Q. I am buying a new puppy and want to choose a good trainer, what should I be looking for?

A. That is a very good question and one that should be continually asked by every dog owner! We probably all have pre-conceived ideas about what a dog trainer is and know the type of people we get along with and those we don’t. Selecting the right person to help you train your dog can be a bit of a minefield. So, let’s consider the following points, firstly your dog trainer needs to be somebody that focuses on training you to train your dog, they won’t be living with you and joining you on every walk, so it is up to you to be your dog’s natural teacher and this is what you need to learn. Training any practical subject also requires skills in planning, setting objectives and targets, what do you need to achieve? Drifting along with no plan and no feelings of achievement is a bit like a pilot not knowing where to fly to. Are you going to compete, or do you just want to enjoy owning a well behaved, sociable and lovable companion? It goes without saying that your dog trainer also needs to possess a wide range of effective ‘human’ communication skills and is approachable. They should be able to assess and understand your capabilities, be encouraging and understand your physical needs too. Cold, wet weather, a cold dingy hall is equally as bad as a hot, indoor school hall that is slippery and echoes too much for you to be able to hear what they are saying! You should feel comfortable to practice exercises and ask questions with them observing you, especially if you attend classes. Your trainer needs to encourage a relaxed, friendly and welcoming club and have group training skills with a knowledge of different human learning styles. I always recommend contacting a dog trainer and asking to attend their club to observe in the first instance. If they are not willing, or friendly on the telephone they don’t choose them! It sounds obvious, but you really don’t need to be looking for a sergeant major style trainer for a family pet (or for any else!). So, we have established that they need people skills, but on the other end of the lead is a canine, so an understanding of canine behaviour, communication and health needs is essential. A professional dog trainer will also be able to know about legislation, local policies and be able to inform you of a dog owner’s health and welfare responsibilities in addition to knowing the functional anatomy and physiology of dogs and possess appropriate insurance. If they have a web site, check out what information they provide, see if they possess their own code of ethics or belong to an association that requests members to follow theirs. Of course, these days, unlike 30 years ago when I started dog training there are several dog training and canine behaviour qualifications, so ask if they have any or have received any formal training. For some dog trainers this can be like ‘lighting the touch paper’ and they may become defensive, but honestly, they shouldn’t mind you asking. It doesn’t matter if they are not qualified, provided they are not stuck in the dark ages with their approach to training! They must possess an understanding of animal learning theories, principles and techniques and not just rely on ‘harsh’ outdated methods, like using their hands to push your developing puppy’s hips into a forced sit, we have moved on from this approach and expect professionals to actively take part in ‘continuing professional development’. An up to date knowledge of available and appropriate training equipment will also provide an indication of their knowledge and their ability to help you! Lastly but not at all least is an understanding and desire to work within animal welfare and know the needs of the dogs while in their care – I bet you are really pleased you asked the question!

Q. I am taking on my son’s Akita but already own a retriever they both get on well. I wondered if I should walk them *joined together* on a *split lead*?

A. In my professional opinion, no as this can limit your control of either dog. It is good they both get on and may be about the same size, so generally walking them together should be fine. Make sure they are both individually lead trained, responsive to your commands and happy to lead walk on either side of you. My advice would be to walk them on individual collars and leads (or other suitable equipment) so you can individually adjust your control as needed, I am sure they will enjoy their walk more too!