

# MR. { CHATTERBOX }

## I LEARN TO SPEAK DOG— AND PEE WEE LISTENS.

What is it about teenagers? Where does that wild streak come from? That gleeful disobedience? That greedy selfishness, that certitude that it's all about me, me, me?

When Pee Wee entered his teens recently—his dog teens, of course, which occur between ages one and two—his cute little puppy habits, so amusing at first, quickly became less so. He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it, he showed no respect to his elders, and if he could have impregnated teenage girl dogs, believe me he would have.

I'd hired trainers before, with mixed results. It was very hard work, and I felt like I was the one who was learning the tricks. Then I discovered Bernie Thomas at Barkbusters. She has a system that really works. The secret? You communicate in "dog." You talk to your dog like you're one of his dog parents, not some pushover from another species who can be conned into anything.



**WHO'S THAT LADY?**  
Pee Wee and trainer  
Bernie meet cute.



The Barkbusters method involves a series of sounds and signals that your dog intuitively understands. It's amazing to watch their faces the minute they start to get it, like a little lightbulb is turning on. "Oh, *that's* what I'm supposed to be doing."

Pee Wee's worst habit? He assumed he was top dog. He would jump on furniture, on people, playfully latch onto their ankles with his teeth, or—my least favorite—stand on your chest while you're sleeping, and make little yelping sounds, just because he feels like a snack at 3 a.m.

As Bernie explained, a dog needs a pack, and he assumes he's the leader until you assert your authority and prove otherwise. That's the cause of most behavioral problems. I learned how to use body language and sounds—a stern "bah" works wonders—evenly and consistently until Pee Wee got the hint. It didn't really even take that long. After each correction, when he does it right, lavish praise is applied and it makes him beam like a lighthouse.

*"All the gossip, all the time."*

**LIFE LESSONS** Clockwise from top left: Pee Wee learns that begging for food is a big no-no; making great strides in walking properly; Fetch!'s Jeff Plunket with Pee Wee and pals; Bernie and Pee Wee reminisce about the experiences they've shared.

Pee Wee's second worst habit? "Gimme some of that." Yes, he had turned into an accomplished little beggar. His secret? His will could outlast yours. Plus he has a naturally expressive face and was able to project total pathos at will. He won the battle every time.

Now, when I eat something, he sits respectfully at a proper distance. In fact, he's getting to the point where he's starting to leave me alone. The other night I ate an entire cheesecake with no interference. Pee Wee sat contentedly on the floor chewing a plastic Pepsi bottle.

And here's an important tip Bernie taught me. Crouch down when you're calling your dog. This works every time—something about not looking big and threatening—and can be invaluable in an emergency.



Photography by Rebecca Baxter



Bernie and Barkbusters can help you solve a whole list of other behavioral problems—indoor accidents, jumping up on strangers, knocking people down, sibling rivalry, chasing cats, etc. What I like about them is the twist of learning to communicate with your dog in ways he naturally understands, rather than teaching him "tricks" that he gets rewarded for but doesn't quite comprehend. For more information, call Bernie at (941) 223-3883 or go to [sarasotanorthport@barkbusters.com](mailto:sarasotanorthport@barkbusters.com).

And Barkbusters' sister company Fetch! provides a whole series of pet-related services: pet sitting, boarding, doggie day care, hotel pet sitting, dog walking, etc. When I'm out of town Pee Wee now boards with Fetch! This is not regular boarding in an antiseptic kennel, but rather in a private home with other dogs to play with. And the private home is located in Indian Beach with a view of the bay, where you're surrounded by doggie millionaires to meet on your walks. Only in Sarasota. Call Jeff Plunkett at (941) 256-0437 or go to [FetchPetCare.com](http://FetchPetCare.com). ■