

A Pack of Lies

by Mark Derr
August 31, 2006, *New York Times*

WITH a compelling personal story as the illegal immigrant made good because of his uncanny ability to understand dogs, Cesar Millan has taken the world of canine behavior — or rather misbehavior — by storm. He has the top-rated program, *Dog Whisperer*, on the National Geographic Channel, a best-selling book and a devoted following, and he has been the subject of several glowing magazine articles.

He is even preparing to release his own “Illusion” collar and leash set, named for his wife and designed to better allow people to walk their dogs the “Cesar way” — at close heel, under strict control.

Essentially, National Geographic and Cesar Millan have cleverly repackaged and promoted a simplistic view of the dog’s social structure and constructed around it a one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach to dog training. In Mr. Millan’s world, dog behavioral problems result from a failure of the human to be the “pack leader,” to dominate the dog (a wolf by any other name) completely.

While Mr. Millan rejects hitting and yelling at dogs during training, his confrontational methods include physical and psychological intimidation, like finger jabs, choke collars, extended sessions on a treadmill, and what is called flooding, or overwhelming the animal with the thing it fears. Compared with some training devices still in use — whips and cattle prods, for example — these are mild, but combined with a lack of positive reinforcement or rewards, they place Mr. Millan firmly in a long tradition of punitive dog trainers.

Mr. Millan brings his pastiche of animal behaviorism and pop psychology into millions of homes a week. He’s a charming, one-man wrecking ball directed at 40 years of progress in understanding and shaping dog behavior and in developing nonpunitive, reward-based training programs, which have led to seeing each dog as an individual, to understand what motivates it, what frightens it and what its talents and limitations are. Building on strengths and working around and through weaknesses, these trainers and specialists in animal behavior often work wonders with their dogs, but it takes time.

Mr. Millan supposedly delivers fast results. His mantra is “exercise, discipline, affection,” where discipline means “rules, boundaries, limitations.” Rewards are absent and praise scarce, presumably because they will upset the state of calm submission Mr. Millan wants in his dogs. Corrections abound as animals are forced to submit or face their fear, even if doing so panics them.

Mr. Millan builds his philosophy from a simplistic conception of the dog’s “natural” pack, controlled by a dominant alpha animal (usually male). In his scheme, that leader is the human, which leads to the conclusion that all behavior problems in dogs derive from the failure of the owner or owners to dominate. (Conveniently, by this logic, if Mr. Millan’s intervention doesn’t produce lasting results, it is the owner’s fault.)

Women are the worst offenders in his world. In one of the outtakes included in the four-DVD set of the first season of *Dog Whisperer*, Mr. Millan explains that a woman is “the only species that is wired different from the rest.” And a “woman always applies affection before discipline,” he says. “Man applies discipline then affection, so we’re more psychological than emotional. All animals follow dominant leaders; they don’t follow lovable leaders.”

Mr. Millan’s sexism is laughable; his ethology is outdated.

The notion of the “alpha pack leader” dominating all other pack members is derived from studies of captive packs of unrelated wolves and thus bears no relationship to the social structure of natural packs, according to L. David Mech, one of the world’s leading wolf experts. In the wild, the alpha wolves are merely the breeding pair, and the pack is generally comprised of their juvenile offspring and pups.

“The typical wolf pack,” Dr. Mech wrote in *The Canadian Journal of Zoology* in 1999, “is a family, with the adult parents guiding the activities of a group in a division-of-labor system.” In a natural wolf pack, “dominance contests with other wolves are rare, if they exist at all,” he writes.

That’s a far cry from the dominance model that Mr. Millan attributes to the innate need of dogs by way of wolves.

Unlike their wolf forebears, dogs exist in human society. They have been selectively bred for 15,000 or more years to live with people. Studies have shown that almost from birth they are attentive to people, and that most are eager to please, given proper instruction and encouragement.

But sometimes the relationship goes very wrong, and it is time to call on a professional.

Aggression is perhaps the most significant of the behavioral problems that may afflict more than 20 percent of the nation’s 65 million dogs, because it can lead to injury and death. Mr. Millan often treats aggression by forcing the dog to exercise extensively on a treadmill, by asserting his authority over the dog by rolling it on its back in the “alpha rollover,” and through other forms of intimidation, including exposure to his pack of dogs.

Forcefully rolling a big dog on its back was once recommended as a way to establish dominance, but it is now recognized as a good way to get bitten. People are advised not to try it. In fact, many animal behaviorists believe that in the long run meeting aggression with aggression breeds more aggression.

More important, aggression often has underlying medical causes that might not be readily apparent — hip dysplasia or some other hidden physical ailment that causes the dog to bite out of pain; hereditary forms of sudden rage that require a medical history and genealogy to diagnose; inadequate blood flow to the brain or a congenital brain malformation that produces aggression and can only be uncovered through a medical examination. Veterinary behaviorists, having found that many aggressive dogs suffer from low levels of serotonin, have had success in treating such dogs with fluoxetine (the drug better known as Prozac).

Properly treating aggression, phobias, anxiety and fears from the start can literally save time and money. Mr. Millan's quick fix might make for good television and might even produce lasting results in some cases. But it flies in the face of what professional animal behaviorists — either trained and certified veterinarians or ethologists — have learned about normal and abnormal behavior in dogs.