people that are intimidated by coming three times a week or don't want that, maybe that's not the person I want.

Maybe I need to hold on because the people who want more training are out there. So now this is what, now I get people calling and say "Three times a week? What? And I don't have to pay more? I get all that?" Yeah. So that's the person. I got finally reached the person that I wanted anyway. And now it's just going so fabulous.

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**SG:** And that's what you want. You know, when we started our online classes in 2008 and I said there's like millions of people around the world that have dogs that could afford our class.

But we don't want them all. We want the people who are our people, right?





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**SG:** So, there'll be people that are listening to this conversation. A lot of people just want free stuff and they're happy like going around and taking little bits and never really getting that kind of relationship with their dog that they could if they would invest in themselves.

So, you know it's okay as a dog trainer to— I think it's fabulous that you stuck with it knowing the people who see the value in getting a chance to get mentored training three times a week, those are the people that I want because they think more, they expect more of themselves and they don't, they have lower expectations of their dogs.

**LW:** Absolutely. If they come more often, they're going to see the progress.

00:21:55

**SG:** Laurie, this has been fantastic. Thank you.

I love the insight of what you're doing in the in-person classes.

Please keep on sharing your positivity and your outlooks on social media. You are a blessing to everybody that's training dogs and everybody that owns a dog.

So, if you haven't followed Laurie, jump over to [The Canine Diva](#) and thank you for being with us tonight.

**LW:** Alright. Thank you, Susan. Congratulations.

**SG:** Thank you.

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## Becoming A Dog Trainer: Training Tips Talk With Canine Diva, Laurie C. Williams

### About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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