

Canine Crew on the Poop Deck

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Whether you cruise for weeks or months every year, or live aboard full time, your boat just wouldn't be home without your four-legged loved ones. Our first beloved labrador, Duke, was eight years old when we acquired our first boat, an old day-cruising Maine lobster boat. While Duke was passionate about swimming, he hated the boat.

When our next boat allowed us to go for long weekends, we had to leave him with friends ashore. After Duke went to the big dog park in the sky, we decided our next companion would be a true salty dog.

Months of research, reading and discussion led us to a plan. Living in Maine, we would get our puppy in the winter, this way he would be trained but still young enough to adjust to the boat. We picked 5-6 months old as the "perfect" time to introduce him to the boat.

We realized that the key to a truly successful canine crew member was ensuring that all "business" could be carried out on the boat. But how? The serious research began. Much to our dismay, we were greeted with numerous tales of failure. One story that intrigued me, however, was of a large dog who needed to make a 3 day passage. The owner's solution was to sod the cockpit, giving the dog the grass he was used to. So we devised our "poop deck" plan.

We brought Tucker home in early March at 9 weeks old. Snow still covered the ground. We placed a small Astroturf mat in the snow, the kind often used as a doormat. Dutifully, we took Tucker out to the mat whenever it was time to go. He wouldn't even stand on it. We persisted into spring.

In May the boat went back in the water. We took Tucker out gradually increasing his time on the boat. He loved it! After several weeks, we decided it was time for his first overnight -- no going to shore. We anchored off a favorite island and, with meager hopes, put the mat in the cockpit. We waited.

As five o'clock approached, he went to the transom door and whimpered. We showed him the mat. He whimpered. This continued for a couple of hours as the whimpers turned into howls. Finally, he ran to the mat and went! Good dog! Praise and treats followed in abundance!

When we acquired our cruising boat, we simply put the mat where we wanted him to go, in this case on the bow. We found the mat only needed to be down for a few trips for him to learn his spot. Tucker made numerous trips up and down the east coast, to the Keys and to the Bahamas. He was the perfect cruising companion!

Then last winter Tucker died very suddenly at the age of five from cancer. We were devastated as we cut our cruise short and limped back home.

While working with the breeder to decide when we should bring our next precious bundle into our home, we made the decision to adopt Dyna, Tucker's mom. Dyna is a beautiful nine year old "retired" lady. My husband had one condition - we could only keep her if she could learn to do her business on the boat. Of course, I "agreed." We picked her up July 5th. Dyna took quickly to the boat having spent time on smaller boats on Maine lakes. But how were we going to teach an old dog a new trick?

Thinking things through, we decided that the main problem with a house trained dog was that they saw

the entire boat as being “inside” and, therefore, not the place to go. So we devised another plan. Out came the trusty mat which was placed in the yard. Every time we took Dyna out the door we said, “Dyan, let's go outside.” - emphasizing “outside.” We would then take her over to the mat, which she then ignored.

We took her to the boat and placed the mat on the bow. We went inside, closed the door and waited a bit, and then said, “Dyna, let's go outside,” opened the door and walked her around the outside of the boat, showing her the mat. This was repeated many, many times over several afternoons. However, Dyna always waited until we were ashore to do any business. We persisted. Finally, one afternoon with the boat tied to the town dock getting a bath, Dyna casually went to the bow and did her business beside the mat. Good dog! (When my husband expressed joy at this success to a friend saying, “Now we can keep Dyna.” The friend corrected him with, “Now you can keep the boat.”)

Our last test came in August when we brought home, Dylan, an eight week old male puppy - Dyna's grandson. In all honesty, this one was too easy. Out came the mat onto the yard. Faithfully, we took him to the mat multiple times a day. He had a few short, get acquainted trips on the boat. The first time we spent the day on the boat, he watched Dyna go on the bow and ran over to the mat to go. At least one dog is actually using the mat!

Thinking through these three very different experiences, I believe there are some basic concepts which can be applied to others.

- Use some sort of movable mark post to indicate the appropriate spot. We've really liked the mat. It's easy to move about and store. And simple to clean. My guess is that it retains enough odor, even after cleaning, to attract the dog.
- Develop a word that they understand as indicating “outside” and use it consistently wherever they go -- at home, on the boat, and elsewhere.
- Be very, very patient. It's easy to give in to an uncomfortable situation now, but focus on the huge reward when you don't have to go ashore in the rain or during a dangerous condition. You will have the freedom to travel overnight or for multiple days. While there may be some exceptions, no dog can hold it forever.
- If you have the advantage of an already boat trained dog, use it as a model for another dog.
- Praise, praise, praise. They live for it. Make the boat a happy, fun place. When your dog knows what to expect and feels secure in their place, everyone benefits.

Having spent the summer preparing our two new crew members to enjoy their time with us on the boat, we are looking forward to years of cruising adventures. Now can anyone solve the problem of two large dogs and two people in what boat manufactures recklessly call a “queen” size bed?