

# The Origins of Treibball

## A Profile of Jan Nijboer

Christine Scott

Treibball, the new herding sport that originated in Germany, is taking the United States by storm. Classes are springing up all over the place and organizations are beginning to fine-tune their competition rules.

This last fall I had the pleasure to meet, train with, and discuss Treibball with the sport's founder, Jan Nijboer. Since Nijboer's teaching material is due to be published through Dogwise sometime in the first part of this year, I thought it might be interesting to the APDT's members to find out a little bit about the man, his method and his vision.

Nijboer's original intent was not to come up with a new dog sport, but was, one might say, a byproduct of his decades of experience working with behavioral problems in dogs. His training experiences and observations gave rise to his philosophy, which he has coined "Natural Dogmanship®" and this in turn led to the "accidental" development of Treibball.

The initial spark of Treibball was birthed when Nijboer was working on an educational DVD concerning the herding of cattle using horses. Part of the filming set was an ever-present Australian Shepherd who was constantly interfering with the project by chasing the cattle. It was quite obvious that the dog wanted to participate but did not know how. Nijboer began to work with the owner and the dog to teach them basic herding skills, and in a very short time the owner could direct her dog to do directional herding while the owner rode her horse. For Nijboer, this was a confirmation that dogs — especially working breeds — need a job. There are just too many unemployed dogs in the civilized world.

Shortly thereafter he was working with another dog who loved to push empty barrels around the yard. The pushing itself seemed to be highly rewarding, so Nijboer decided to give the dog a job by teaching him to push specific barrels toward his owner. Seeing the pure fun that the new "barrel team" was having, he began to wonder if there would be other dogs who would enjoy this kind of activity. But since barrels are cumbersome, hard to find, and one-directional he was looking for a better option.

The last bit of inspiration came when Nijboer watched a television show that featured two Boxer dog teams playing "soccer" by trying to push a ball into the opposing team's goal. And so the idea of the exercise/yoga ball "sheep" was born.

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Jan Nijboer

As he began to test out his theory, Nijboer saw that many dogs found the exercise of herding to be self-rewarding, and that no other motivator like food was needed. With that in mind, Nijboer's method is not food reward-driven, but example-driven.

Nijboer teaches Treibball the way he teaches everything else to a dog — by example, or by letting the dog experiment to succeed, which is the way nature usually dishes out life's challenges.

What this means for Treibball is that the first thing the dog needs to understand is that the ball belongs to the handler. This is especially important with ball-obsessed dogs. For them it is actually recommended that the ball be introduced as the sole property of the handler. In the beginning the ball is only rolled around by the handler or sat on by the handler without any invitation for the dog to join in. Once the respect for ownership of the "ball sheep" is established, the dog can then be invited to join in the act of controlling the ball, and the actual herding work begins here. For dogs who are already calm around the ball, one can easily go to the second step.

The dog is invited to join in the fun with the ball — that means the handler is rolling the ball using his hands on the bottom of the ball so as not to initiate "killing" ideas. Nijboer has found that rolling the ball along using one's hand on the top of the ball seems to encourage dogs to also manipulate the ball from the top, causing them to lose control, and more importantly it seems to trigger biting of the ball. If, on the other hand, the ball is pushed in its southern hemisphere by the handler, the dog is more likely to follow suit. Once the dog is actively involved with the handler and the ball, the handler can give the ball a good shove, which will hopefully initiate the "Oh no! The sheep is getting away from us!" response from the dog. It is interesting how many dogs, after regaining control of the ball, will automatically redirect the ball back to the handler. The command "push" is only initiated once the dog touched the ball hard enough to cause motion by himself.

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As with all other sports, each dog approaches the introduction to the ball in a different way. As mentioned before, some (especially herding breeds) approach the ball with all-out enthusiasm. Others vary somewhere between ambivalence and reluctance. But even these dogs can be brought "into the herding fold," so to speak, with demonstration, time and patience.

The number one thing to remember when beginning to work with a fearful or unsure dog is never to roll the ball toward the dog. This can be very frightening and imposing to the dog. Once again, the dog has to see the handler have fun with the ball by herself. If the dog becomes brave enough to engage and just touch the ball, the ball is pushed immediately away by the handler so that the dog will learn that this big round thing retreats when being touched, making it much less frightening.

Nijboer's insistence on teaching without food was quite challenging for me and the other trainers. As a trainer who uses a clicker for almost anything I teach, I was very doubtful that I wanted to (or could) switch over to another method of training. But being aware that many people have difficulty clicking in a timely manner, I wanted to acquire another approach. So when I received the invitation to a three-day workshop with Nijboer, I could not resist. I found myself in the company of other clicker trainers who were just as doubtful as I was about the possibility that any progress could be made without the presence of some other immediate reward system.

The dogs, most of whom had never even seen a yoga ball, proved us wrong. Their personalities ranged from all-out enthusiast to the laissez faire type. To begin with, the handlers were taught to play with the ball themselves in a manner that was neither threatening nor overly enthusiastic, so as not to incite the dog's desire to kill the ball once he was participating. As mentioned before, once the dog joins the handler in the pushing of the ball, the ball is then pushed a little harder as if it were escaping. Most dogs will immediately chase after the ball trying

to catch it and then direct themselves to push the ball toward the handler — a natural tendency that I found quite interesting. However, if the dog just headed off to have fun with the ball, the handler would reclaim the ball by sitting on it. The same would be done if the dog attempted to bite the ball.

In the beginning the dogs would have difficulty controlling the ball, particularly with pushing it in a specific direction. In the process of learning to alternate sides to get a straight-line roll, some dogs got very frustrated and tried to kill the ball, while others were just simply clumsy with their attempts. In both cases the dog might be seen jumping on top of the ball, and it took a keen eye to distinguish playful inexperience from escalating involvement that would lead to the "killing" (popping) of the ball.

Simply using a bigger ball could alleviate some of this jumping on top of the ball activity. Nijboer does not restrict dogs to certain ball sizes. Timid dogs often do better with smaller balls to begin with, while many small dogs seem to prefer a larger ball, which can also prevent the dog from tumbling over the ball. Interestingly enough, dogs also seem to have individual color preferences. Blue and yellow seem to be high on the preference list and we had one dog that just loved the pink ball.

To help teach ball control, barricades were set up to form a zigzag course in which the dog was simply called toward the handler with the push command and the dog was left to himself to figure out how to negotiate the course.

Over time, dogs develop their own style of moving the ball forward. Some use mostly their faces (often open mouthed, which gives them a bigger pushing surface) constantly alternating sides. Others make Treibball into a full body contact sport, using their faces, paws, chests, sides, and at times their hind legs. Small dogs in particular seem to use their paws. Some use their paws simply to get the ball rolling, while others seem to box the ball along all the way to the goal. Other than biting the ball, all forms of expression are allowed, since Nijboer encourages free learning about the movement of the ball, and the experience must ultimately be enjoyable for the dog.

After the introduction of one ball, a second and third ball are added very rapidly, since one wants to avoid getting the dog too focused on "The One." The handler can actually see when the dog is ready for another ball, since he begins to look around as if to say "now what?" once he has pushed the first one into the goal. At this point one or two more balls are added so the fun can continue. If the dog gets too aggressive with the ball, the handler always reclaims it. After all balls have been driven into the goal, the handler will sit on the ball and the dog will be asked to lie down. Only then, if desired, will an alternate reward, such as food, be given.



Waiting to practice.

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Nijboer prefers to reward the dogs by letting them have what he calls a "Prey Dummy®." A Prey Dummy is a linen pouch that can hold up to two cups of food, depending on size. The dummy is originally introduced separately as a hunting tool, teaching the dog to retrieve the dummy and letting him have some food out of it when he does. Then, if the handler chooses, she can add another dimension by hiding the dummy and letting the dog hunt for it. (This method turned into an all-out favorite with my dogs.) The hunting and retrieving of the dummy very quickly turns into its own game and the eating of the food, surprisingly enough, becomes secondary. Once the dog understands the Prey Dummy game, the dummy can be used to teach directions. Beginning by placing a dummy left or right of the dog, only the correct retrieval choice of a dummy will be rewarded with a game of tossing the dummy or a quick snack from it.

So how do the two parts fit together in the finished Treibball game? The dog sits by the handler and is sent out to the pinnacle of the ball pyramid. (The balls are set up in billiard pool style.) Depending on the experience level of the dog, he is either just asked to push one ball after the other into the goal, or, if directional control has been achieved, specific balls are requested for retrieval. Once the dog has penned all the balls, the Prey Dummy

is thrown for the dog to retrieve and take away for later consumption.

To illustrate that this method is not about the food but about the enjoyment of the work, Nijboer had one of his advanced students set out half a dozen dummies, some of which were open and laden with food. In spite of this, the dog continued working around the open dummies, only retrieving the ones he was asked to.

When I got home I was faced with a dilemma: Did I want to experiment with my dogs and retrain them using Nijboer's methods, or continue as usual? One of the problems I had run into before I left for Germany was that my dogs would always only give me so much before they would look for their cookie. That usually meant one or two ball pushes with a keen eye on my hand or wherever they thought the cookies were lying. So I decided to totally get rid of the cookies. The first few tries went well enough, and my "chow-hound" seemed to especially like the absence of the pressure that the presence of cookies apparently exerted on him. But then there seemed to be a total shutdown of both dogs. I had brought some Prey Dummies with me from Germany just for the hunting fun, so we laid off of Treibball for a while and just simply hunted, looking for dummies in the back yards, on long



*A seminar participant poses for the camera.*

strolls through towns, etc. Then I began to re-teach directional sends using the dummies and from there I re-introduced the ball. This time the switch seemed to be successful. The eyes were no longer looking for food and the dogs were able to focus more on the task at hand (with only the occasional squirrel running through the yard causing a total loss of concentration).

Now each run-through is rewarded with a toss of a dummy, and the end of the practice is followed by a rigorous dummy chase, which will lead to the dummy's eventual "death" and devouring of the food inside it.

Nijboer did not intend to invent another dog sport. Instead he intended to find an activity that is enjoyable for both handler and dog, and one that made sense to the dog, addressing some of his primal needs like chasing, hunting and eating. Nijboer said that his dogs often do not eat at home — after all, the prey is in the woods, not in the den. While my "woods" are made up of suburbia, I can say that the herding, hunting, eating sequence makes a lot of sense to me, and the dogs seem to agree.

So where does that leave the sport aspect in Nijboer's eyes? Again, relationship is of utmost importance; in competitions heavy demerits are doled out if the dog is put under pressure to perform or appears to have been trained under pressure.

Aside from that, Nijboer has spoken of having multiple dogs herding at the same time using two whistles with different tones and two separate goals. Obstacles like barriers, streams and bridges can also be added to the playing field, causing the dog to search and then retrieve the ball. Another option for horse lovers would be combined herding using horse and dog. And finally a colleague of Nijboer's has developed a large, lightweight, low surface-resistance ball that can be used to have dogs herd a ball into a goal in the water.

To sum up, we can think of the idea of Treibball as bringing us back to our roots. Originally dog and human did all these things together: herd sheep, retrieve lost sheep, drive cattle and at times drive livestock out of the water and back onto land. Treibball brings dogs and humans back to these roots, working together and enjoying each other as they once did.

*Christine Scott is a graduate of Animal Behavior College. She currently teaches basic obedience, Treibball, tricks and freestyle classes at a local day care/teaching facility (K9 Kampus) and at a local pet store, as well as at her own place. She is a "Be a Tree" representer for Doggone Safe and a member of Space Coast Therapy Dogs. Christine lives in Palm Bay Florida with her husband and two mixed breed rescue dogs, Mutley and Rusty, who have enjoyed learning flyball, freestyle, agility, tricks, and most recently Treibball. She can be reached via her website [www.courteousk9.net](http://www.courteousk9.net) or via email: [courteousk9@yahoo.com](mailto:courteousk9@yahoo.com).*



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