helped me navigate the train system and get me to my hotel close to the center of the city and not far from the Spanish Riding School. She helped me settle into my hotel and then we walked across the street for a meal. Then back to the hotel where I tried to sleep but who could sleep?

Saturday finally came with another beautiful day for sightseeing. Marlene met me at the hotel and off we went. I had managed to get tickets for us for a performance of the Lipizzaners on Sunday but I so wanted to see the School. Off we went so I could get my first look. And there it was, I was so excited, I knew I was grinning from ear to ear. We went inside and discovered we could take a tour of the stables—I didn’t have to wait until the next day to see the stallions. We saw the riding arena up close, at ground level. And we found our seats for the performance the next afternoon. I couldn’t believe I had managed to get such good seats!

We spent the rest of the day and Sunday sightseeing around Vienna. As with Olomouc and Prague, the sights were something I had only dreamed of seeing. I was getting to actually see places that I had only learned about and seen pictures of in school. Monday dawned very early with Marlene arriving to ensure I got to the airport on time. As I settled into my seat for the first leg of my trip home, I thought back over everything I had seen and the people I had met. The new friends I had made.

Friends and family had expressed concern at the beginning of the trip about my traveling to places where I did not speak the languages. Somehow I had the feeling that everything would be okay. I felt that my mom (who left us last year) was seeing that this trip was possible. I had guardian angels in Mila, her family and friends, as well as people I met along the way.

When traveling from Olomouc to Vienna a young woman volunteered to help me change trains in a small town where not many people would speak English. She helped me get off at the right stop and stayed with me to ensure I caught the correct train to Vienna. It turned out she was a language major at the University in Olomouc.

The most important job a breeder has is to provide new pups with a solid foundation. The owner’s job is to take that foundation and begin building towards future goals. Klas Mellander’s quote was to encourage employee growth within the workplace but the concept easily applies to the early development of the performance canine.

In the human/animal relationship the process of training and learning becomes an effective means to communicate between species. A solid foundation for any dog, no matter the goal, has two parts: early exposure to various sights, sounds and surfaces; and positive introduction to the concept of learning.

Specific behaviors learned early tend to be life long however these behaviors will have less overall impact on the pup’s performance future when compared to the pup’s ability to fully understand the notion of learning.

This point became clear to me when a dog I bred was returned when he was six-years old. Clay left the fold at four months. His owner did some sporadic training. Less than two months after his return he came within three seconds of qualifying in his first ever agility trial, after I worked with him for less than 15 minutes a day, maybe twice a week. The early foundation I provided stayed with him. He knew how to learn.
Creating a solid foundation for your puppies’ future aspirations needn’t be cost prohibitive—money need never enter the picture. The real investment is time. Properly creating a solid foundation is time consuming; therefore the more litters a breeder has on the ground, the less foundation each pup may have. As a potential owner, I prefer breeders who have one, or at most, two litters at any one time. Or I make plans to bring my pup home as early as eight weeks, so I can begin to lay my own foundation.

From the moment my pups are born, I follow the suggestions outlined by Dr. Carmen Battaglia, PhD in his “Developing High Achievers” (Early Neurological Stimulation) article. Pups are handled daily in a multitude of ways, as per his recommendations, for the sole purposes of introducing mild amounts of stress. Research shows that animals challenged with minimal amounts of daily stress during the first weeks of life have better coping skills of everyday stressors as compared to non-stimulated brethren.

When their ears begin to open I open the sound of the clicker during nursing. The idea is to have positive subliminal associations to the click; there is nothing more positive to a hungry baby than feeding time. This early exposure makes for a smooth (and quick) transition to more classic click/treat sessions starting around five to six weeks of age. For me, the clicker is the first means of communication with my dogs and while I do not use it exactly as described by click/treat enthusiasts, I will use it sporadically throughout my dogs’ lives, especially when introducing any new behaviors.

With little money to spend on expensive puppy agility primers, I used my imagination to create some rather interesting substitutes—rough perhaps but effective for the purpose of early exposure to a variety of surfaces. For an “A-frame” I took a used 60x60 cm wooden lounge, folded it into an upright triangle, which allowed the pups to climb up the soft fabric, go over, and then slide down the other side. Running through the center of the triangle created a makeshift tunnel. To simulate the rickety movement of a teeter-totter I did two things; I fed the pups with a large flat rock or piece of wood. The pups’ natural curiosity takes over and they will climb over, run atop of and oft-times fall off the make shift obstacle with no negative connotations. As they get bolder one can raise the elevation ever so slightly on one side so they learn about the structure from various heights, angles, etc.

For a tunnel I “splurged” and bought a very cheap children’s tunnel at a local toy store. An alternative would be to convert a cardboard box by opening both ends and reinforcing the sides with tape to help keep their shape. A chute can be made by attaching an old sheet to one end of the box tunnel and allowing it to lay flat beyond the opening thereby encouraging pups to push through the sheet to escape. Everything at this stage is done at the pups’ pace and initiative. Other than dispensing treats here and there to encourage investigation, at no time do I force any pup to experience anything it does not want to try. Remember too all dogs are situational, puppies even more so. What they may embrace in one location inexplicably lose their patience with adult dogs (or non-conditioned puppies) versus adult dogs that lack any kind of foundation to be just uneducated in the art of learning. With a little perseverance the light bulb slowly turns on, and the learning curve can become indistinguishable between the two age groups.

So owners: do not despair—old dogs can learn new tricks! But more importantly breeders do your puppies (and the owners) a favor—stimulate those young minds early and often; you might be surprised by what they can grow up to accomplish.

**MAKE LEARNING POSSIBLE**

Teaching the pups how to learn becomes a natural progression from their early clicker training. At first they are “worked” as a group with all “training” revolving around mealtimes. Naturally the pups clamor or climb on the sides of their ex-pen, or my pant leg begging for their supper; when this occurs I try and stand tall, hold the food high and above/towards the back of their heads and quietly wait. Invariably, with their heads looking straight up vying for the food, their bums will rock back and hit the floor. Oddly, they all seem to do it at the same time and when they do, I immediately click and put the food down. I then sporadically click as they gorge themselves, reinforcing those positive click associations.

Pups are veritable sponges at this age and super quick to repeat what works, so when upon my approach with the food bowl they begin to offer the sit, I introduce a quasi-wait; I have them sit a little longer each time before offering the click and meal. Eventually little light bulbs start to flicker in their brains and they begin to learn that their action, such as sitting equals food; pay attention to the human and you might earn the food!

As the pups leave the nest, and I am left with one or two, I begin more individual “training.” I introduce the dumbbell and retrieve, the send away and recall, and of course longer waits for supper—up to and including placing a bowl on the ground, a mere foot from a sitting to-12 week old pup who hungrily, but patiently, waits my release word of “OK.”

I have found the learning curve between mentally conditioned puppies versus adult dogs that lack any kind of foundation to be astronomical. Pups as young as five weeks are easily lured with food for sits, down, stands, etc. while an adult dog will often times paw at the food, stare and whine in frustration or give up completely; they have no clue how to make the “human food dispenser” pay off. And it’s not just the dogs that get frustrated. Owners often lose their patience with adult dogs (or non-conditioned puppies) and sometimes consider the dogs’ “dumb” when in truth they are just uneducated in the art of learning. With a little perseverance the light bulb slowly turns on, and the learning curve can become indistinguishable between the two age groups.

**To view Dr. Battaglia’s article visit:**