

Otis THE BOYKIN SPANIEL

by Magda Fernandez

Folks, there's no denying it. I now have a wily, curly-haired, four-legged teenager on my hands who's discovered the joy of the loophole! Since my last column, Otis and I have been learning a thing or two about this wild and woolly stage. He's figured out that I'm not omnipotent, and I've realized that he's figured this out! Don't get me wrong—I'm having a blast because I like a spunky dog. But the stakes are different this time around. When Otis was a puppy, I at least was able to catch him quickly if I had to. But Otis the 39 lb. teenager is now a heck of a lot faster and muscular. He can dodge away from me on a dime, and boy does he know that! On top of that, I've been slowed down slightly by an arthritic knee. If it weren't for all of that early obedience training, some tried-and-true tricks, and lots of high-value treats, I'd be in deep trouble. My challenge, you see, is giving Otis the freedom to be the dog that he is, while keeping him safe from his own unpredictable impulses. Now that Otis is all raging hormones in a high-rev engine, he can be king of the field in one instance, yet way in over his head in another. This means that, more than ever, I need to anticipate what he'll do to keep him out of harm's way. I can dog-proof the house, but I sure can't dog-proof the outdoors.

For example, over the past several months, Otis has learned that you don't step between a dominant male dog (regardless if he's a pal) and a female that he's keen on in the park. On the other hand, I have learned that there are dog owners who are clueless enough to bring a bitch in heat to a dog park. Otis' pal, who is a large English Springer, did bite Otis in the mouth and drew blood. But we never found the wound so fortunately it was minor. Although Otis definitely knows his place now with this dog, his owner

and I don't take any chances and leash our dogs if a young female, spayed or not, enters the game. The beautiful thing is that Otis and the Springer continue to play well together, in spite of that one incident. Even though the Springer beats him to the ball most of the time, Otis likes to taunt him when he does catch the ball by refusing to release it. When this happens, Otis leads the Springer around the field in a slow dance, turning away at the last second each time. This shows me that Otis is smart enough to have figured out that, even though he's not the top dog on that block, he still can have a good time without getting into a scuffle.

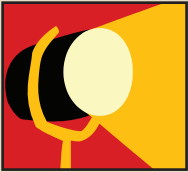
Otis the teenager also decided that stumbling upon fresh scat in the woods is like finding a stick of butter with his name on it. I know, GROSS! I'm not worried that Otis has a dietary deficiency because he has been flourishing on the BARF diet and supplements for months now. What I have learned is that a lot of the scat that healthy dogs like Otis like to eat is mostly fatty, barely digested food. This also explains why no command or treat works in luring Otis away from his find. At the same time, I'm not going to deprive Otis of his off-leash morning walks in the woods as a solution. Since I'm not a hunter, this is the way I make sure that Otis does what he's bred to do every day. Hunting is in Otis' blood. So when we walk in those woods, he strides through them nose to the ground in search of scents that interest him. It's magnificent to see him suddenly lift his nose in the air and then gracefully pop over the fern beds to his target. Thankfully, a friend of mine who grew up in an Australian sheep farm offered me an effective solution. He advised me to carry a small spray of household vinegar with me, and spray either Otis'

mouth or the pile whenever that happens. It doesn't keep Otis from trying to eat the stuff, but it sure does stop him once I spray it.

There have been many more antics, like the time that Otis decided that he wanted to swim across a large lake. Not! Otis now swims on a 30-foot leash if I'm not swimming with him in a large body of water. Or how about the Call of the Mudpit? You all know that Call, I'm sure. Why do Boykins hear that Call when we've got to be somewhere else in 15 minutes? On the home front, Otis suddenly decided that bathroom trash bins are really food bowls; that closets are vertical toy chests; and that cushions look far better with nibbled edges. The once mellow Otis now puffs up his chest and barks whenever anything on four legs crosses our yard—and you all know that usually means in the middle of the night.

Like I wrote, life with Otis the teenager is one continuous series of adventures. Would I want it any other way? Oh heck, no! So what if Otis now needs to body slam my armpit while we're on the couch before he calls it a night? What's there to mind? Thanks to Otis, my abdomen hasn't been this toned in ages!





Spotlight on ... Renegade

Renegade on his first real bird retrieve. 10 weeks and not wanting to give it up! He will sit and hold on command and he loves to play with a red frisbee every day for exercise. - Scottie Murray

