

### DeCaff's Dog Story: Transforming an Overwhelmed, Reactive and Anxious Dog Into a World Champion

#### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

#### Transcript

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If you could imagine a dog or a puppy who was so overstimulated by things that they could feel, things they could touch, things they could see, things they could hear, that they [lost all confidence](#). If you could imagine such a dog, then you could imagine my sixth dog named DeCaff.

And over the next two podcasts, I'm going to share with you 12 lessons and two reflections that I learned from training and owning and loving DeCaff, including one that I can't believe I'm going to talk about publicly because I honestly feel a little bit ashamed about this lesson.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. In this first podcast episode where I do a deep dive into the amazing lessons I learned from my great dog DeCaff, I'm going to cover the first six lessons and I'm going to talk about one reflection. And a reflection is something that I realized looking back over the last 23 years that I really took on board because of raising and training DeCaff.

Now DeCaff was three quarters Jack Russell Terrier, one quarter Border Collie, and I got her kind of unexpectedly and unplanned. She was brought in for training. The family owned several dogs of their own and had two small children. So, I knew DeCaff wasn't going to work out. Plus, I fell in love with her. For some reason right at the airport I called the family, I said, "You know what, I'll help you with your next dog."

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And so, I ended up buying her from them. They were completely happy about it. DeCaff was born on Valentine's Day, the year 2000, so 23 years ago. Yet these are lessons that are still so powerful to me. I think of DeCaff when I'm helping students that have similar problems. We actually have [several games](#) in our online programs that are there because of what I learned through DeCaff.

She was a typical Terrier puppy in that she was rambunctious and sassy and loved to play, but I knew right away there was something a little bit off about her. At nine weeks old, I was doing a demonstration and she actually attacked another little nine-week-old Doxie puppy and not like 'bug off,' like attack. We had to [pull her off of this poor puppy](#).

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And so, I thought that was a little bit strange. Yes, I'd had Terriers for decades up to that point, but it was still something strange and new to me. Now, DeCaff was certainly friendly enough to people. She loved being out. She [wasn't fearful about new environments](#), although she was very concerned about new textures on her feet.

And so, when we put up our dog training building, we put a sand ring in there. And a couple of years later we changed from a sand ring to a rubber floor, and she didn't like that.

So, she would train on that rubber floor but as soon as any action had stopped, she would immediately find a cloth chute from a collapsed tunnel, back in the day, we used to use those in agility.



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And she would run over and stand on it. And she would wait there until it was her turn next to go. She did not want to leave the security of the cloth tunnel. It was different than that rubber floor, and she wasn't stepping on that rubber floor until she had to step on the rubber floor.

Likewise, if she was around a tent and the wind blew, the sounds of the tents flapping, or a flag flapping put her off to the point where she soon grew to not like the feel of the wind blowing. Maybe because of [what it was going to predict](#), or maybe she just didn't like the wind as well. So, the first lesson I took on board with DeCaff is that of [puppy selection](#).

You know, the dog I had before DeCaff was my red Border Collie Buzz, who I wrote the book [Shaping Success](#) all about. And so, when DeCaff suddenly became my dog, I thought, [what am I going to call her?](#) And I thought after a Buzz everybody should have a DeCaff. And that's how she got her name.

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Now I evaluated Buzzy at seven weeks old I looked at his litter and I saw all these structural faults within him, but oh my gosh, he had so much drive, so much keenness to work, so much willingness to want to do anything with me. And I thought, 'this is going to be a fun dog to train' and I took him. And so, with DeCaff I was like awestruck by her great structure.

So, most Terriers have a very upright shoulder. She had the Border Collie shoulder, she had a lovely lay of shoulder, beautiful, beautiful structure. And that's all that mattered because I figured 'I can't dog train structure, but I can dog train everything else!' "Oh, nay nay," to quote the late John Pinette. Yes, you can dog train some things, but they take a lot of work.

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And so, moving forward beyond DeCaff I said, when I'm looking for my next puppy yes, I want lovely structure, yes, I want all that good drive, but I also want to consider what are the parents' parents look like, what do the parents' siblings look like, what about all the other puppies in the litter? Now, for those of you [getting a rescue dog](#), this is going to be easy. Your heart's going to help you make that decision. Really, that's going to be the primary factor.

But lesson number one with DeCaff is all about puppy selection, and it's got to be the whole package. It can't just be one thing. Of course, when I'm going to a breeder and looking for a new puppy, the number one concern I have is the health of the parents, the health of the parents, parents, the health of the parents, sibs, et cetera, et cetera. And then it goes to structure and temperament and drive and balance. That's what I'm looking for.

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Okay, so now I have this puppy that I am seeing all these [behavioral challenges](#) and then at that point sure I took some behavior courses in university, but I really considered myself a dog trainer. And when I look at what I know now as a dog trainer, what I knew back then was pretty lacking.

And so, I trained DeCaff here at home and she had fun. She loved to tug. She loved food. Except in [new environments](#). Then maybe tug not all the time, and definitely not food all the time.

So, tug had a higher rating to her than food, but definitely neither one were the 'gaga' thing that made everything come together and make it make sense to her.



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And so, this crazy avoidance of things under her feet really came into vision when we went to Florida. She was about 11 months old, and I was super excited. We'd done all the little pieces to work on her contacts and I was going to put it all together once we got to an environment in Florida where I could train outside.

And so, we get out of the motor home, and she hits the grass like a bucking bronco. She is jumping up and down and she has to get back in the motor home. And I'm like, 'this is so weird.' And I thought, 'well, there's some agility equipment over there. I'm going to go over there and I'm going to use the agility equipment to get her excited.'

So, I take her over, put her on the dog walk, and she's fine up there. And I put my hand out to do some hand touches while she's on the dog walk. "Yes, I can do that", gave her some cookies, put it down lower where she had to touch her feet to the ground. She hit the ground and backed all the way back up the dog walk. We don't do this here.

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And that carried on after I left Florida. I went and taught a seminar in Houston, and they had what they called hog fuel which is like I think a lot of manure mixed with dirt for the foundation of where I was teaching. That didn't go over well with Ms. D. And then I went to California where I was actually teaching in an olive orchard with dead olives on the ground. She did not like that one little bit.

And so, lesson number two that I engaged in all of those environments was the importance of arousal states. You can hear me talk about arousal states in [podcast episode 86](#) here on Shaped by Dog. But when the dog is at a lower end of the arousal curve aka the Yerkes and Dodson curve at the left-hand side is when dogs aren't really excited and they're really not very aroused, and they're going to notice insignificant things in their environment.

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They're going to notice the olives under their feet. They're going to notice, "Ew, this grass is really, really wet." They're going to notice these things. Now, could I have trained DeCaff in those surfaces? Yes, but I would've got a dog with [a lot less joy](#). I would've got a dog without putting their whole self into the training because they constantly would've been on high alert for "what is weird next?"

And so, I lowered my criteria for what it is we're going to do. We're not going to do agility contacts. That's what I had planned. But guess what, you can write the plan, but the dog dictates the pace of that plan. And so all that I did is, can I get you to the point where you can play Recaller games, where I can get you to tug and release and tug, where I can get you to chase and then tug without noticing the things in your environment?

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And that was huge for DeCaff. We did progress our training in all of those environments because guess what, we progressed the joy. The next lesson I learned, now I knew D needed some extra umph, and of course if you follow my podcast, you know my dogs all have nicknames.

So, I called her 'D dog' when she was really, really young. And then I started calling her 'my D dog, you are my D dog.' And why am I sharing all this with you, because when you say, 'my D dog' really fast, it turns into 'mighty dog.' And that's who I wanted her to believe she was. "You are my D dog, you're a mighty dog."



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And one day I heard, and I've talked, and I've shared this story on the podcast, somebody calling her 'Deec the freak' because hello, she did do some weird things. However, that environment is not helpful for my dog. That environment is not helpful for me. I spoke about that recently on [podcast episode 228](#). Now, DeCaff started out her competition career very slowly. Very slowly because she was still worried about things. Honestly, she didn't run as fast at a trial as she did at home until she was five years old.

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Now if I had her today, I know I would do better, but that's the way it was back in the early 2000s. But guess what? DeCaff eventually got faster, and she won some regional championships, and then she won some national championships, and then before her career was over, she was a three-time, all-around world champion in the sport of dog agility.

Now, when she won her first regional championship, I got a note from a friend of mine who said, "Please don't take this the wrong way, because I always knew you'd work through these problems your dog had. But I never in a million years dreamt she would have success on the same level your past dogs had."

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And I wrote back one line, and it was, "When I look at my dogs, all I see is greatness." To me my dogs are just unpolished diamonds, and I'm the polisher. What I do, the choices I make, help them to shine at their brightest. And so, lesson number three for me is you have got to create a positive environment for both yourself and your dog. Don't allow anybody to speak badly, and don't you ever speak badly.

[Don't ever define the dog by their limitations](#). Don't call them a scaredy cat dog, a shutdown dog, whatever, mighty dog. What is the opposite? What is a word that can make sense to your brain? Is she a mighty dog? Well at first, she wasn't, but she was always my D dog, so she became that mighty dog in my mind.

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You know [my friend, therapist Elliot Connie](#). I've spoke about him in the past. And last weekend a meme posted to social media, and it went something like this. "Your worth is not defined by others' opinions of you but rather of your own self-perception." Now, you can take that and turn it into your dog. Your dog's worth is not defined by other people's opinion of them, but of your perception of them.

No dog has ever surpassed the perception their owner has of them. You need to see your dog in the absolute best light possible for your dog ever to have a chance of shining their light. But as long as they're kept down, even by the energy, the toxic energy in the environment, they're never going to be who they could be. And that's a real shame.

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While we were on that trip to Florida, my late husband John grabbed a fly swatter to kill a fly in the motor home, and when he smacked the fly on the counter DeCaff broke out of a sound sleep and just flew at John, [jumped up and bit him](#). I think she got him either in the leg or the arm.

I know John was not too happy. And immediately I went, "What did I just see?" That was a spark, that was a lightning bolt of fire I have never seen in that dog. So, I took the fly swatter, and I smacked it on the counter myself, and she came at me. It was kind of scary, but it was super fun.



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And right then I decided 'you can either counter condition this response,' so I have a dog that has a normal response to a fly swatter, 'or you can use this in your training.'

And of course, hello I'm a dog trainer at heart. I live in Canada, we only have flies a few months of the year. Ding, ding, giddy up, let's go with this fly swatter. And so, I had my dog's [number one reinforcer](#). Now my first dog Shelby who was [crazy about rocks](#) taught me that it's the dog who defines what's the value, and DeCaff just underlined it. So that was lesson number four.

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Be sure never to force what you think is important on the dog when you're [picking their best reinforcer](#). So, for DeCaff, I had this amazing reinforcement that now that I could use in my training, and anytime she saw it, she lost her mind. Her favorite thing in the world was to take a fly swatter, go for a victory lap run, and then rip it to bits.

Needless to say, we went through a lot of fly swatters during our career and training. But that was okay because guess what, they were not that expensive. Plus, so many of my students thought it was so much fun to bring DeCaff fun fly swatters.

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Now here's the thing about having a go-to reinforcement. One that sends your dog into another orbit is people stop there. So, what I did was I realized I had some great thing here, and so I went out onto that Florida grass, and I put the fly swatter up my shirt and kind of tucked in my waistband and I went out and I got her to tug, and I got some kind of mediocre tug. Yeah, a little bit of good tug, a little bit of mute.

As soon as I got a really good tug I said to her, actually, I call it the dwatter. "Dwatter!" and I pulled it out from behind my back and I started smacking it on my legs and she again went crazy, grabbed the fly swatter. Now, I put it back behind my back. This time I didn't tuck it in anywhere. I just tucked it in my waistband. Why bother, the dog knows that it's there now, right?

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And I asked for some more tug. Yes, the tug would've instantly got better. I did a few more, here's your dwatter, and tug and dwatter and tug. Only two or three, the most important repetition on that whole sequence believe it or not, it isn't the last one, although you do want them to have really high intensity on that last one. The most important one is the first one because you want to see, [are we getting a transfer of value?](#) The next time we come out to play tug in the grass is the first repetition more intense than the last and by golly it was every time we went out, it got more and more and more intense.

So, lesson number five is the transfer value, the critical importance of a transfer of value. You can't take something your dog loves and then think you're just going to hide it or pretend you have it in your pocket oh and give it to somebody else.

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Dogs aren't stupid. What you have to do is transfer that value onto another toy, onto I transferred it to food, so she had high drive for the food. I transferred it to obstacles. I could use the fly swatter. I could pull it out after she did a little sequence when she least expected. So, the first time was always hidden.

And then I could go back and forth between tug and a fly swatter because let's face it, a fly swatter isn't always the most convenient thing to have hanging around when you're at an agility trial.



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Although, yeah, I took them there, too. The transfer of value is what turned my dog from a dog who could do the sport, to a dog who was gaga to do the sport.

Okay, the next lesson I got from DeCaff came when we were selected to go to the Great Outdoor Games, the ESPN Great Outdoor Games. It was quite an honor to be one of the dogs selected. I can't remember, a handful of dogs in two different jump heights. That's all they took, and it was \$10,000 on the line for the winner of each of those categories.

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And I was super excited that DeCaff was selected. The only problem was DeCaff was not fond of the heat, and the Great Outdoor Games that year were going to be in Reno, Nevada. And when I say she wasn't fond of the heat, that's not uncommon with [dogs who struggle with motivation issues](#). They don't want to play the game when it's in the heat of the day.

And so, I knew I was very strategic about that with DeCaff that at an agility trial I brought out the fly swatters during the heat of the day. So, I had her tug on toys during most classes, and then when it was the hottest out, she got a fly swatter at the end as her reward when we were done. And when I was at home, I trained her in the cool of the morning and the cool of the night.

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I never ever trained her outside between the hours of like 10 and three in the afternoon in the summer heat. Just didn't bother because she didn't like it. Okay, here we are going to Reno, Nevada. Now, as a side note, after my first run, looked at the thermometer they had on the ground it was 122 degrees Fahrenheit. So hot that actually I came out of the ring, and I broke out into shingles for the first time in my life. But that's another story.

And so, what could I do? I could go and take this dog who really didn't want to be there, but what could I do with my dog who didn't like the heat? And spoiler alert she won the \$10,000 that year. "What did you do, Susan?" Well, I knew I had to train her in the heat of the day. No more training late in the afternoon or in the early morning. I had to plan.

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So, I started my plan back in May. As soon as it got a little bit warm out, I checked the weather forecast, picked the hottest days and the hottest times of the year, the hottest days, and the hottest hours of those days. And what I would do is I would set up something that I knew was her worst obstacle. Now, looking back maybe I would pick her best, but I don't know that I was wrong. Her worst obstacle in the heat was weave poles. And so, what I did was I set the weave poles up going into the pond and I would have her go out in the stinking heat where she barely would tug. I did get her to tug. How did I do that? With my fly swatter. So, I would go out, ask her to tug, got some limp tug like I did in Florida, and then occasionally I'd pull out the fly water as reward.

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Then one set of weave poles go for a swim into the pond, one of her favorite activities, back in the house. So, for the first week it was like one rep, back in the house, and then we'd do two reps. And then I would do like a tunnel to the weave poles, and then maybe a couple of jumps to the tunnel to the weave poles. You see where I'm going? By the time we got to the Great Outdoor Games in July, she was doing full courses before she went in the pond and loving it. No longer afraid of the heat, no longer balking because 'It's too hot. I don't do this stuff in the heat.'



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So that leads me to the sixth lesson. When you have a challenge, take the challenge out of your training. Now I could have just got agility sequences, left them out on the agility field and kept training her in the heat and hoping she would get used to it or I took the problem 'I don't want to be in the heat' and I dealt with that alone with the fly swatter and the tug. And then I did one thing you love. I mean, she loved in the heat of the day to go for a swim. So, I combined those things. Take your challenge out of your training.

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The longer you keep the challenge in the training, the more you're building that malaise, that lack of motivation into the training that you're trying to improve. And it just doesn't make sense. So, lesson number six, take the problem out of your training.

Now I'm going to share with you one of the reflections. So that's six lessons. I've got six more I'm going to share with you, including the one I wasn't sure if I should share. But the reflection that I have for today, and this one is a recent one. And it was really looking back over the three dogs that I learned so much from. DeCaff, Buzz, and This! The three dogs that were my toughest dogs to train, the three dogs that I learned so much from.

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And I always had [this mindset](#) that you know, these challenges bring the gems of great lessons. And it's true within all challenges there are some amazing lessons for us. But challenges don't always equal knowledge. Challenge plus curiosity equals knowledge.

You don't automatically get the lessons unless you're curious to find them. But here's my big reflection. Even though challenges bring lessons, lessons do not require challenge. And that's a mindset that I have recently become aware of.

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And it's an important lesson for me to be aware of because the question is, have I been putting out the thought out into the universe or to God that I need these lessons because I'm this worldly dog trainer and I'm supposed to be helping everyone, so just send me all the problems so I can figure it out so I can help so many people.

And the answer is no. You can learn by being curious, not of just your own dogs, be curious of other people. I love helping other people, but that curiosity that I have with my own dogs now, I know that curiosity can equal lessons without having the pain and the frustration of all the challenges that I've lived through to bring me those lessons.

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So, I hope you think about that as a reflection for yourself. Knowledge is there available for you as long as you're curious. In the next installment of DeCaff's story, I'm going to share a massive epiphany that absolutely changed DeCaff's life for agility.

At the time she was weaving, her weave poles, which should take about, I don't know, for a small dog, two and a half seconds. And when she first started her first trial, I think they were ten-second weave poles.

So, my big epiphany for that, I'm going to share with you the massive lesson that DeCaff gave me on [the use of time outs in dog training](#). And I've got four more plus a big, big reflection.



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And if you are a regular podcast listener, I bet you you could maybe have a guess at what the big reflection is. So, leave me a comment, jump over to YouTube, come on over to the Shaped by Dog website, leave me a comment if you've guessed what it is.

And if you are over on YouTube, sure would love it if you'd give us a like, and if you're not a subscriber, join the community, subscribe to the page. That is telling the magical algorithm that what I've got to say is worth listening to. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

[Podcast Episode 168: Creating Confidence For Anxious, Stressed Or Reactive Dogs Part 1](#)

[Podcast Episode 95: How Playing with Your Dog Like a Puppy Can Reduce Fear](#)

[Podcast Episode 159: Help! My Puppy Is A Bully And Plays Too Rough](#)

[Podcast Episode 180: Taking Your Puppy To A Café Or Restaurant: Socialization Success](#)

[Podcast Episode 16: The Thing Before Your Dog's Thing](#)

[Podcast Episode 36: Puppy Selection: How I Do It and Why I Didn't This! Time](#)

[Book: Shaping Success by Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 13: Naming Your Puppy or Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 78: How to Train a Rescue Dog with Behavior Problems](#)

[Podcast Episode 221: Mindshifting Dog Behavior Problems To Overcome Extreme Training Challenges](#)

[Podcast Episode 197: Outsmarting Distractions: How To Use Environmental Reinforcement in Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 86: How to Train Unmotivated or Overexcited Dogs](#)

[Podcast Episode 206: First Dog Agility Competition: Creating Joy For This! By Maximizing Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 228: Navigating Failure In Dog Training: What's Your Plan B?](#)

[Podcast Episode 220: Help Humping, Barking, Destructive, Reactive Dogs Overcome Dysregulation: 4 Case Studies](#)

[Podcast Episode 208: Brilliance, Resilience And Gratitude: Inspiration And Motivation With Elliott Connie](#)

[Podcast Episode 25: Why All Dogs Can Bite and How to Reduce the Risk with R.E.A.D.](#)

[Podcast Episode 205: The Hidden World Of Reinforcement For Dogs And Why You Need To Know](#)

[Podcast Episode 226: Safe Toys For Dogs And Why To Avoid Tennis Balls And Sticks](#)

[Podcast Episode 31: 5 Simple Hacks to Help Your Dog Learn Faster \(Reinforcement Process\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 177: Dog Training Outside The Box: Transfer Of Value Case Study](#)

[Podcast Episode 203: Reactive, Unmotivated and Fearful: Finding Resiliency For This! Beyond Dog Training Part 1](#)

[Podcast Episode 150: Adding Mindset To Your Dog Training Tools: Who Do You Become?](#)

[Podcast Episode 34: Time Outs for Dogs: Does Your Dog Need One?](#)





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### 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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