



GAMES: MAKING LEARNING SAFE & FUN

GUEST: TERRY RYAN

Colleen Pelar: [00:00:00] Hi, welcome back to UNLEASHED (at work & home). My guest today is Terry Ryan, dog trainer extraordinaire. She's the owner of an established dog training school in Washington state and she is a trainer who trains trainers. So many of us have learned under Terry, and one of Terry's particular gifts is bringing training... making training fun, and often by using games. So, I invited Terry today to talk to me a little bit about games and how games can make our lives more joyful. Thanks so much for coming Terry.

Terry Ryan: Hi Colleen, good to be invited. Thank you.

Colleen Pelar: So, Terry what sparked your interest in games?

Terry Ryan: Oh, I guess years ago, I decided that there was more to dog training classes than forward, halt, left turn, right turn, and I just started inventing things [00:01:00], and adapting things that suited me, that made me happy, and try them out on my students.

Colleen Pelar: And what kind of effects did you see with that?

Terry Ryan: Well, selfishly I enjoyed myself. I get a kick out of creating new things or taking old things and manipulating them into something different; stealing ideas from others and changing them around to suit me; or even inventing a few things over the years. So, it seems like having a good time is contagious; if I'm smiling and having a good time it almost seems like my students are too. Then of course, we always have to look at the dogs because their opinion might be different from ours. We have to consider them for sure. Sometimes when we're having a good time, the dog just might not, so we have to keep that in the forefront at all times.

Colleen Pelar: [00:02:00] I think a really important thing you just said there is that it was contagious; like your positive emotions you were experiencing were contagious. And that's one thing that we all kind of intuitively know, but we don't consciously think about that much; that how our mood is affecting others, and how positive moods can really have a great effect on the people around us. You found that to be true?

Terry Ryan: Well, yeah, I think you and I and people like us have spent a lot of our time trying to have people enjoy their dogs, and be happy, and turn them on. I talk about the on button and the off button. I think it's important that we also share an off button with our

dogs. Over the years, I've done that in the classroom situation particularly if we're playing a game and people start to get spun up a little bit. I think they're little bit out of control. I'll push my iPad and play relaxation music. Often, they're so [00:03:00] happy they don't hear it. So, I just stop talking and point to my ear and do the shushing motion and I'll say, "Yeah, listen to that. Now, let's breathe slowly. Let's think about something relaxing. Don't ask your dog to do a thing. Don't ask him to sit or lie down. I don't care what he does. Just breathe... put your hand on your dog. Put it over a big muscle, and just kind of move that muscle around a little bit and let's breathe." So, I tone my voice down and honestly, it's amazing how the people start to tone down.

And pretty soon you look at the dog... some of them are dancing around..."What's next? What's next?" But little by little, they start to tone down, too. So, once we get them calmed a little bit, then we resume, and that process takes maybe a minute and then we get back to it. [00:04:00]

Colleen Pelar: Which is awesome if you can bring an entire room down in about a minute and by making it a game the way you have... it's not technically a game because rules and all... but just making this a low-stress, you can't really do it wrong, or just kind of all doing this together, it makes it sort of a safer learning environment for the students. They're not feeling corrected. They're just being guided toward what you'd like them to do. Is that what you found?

Terry Ryan: Well, they're never corrected. I just point out information that's coming our way. The game... I view as if... the people don't like the word "games"; if that's too sissy for them, I call them fluency exercises. That's exact exactly why I'm doing them, to make the core behaviors better and more reliable. So, we do the fluency exercises. They're games. Eh. But the games I would say [00:05:00] less than 10% ever seem like they could be interpreted as competitive. So, and I know some people are very competitive. So, anytime I'll introduce a game, for instance at an instructors workshop, I'll say that "For you competitive types. We can add criteria; we can add a timing element; and we can make this competitive. But generally, my games are no winners, losers. If someone looks like they're struggling, or if they don't complete the task, you know, like musical chairs, you're out. I don't say you're out. I say you're promoted. And then they go off to the side. Hopefully if I have enough assistance with an assistant, and they're promoted to a private lesson, they get a little bit of tutoring and then they come back and join the game. So, there's no "you're out". It's just "you're promoted".

Colleen Pelar: [00:06:00] And I've always liked that. I've never been a fan of win/loss games and particularly not in a training class, and for a game like musical chairs where if your dog is not as... or your team, because it's not always a dog... is not as good as the others and then you're out, you actually get less opportunity to practice which is crazy, because then we're reinforcing the people who've got the stronger skills, and letting the ones who are struggling just sort of wallow there in the struggle. So, I love the "you're promoted" and off you go and get a little one-on-one tip from an assistant, and that it's everybody wins, and it's still fun, and it's low pressure, and it just sparks more joy that way.

Terry Ryan: And, those are the ones that need the help the most. Why would you sideline them?

Colleen Pelar: Absolutely and it creates more success for everyone by doing it that way.

Terry Ryan: Agree

Colleen Pelar: So, from that perspective, there are lots of articles [00:07:00] about like... gamifying your job, and finding ways to make your actual work more interesting, or more fun by just kind of mentally, you know, how many phone calls can I make this hour? How many, you know reports can I finish? How long will it take me to finish this report? How many times do I use the word 'awesome'? Whatever... I'm finding these kinds of strategies for ourselves to make things more interesting. Do you do any of that yourself?

Terry Ryan: Well, I've been playing games in the dog training arena since well, I guess since 1966. I started when I was three, Colleen. It was only recently left... a couple of years ago that I ever even heard the word, gamify. Somebody used that... in fact, my arm was twisted into making that part of the title of the book I wrote recently. [00:08:00] But I had to look it up... the definition and I'm thinking yeah, that's what I do. The definition is purposefully using games to promote and facilitate education. And over the years, it's been used a lot in early childhood education, adult ed, e-learning, and particularly you see it... I see it in team building events. So, I kind of inherited that term.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, it's an interesting term. I think it relates so much to the online video game kind of world, but the concepts and strategies behind it are not new... ideas. We've been doing this kind of thing but gamify as a term is new. However, it's a very Google-able word. So, when people do talk about like gamifying your job, or how can you find strategies to just make the [00:09:00] job more interesting for, you more fun for you, more successful for you, there's a lot of benefit to that... to looking for the strategies to perk up our fun there. So, what kind of... what tips would you suggest to somebody who wants to make his or her work life a little bit more fun?

Terry Ryan: Well, I'll have to speak to... as a dog training class instructor. It's not going to be fun for you or the students if it's not working; if they're felt to be put on the spot, if they're not somehow successful. So, I think as the game leader or instructor you need to have a whole quiver of games, lots of games, and don't decide ahead of time we're going to play this, this, and this. See how the people and dogs are, and have some options ready, and be ready to [00:10:00] back out of an option and go in a different direction depending on what the dogs and people are telling you. I guess I view instructing in general and game playing, especially teaching, by new methods. We might find some cognitive dissonance going on people that have trained before under instructors with different methods, or instructors that are sticking to their old tried and true method of teaching classes. It's kind of hard if they feel that that's working for them. It's kind of hard for them to want to go in a new direction. So, we have that going on all the time too, with the students. Unless they're

totally new and naïve, they've got some expectations of what might be taking place in a dog class and what I present might be a little bit of a deviation from that.

So, [00:11:00] I guess the analogy that I would like to use is that of a tour guide. If you go to a foreign country, you're a little apprehensive; you've never been there; before the architectures' different; the food is different; people are behaving somewhat differently. Are you safe? Is it okay? You look to the tour guide; a tour guide's job is to make you feel safe; make you feel okay; explain it to you so that it's easily accepted by you and that you want more. So, I guess we instructors are simply tour guides into a new and unknown area for some people.

Colleen Pelar: That's a great analogy – the tour guide analogy because I think that's true in almost any new environment, or customer service environment too. Like, anytime someone's [00:12:00] coming to you for a service, they're on the end of not knowing what to expect and you're on the end of, oh, yeah, we've done this before. So, that would be true with dog training; it would be true with grooming; it would be true with vet visits; it would be true with boarding and day care where we have a system, we know what to expect, and the client is coming in and going, you know, “Is it safe here? I'm not really sure. Is there someone here who can bridge this gap for me and help me to understand it.” And having a sense of fun with that increases the feelings of safety as long as we do have that success component, and I do like that you specify that because with not having losers in the game, so that's a piece of getting the success component. But also, the idea of making sure that we are getting the behavior we want. And for ourselves, sometimes there's a little bit of [00:13:00] that too; when we're trying to change a habit and we take off too big of a piece; if we're like, “I can't quite reach the goal” and breaking it down a little bit smaller and succeeding then makes it more fun, more achievable, more investment with that.

Terry Ryan: I love metaphors and analogies to a fault, I'll admit almost to the point of being anthropomorphic with some people. I'm sorry; I try not to be. But as far as what you just said, I use the idea of taking a big piece of something and breaking it into smaller manageable pieces. I use the example of an hourglass – if we had a pebble that represented a piece of knowledge and it was at the top of the hour glass, our learner was at the bottom, no matter how hard we push and shove it's not going to get through. But if we break it up into little pieces of sand and trickle it in, [00:14:00] it's going to work.

Colleen Pelar: I love that! That's a great one. I always confuse myself on which one's the metaphor and which one's the analogy. That one's a metaphor. Right? Analogy is...

Terry Ryan: Oh, I think there's a fuzzy line between the two of them.

Colleen Pelar: I think that's why I love that image because you're right that the pebble is stuck there at the at the neck of the hourglass, but it's very simple to get it down as little grains.

Terry Ryan: Well, if you try to get it down, and shove it down, you're going to hurt your thumb and you might break the hourglass. So, I can go on and on with that, but I won't.

Colleen Pelar: And we could hurt the learner to who's standing under the boulder coming down at them.

Terry Ryan: CRASH! Good one. I'm going to use that one; I'm stealing that one.

Colleen Pelar: So, do you think that games are our natural... I guess... [00:15:00] do you think that animals create games on their own because. yeah, let's go with that one...

Terry Ryan: Okay, I over the years have definitely seen dogs do things that seem to amuse themselves. One example that always comes to mind is the dog that goes to the top of the staircase and drops the ball and then races down and fetches it and brings it back up again. To me that is the ultimate of how "wow" dogs are, and how wonderful they are... wonderful of... are able to solve problems. So, the short answer to that is "yes".

Colleen Pelar: What evolutionary benefit do you think there is for us living creatures in creating these games?

Terry Ryan: Well, games are practice for life; you know children play – some children play with dolls [00:16:00] because they're practicing to be parents; some children play fireman because they want to practice defending themselves, hazard avoidance. So, you know a biologist would tell you that things that dogs do, maybe people too, are broken into three different categories –hazard avoidance, reproduction, and food acquisition. And when I look at dogs playing, I wonder if I were to put this into a black and white category, where would it fall? That's one of my part-time habits, pastimes. So, I think that games prepare us for the real life, and just take a look at the kinds of games we play and that would probably stand up. I don't know. I'm not really a biologist but I had lots of friends that are.

Colleen Pelar: It is interesting because I definitely think lots of animals play [00:17:00] but I am not a biologist, and one of my sons was taking a college course where they were making a distinction between play and ritualized behavior. And I was not in this course, so I'm probably not going to say it right, but some of the pieces that they were talking about as being ritualized behavior, I would agree are ritualized, but that when they provide joy, they fall in my opinion, the non-scientist's opinion, into the category of play. Like this... this is just I do it because it's fun; not I do it because it's habit, you know scratching the side of your nose might be habit; running up the stairs and throwing your ball down so you can race down and fetch it, that's play. Even if they're both, you know something that we could predict as a ritualized behavior.

Terry Ryan: I'm guessing that what we call habit, kind of fixed [00:18:00] action patterns, are things that dogs are going to do because it's ingrained and possibly they do it and feel some kind of a reinforcement, intrinsic or environmental reinforcement. So maybe that's

also a fuzzy line. Maybe that's also a gray area. That would be a good PhD thesis for somebody.

Colleen Pelar: That's good. Wonder who out there wants to take this one on?

Terry Ryan: Tell your kid.

Colleen Pelar: None of my guys seem to think that they want to work with animals, but you know, there's time, they can... they can lean into it. So, with the idea of games... like, really thinking about games, do you see ... and I do want to make sure that we're including within games that we don't need to have a winner or a loser, but just some sort of like mental strategy of how can I make this more fun... [00:19:00] What are the benefits you see in a person looking at an activity and saying, "How can I convert this from the thing I have to do, to the thing I get to do with some element of fun?"

Terry Ryan: Well, one thought would be... how can I make this fun versus more educational for the learner? So, I think about value-added. I have a game. I have a goal. I know what core behavior I want to strengthen with the game. We play the game and then there's a teaching moment invariably that pops up that you weren't anticipating. I call that value-added, and I'll do something like... we're playing... whatever, red light green light, but on the sidewalk on your next walk, this is [00:20:00] including a strategy that might help you and then I'll quickly point out the practical aspect of the game. I might see a dog that's yawning, or maybe sits down and scratches. And I might say, "Why look at well, look at that Fluffy's yawning." And if I'm lucky somebody's going to say "Fluffy's bored, or Fluffy's tired", and then I could go into a brief, "Fluffy might need oxygen; Fluffy might be holding her breath; Fluffy might be conflicted. I wonder if Fluffy is worried about the fact that you folks aren't staying on your marks. Give me you're getting... maybe you're not... maybe you're getting too close to each other and let's make it easier for Fluffy by getting back on our marks". So that's real-life value in interacting or training your dog that I extracted spontaneously from a silly game we were [00:21:00] playing.

Colleen Pelar: And you have several books on games for trainers, right? There's... there are multiples now aren't there?

Terry Ryan: Well, there's only one that's still in print. Years and years ago as far back as we go together in our friendship, there was one called "Games People Play... to Train Their Dogs" that's been out of print for probably 15 or 20 years. The sequel to that was "Life Beyond Block Heeling" and that's been out of print forever too. The one that I wrote last year is a new and improved version... there's about 70 games in it versus 20, and I made an attempt to sneak in the side door... it's actually – If you read it, it's actually an instructor's book masquerading as how to play games book. So that one's been pretty popular recently. Yeah, that one's called [00:22:00] something like oh, I don't know, "Gamify Your Dog Training", something like that. Dogwise put it out. I actually forget the title of it; it's publisher made the title, not me.

Colleen Pelar: So, you do have one very interesting experience that many people who aren't dog trainers have never heard about. So, I would love if you would tell us a little bit about what Chicken Camp is and why on earth anyone would want to go train chickens.

Terry Ryan: Oh my goodness, you had to bring up chickens. Sometimes I like to get through a day without talking about chickens.

Colleen Pelar: Well today is not that day for you.

Terry Ryan: You know what? It's my favorite thing. Almost any dog workshop has a few slides about chicken training much to the surprise of Seoul, South Korea last week. What? All right; chicken training actually started out as rat training many, many years ago. There [00:23:00] wasn't the cooperation between academic psychologist and behaviorists, and dog trainers as there is thankfully today, and I remember times when academia would say, "Give that dog trainer a rat in an operant conditioning chamber. Let's see what she can do. And my thought was, "Give that guy a seven-month-old intact lab puppy with the 75-year-old person attached to the leash, and let's see what he can do." And that was kind of where it was back then. So, I decided, all of my dog training friends, we're going to excel at using a skinner box and a rat. Back then, I was doing dog-training camps. Everybody came because actually... it was only back then only one other camp in existence, so I thought I had them. At that time, I worked at the College of Veterinary [00:24:00] Medicine at Washington State University. So, I had access to lots of resources; Lab Animal Resources was one. So, I would borrow rats from Lab Animal Resources and take them back, borrow operant conditioning chambers or skinner boxes from the Psych Department during the summer, take them back and during dog camp, one of the rotations was train a rat in a skinner box. That's how it started.

Well, back in the early days, I had an association with Karen Pryor who at that point was working at Sea Life Park in Hawaii, and her associate Ingrid Kang, both of them moved to Washington. One day, I got a call from Ingrid who said, "I am so bored here. I'm cold. I have nothing to do." This is a person who lived in Hawaii for lots of years. Ingrid is from Sweden and she has an [00:25:00] advanced degree in animal cognition. I said, "So what are you doing in three weeks?"

"Nothing."

"Want to come to dog camp?"

"Oh, ja. Ja."

So, she showed up and she saw what we did at dog camp. And I said, "Well, what do you think?"

She said, "It looks good, looks fun. I enjoyed myself."

I said, "You want to come to the next one?"

"Oh, yeah. Maybe..."

I said, "Good, because you're going to teach the other species unit at the next camp."

She's..."Oh no, no, no." And just like all people that say "no", they're the perfect ones for the job.

So, I twisted her arm and she thought "I'm too busy like getting lunches ready and putting out fires to teach it myself anymore." I have a hundred and twenty people at those campuses. We rotate through various instructors that I would hire. So, she did it. I said, "Oh and PS, I don't want to do rats anymore. What do you think we should do?" I had no idea about chickens.

And she said, "Well, I raise finches." And it was like well, finches [00:26:00] just don't eat enough, so we can't use her finches. Well, what about oscars? I like oscars. I've had oscars, but I couldn't get my head around all these mason jars with oscars after camp.

She said, "Well. I just got some baby chicks. What about chickens?"

And I said, "Let's do chickens." That's how chicken training got started at dog camp and it was just a rotation among other things like behavior training, good citizen. I would have students come and do calming signals. I would have T-touch people there. It was just a rotation, but people really enjoyed it. I loved it and after a while, it became popular. Ingrid taught it and then I called up Marian Breeland Bailey one time. I didn't know her but as she was in the back of my psych books and I said, "Hello Miss Bailey, this is Terry Ryan. I'm a dog trainer in [00:27:00] Washington state. I use chickens to help dog trainers learn the principles of classical and operant conditioning so they can better train their dogs."

And she said, "Oh what a good idea... good for you, dear."

And I said, "...and, I wonder if you would come and teach that unit for me?"

"Oh, no, no, no dear. I'm retired but keep up the good work... really good work."

And I kept on and twisted her arm. And finally, she agreed to come, and she really put a flare on the chicken unit at dog camp. And brought her husband Bob Bailey along with her and we've all probably heard of Bob... Marian passed away in '01. Unfortunately, a lot of people haven't heard about Marian as much.

Colleen Pelar: I attended the last Chicken Camp she ran.

Terry Ryan: Lucky for us.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah. She was awesome. She really loved teaching. It was really interesting. And then I went to one of your Chicken Camps a few years after that, and the funniest thing [00:28:00] was when I was heading off to the first Chicken Camp, I'm you know telling people like I'm going to Chicken Camp and my husband had never quite made the connection that I was going to like, actually train chickens. Like he was like, he said it was just a cute name. I'm like, no, it's kind of an interesting experience because you don't realize how much dogs work with you until you're faced with a chicken who's like... you either got it or don't got it.

Terry Ryan: The chicken doesn't like it; the chicken flies away and our chickens are on tables without leashes. People either get it totally, or they don't get it at all and disparage it. But funny thing; my mother-in-law not too many years ago looked me in the eye and said, "You mean they pay you to do this?" "Yeah." Piece of the camp that doesn't get it at all.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, and yet it's an amazing learning experience for so many dog trainers. [00:29:00] I think that's really cool. I didn't realize that you were the one who got Marian Bailey into it. So that was a new piece for me.

Terry Ryan: Well actually Keller and Marian and afterwards Bob were using chickens to train trainers for their animal behavior business. Before I was born, but those were dog people... those were animal trainers. So, I'm the one that's saw, I guess, the value of bringing it to the dog people, but they were doing it long before I was even born.

Colleen Pelar: We're so grateful you brought it to the dog people because I think it's a fascinating learning experience, but it's also just such a cool different thing to do. I mean you learn a lot, but you doing something different opens your eyes to other ways, and other strategies, and also points out holes in your knowledge, which kind of... if we go full circle back to our whole concept of games, sort of brings that [00:30:00] idea of the tour guide, you know... that you were using the tour guide role there to expand horizons.

Terry Ryan: Well it's all about lateral thinking... their own expression of lateral thinking. Don't do the same thing over and over again, particularly if it's not working. Why would you do more of it harder, longer? Step sideways a little bit and see if there's something different that would be helpful.

Colleen Pelar: And that's probably a great spot to sum it up on. So, thank you so much for talking to me today about behavior and learning and games and how we can all just feel a little bit better in our lives. I really appreciate you making time for UNLEASHED (at work & home) and all of our friends out there.

Terry Ryan: It was a good excuse to get together. It's been too long.

Colleen Pelar: It has been; we will have to make a make a date to get together sooner. Actually, one of my sons is moving to the Seattle area. So that'll have me almost in your neck of the woods.

Terry Ryan: Absolutely. Just hop on the ferry and come on over.

Colleen Pelar: Will do. Well, thanks so much Terry. I'm really glad you could join me today.

Terry Ryan: You're welcome. My [00:31:00] pleasure. Bye. Bye.

Colleen Pelar: UNLEASHED (at work & home) is all about finding practical, sustainable ways to apply positive psychology to improve the lives of veterinarians, veterinary nurses, and other animal care professionals. Protect yourself from burnout and compassion fatigue by listening to the podcast, participating in a workshop, or scheduling private confidential coaching with me. Details about all of the programs can be found at ColleenPelar.com.

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