



ALLEGIANT CANINE PLAYBOOK

***“Leading the Way
With Freedom & Play”***

***Founder, Matt Burnett
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My Story

My name is Matt Burnett, and I'm the founder of Allegiant Canine — an all-age, all-breed off leash obedience and behavioral rehabilitation company based in Chapel Hill, Tennessee. I am originally from Texas, and I am grateful to have completed a four-year degree in West Tennessee. After college, I traveled to 29 countries learning how dogs lived all over the world. I spent several years in corporate sales while exploring how to live with, learn from, and lead dogs in the most holistic way.

In 2015, while serving as a volunteer at the Williamson County Animal Center, I saw up close how much a dog's future depends on the humans around it. In 2017, I left corporate America, became General Manager for Global K9 Protection Services and The K9 Experts. On one fateful evening in 2018, I founded Allegiant Canine in Spring Hill, Tennessee and launched a board and train program built the hard way — one dog, one owner, one relationship at a time.

From 2020 to 2024, I sold my whole estate and lived on-site as the live-in Training Director for Rural Animal Rescue Effort (RARE) in Columbia, Tennessee. I have worked alongside dozens of Nashville area animal rescues on a variety of obedience and behavioral issues, with great success. This experience has taught me so much about how structure in the home, a clear communication system, and an abundance of biological fulfillment can impact a dog's nervous system and behavior for the good.

Over the past decade, I have personally evaluated an estimated 550 privately owned behavioral dogs, actively graduated hundreds of dogs in off-leash obedience, and rehabilitated 238 behavioral cases — not counting the shelter and rescue dogs along the way. I'm no stranger to feral dogs, working K9s, wolf and coyote mixes, or dogs with extensive bite histories. What I have learned is that a dog's behavior is much more impacted by the way that they lived life with their humans than some temporary intervention from someone they may never meet again.

My approach is balanced, relational, and holistic — I care as much about how a dog feels as I do about how a dog behaves. I will help you. I will counsel you. I will coach you. But what I cannot and will not do is train this dog for you. I firmly believe that good training must at some point be done alongside the owner. This coaching is absolutely required, mandatory, and inseparable from lifelong results. I love doing it because good dog training heals the dog and the human. You can do this, and I am delighted to help!

Outside of work, you'll usually find me learning new Ukrainian recipes with my fiancée, Mariya, out on an off-leash adventure in the hills of Middle Tennessee, or playing tug and fetch with my American Bully rescue, Mila who has met each and every rehab case. I have a goal of re-establishing a board & train program on a family compound with a garden and livestock and kids! Mariya and I dream of doing one international trip and one intercoastal trip each year. I love dog training, but I love my little family the most!

My Philosophy

Dog obedience is actually one of the easiest things a human can learn. In fact, dogs are way smarter than we give them credit for. Nearly 100% of obedience that I teach in my program is learned without a single command, lure, leash pressure, or e-collar stimulation. Canine behavior, on the other hand, can seem immensely complicated. There are intersections between these two capacities, but they are not the same thing.

When I am trying to modify a behavior for which there is an immense amount of rehearsal, a belief system, and potential bad training previous to me, I see it like an experiment to a certain extent. If I don't have the client's cooperation to maintain the "control" element of the experiment, I cannot trust that the test of the "sample" is going to be reliable. It's just like a COVID test. I need your help to maintain consistency with that control – or the test is broken.

Every case is immensely different. We have to stop the rehearsal as quickly as possible, allow the belief system to die, and show the dog what life can be like when owners

prioritize freedom & plan instead of obedience, control, and compliance. I do believe that dogs learn through payment, pressure, prevention, and punishment. These four conditions make up an interconnected ecosystem that will modify learning and behavior in any dog.

In over a decade, I have not met a dog that I believed was beyond rehabilitation. I have met plenty who didn't have owners who rescues felt it was appropriate to euthanize, but that is never my recommendation. I have also never met an owner who I felt was incapable of doing the very simple task of providing structure and fulfillment for a dog, even given physical limitations. I need a client's full commitment from day one – to the dog and to the program. There's no half in, half out solution here. If you're already talking about euthanizing or rehoming the dog, it is not my job to convince you otherwise. I won't waste your time or mine.

My role is 10% dog training and 90% human coaching. The biggest mistake that we make with our dogs is putting them above our real-life priorities like our families and careers. Human codependency, delusion, or even mental illness is at the root of a majority of the behavioral cases I have worked. Sometimes I will remind you that you are putting the dog on a pedestal where they don't belong. It will be up to you as to whether you apply these principles to your life. You will find that I am a really agreeable person, but I have three rules with clients:

1. I will always tell you the truth, even if it hurts.
2. I will never allow you to believe in a false positive or gaslight you.
3. I will never ask you to do something that you think is wrong.

CONTINUE HERE...

Preface

I wrote this playbook as a quick reference guide for clients and handlers originally but realized that the overall focus of the dog training industry at large has always been more geared toward low-arousal, under-threshold positional obedience (control and compliance). I have learned that every single client dog will eventually fail, slip into unpredictable aggression, or surprise their handlers with biologically appropriate, yet inhuman behavior that confounds them. The ability to run off leash at full speed, play with other dogs, and engage in aggression venting tag, tug, and fetch with their human handlers are the three activities that I have seen prevent, rehab, and reverse severe aggression issues. There is nothing else that works.

The positive-only crowd will push you into an hours-a-day work habit with food and treats that will leave you frustrated and exhausted. Balanced trainers will be happy to come in and show you how this is the wrong approach for decreasing behavior that you don't want. But then you'll be left alone to answer the question, "How do I fulfill this dog?" We forgot somehow along the way that our dogs are indeed dogs. They are not humans. They're not characters from a Disney movie. They are predatory creatures who need a window of opportunity daily to exercise their curiosity and arousal muscles effectively and yes with control.

I will not be assigning endless leash work, place practice, or putting you and your dog through ridiculous figure 8 walk-by drills. Your only homework will be 5 mins in each active category of engagement each day, taking a couple days off per week. If you're doing 45-60 min walks each day, please stop now and replace these walks with the following protocols and activities. I cannot begin to describe how subtly different this program is from every other program in my area. There are tiny differences that will

completely change the way that you see your time with your dog. So how do we do it? What's the big difference?

The Importance of Play

All animals whose basic biological needs are met – will play. The use of play in modern dog training is not a fad. It is not an attempt to completely avoid punishment. And it's not merely used as a stand-in for another reinforcement system like physical touch or food reward. Dogs do not have to play to survive, so when they play, it is because they are living in an environment in which they can thrive. If a dog will not play, it is due to one or a combination of four factors: boundaries & structure in the home, belief system trauma, behavior modification failures, or a lack of biological fulfillment.

Play-based training is not *only* important as an indicator of the quality of the relationship. It doesn't *only* show me where the dog's nervous system is. And it's not *just* a cute way to exhaust your dog. Play allows us to evaluate if we are eliciting willing cooperation, attempting subtle manipulation, or insincerely forcing something that is not there. A dog will not play if they feel they are being tricked or conned. You cannot bribe them with play because it takes two. The most important element of play for me as a canine coach of humans is its ability to right the record of what your dog is – to you!

The Danger of Food-Only Training

Food or treats are a convenient reinforcer. It can be thrown, withheld, used as a lure, and even hidden as a jackpot. But food is required by dogs for survival, so sometimes

in behavioral cases, a dog's food drive can lie to us to make it seem as if their belief system has changed when they will really want to growl, bark, lunge, or bite. I used to use food to train all obedience behaviors, and it was very effective for "obedience training." However, food can sometimes bypass the decision-making brain of the dog, causing our obedience to be too reflexive, robotic, and rote.

When I realized the danger in creating a food robot, I began to simultaneously find false positives in my rehab program for dogs with severe aggression issues. I found that dogs would sometimes conceal how they felt about me in order to get the food. Is that an altogether terrible thing? You would have to ask a veterinary neurologist to know the answer to that. What I did find is that dogs trained primarily with food and lots of "obedience" would eventually relapse because their human caretakers made everything about control and compliance instead of connection and communication.

Late one evening a few years ago, I got a call from Larry Krohn, owner of PakMasters Dog Training. He has really turned me on to real, lifelong rehabilitation through play. Jay Jack (Next Level Dogs) and Ivan Balabanov (Training Without Conflict) have some incredible insights in these areas, and I'll reference only what is publicly available of their teachings. Go read and listen and watch and study these yourselves! What I found is that instead of creating willing cooperation, I was suppressing aggressive behavior, sending it into hiding, and calling it success. I was missing the out on the possibility that the dog needed more than we thought to give them.

What Was Really Missing

To avoid using a bunch of jargon, I am going to really oversimplify this concept that was packaged as “The Four Windows” many years ago by revolutionary bully breed behavioral dog trainer and creator of GRC Dogsports, Jay Jack. Dogs are always in one of three natural or biological states: freedom, play, or rest. Humans added work (behavior mod / positional obedience) as a “window” to conform dogs to human society. As a result, human society forgot what dogs originally were: predatory animals of aggression, arousal, anxiety, and association. Dogs have the terrifying distinction of being able to look really good while feeling like garbage – genetically misunderstood, systemically under-fulfilled, and acutely stressed.

Every day, I see Instagram reels of people getting attacked by dogs because they are treating them like humans. The implanted expectation that dogs should be calm, docile, and low arousal all the time is complete bull. Humans who act like this are called “Sheople.” We also have times that we need to step into another persona to channel aggression, anxiety, and arousal. Treating dogs like this is the literal definition of round peg, square hole. For dog training to work, we have to be on the same page about what a dog is, what they want, and what they need to be able to be predictable members in a human society.

My time in animal rescue gave me a really nice education on what a completely friendly dog is capable of, given the right stressors. A dog that is genetically mediocre, chronically under-fulfilled, and acutely stressed is pretty likely to put on a bite at some point in their life. This is why I encourage clients to be aware of the layers of tension that might lead to this kind of thing. Freedom & Play dramatically reduce all layers of stress because they allow the dog’s nervous system to heal through the release of tension (arousal & aggression) and happy hormones of all kinds.

Sometimes we find ourselves reaching out to a dog trainer because our dog has been “caught in the act,” and we are still reeling from the implication that we might indeed have ended up with an aggressive dog. “What will my family think? What will the neighbors say? Will I have to put them down?” Ultimately, I believe this shame spiral causes a lot of euthanization, rehoming, or practical neglect in the dog owning public. It sends just as many dogs to endless medication and prevention protocols as it does to the “Force-Free” or “Positive-Only” trainer.

Dogs are literally rotting in their homes because the majority of dog trainers are ideologically captured parrots of an ideology rather than practitioners, engineers, and tacticians of real hands-on dog training. They will use every condition of dog training except for clear and loving punishment. They have created a world in which their clients believe they are the hero, and there’s nothing to do but to appease them and shield them from all semblances of real life. This in turn creates canine sociopaths who will eventually be sentenced to death. I am working with many such clients as we speak who are having to unlearn all their bad habits of distraction and redirection, from both balanced trainers and positive only hacks.

So how do we stop all this and give the dogs what they really need biologically? We honor them for what they are by giving them a window each day in which they can step into this aroused, aggressive persona. When I first heard Jay Jack explain this concept in detail, I was blown away and realized how badly I had done at making sure my clients were providing this for their dogs. Some achieved it by accident because their dogs were now off leash trained, but I had to be honest that I was selling a solution not

of connection and cooperation but of control and compliance. It had become about getting the behavior, no matter the cost, emotions, or belief system fallout.

I realized that what was really missing was coaching that prioritized a dog's happiness and health over robotic obedience. Who wants a dog who listens in spite of themselves? I want a dog who gives me their whole heart and when we work, works because they are my best friend. What was missing was the imagination and magical curiosity of what would happen if a dog knew they could get everything their heart desired through their handler. This concept has helped me heal my relationship with myself, my soon-to-be wife, my clients, and all our dogs. You will become a different person through this program. So buckle up, remove the stick, take a deep breath, and let's remember the mystery that we had when we first met our dogs.

Indefinite Over-Reliance on Prevention & Management

Prevention and management are temporary constructs that we use during the training process to stop the rehearsal of dangerous behaviors so that the dog is incapable of traumatizing and terrorizing their owner and the general public. I will actually encourage you to use a lot of prevention in the short-term. But it is not intended to be forever. The more that I have leaned into freedom & play, the less my clients and I have had to lean on lifetime prevention protocols. Muzzles, crates, fences, gates, and leashes all become things of the past as cooperation takes over and trust sets in. Like a pair of spouses healing from trauma, they are realizing that they may not have ever known or accepted each other from the very beginning. This rehabilitation can start today, and it is forever when done properly. If it's not fun, it's not forever. Play heals all.

Applications for Play

Play allows the dog to reveal themselves to us while also changing their own perceptions of themselves, their handlers, and the environment. I do still use food in training when I already know that the dog likes me and knows we're on the same team. Because play requires sincerity, a dog cannot lie to me that they want to play fetch, tug, or tag. Would you play with a bully? Would you play with someone unpredictable? Nah. You'd run for the hills. I can pretty much promise you that your Eeyore couch potato dog has a game in their mind they would be willing to play with you.

We can use play to teach the communication system, to boost your collective confidence as a dog-handler pair, to build behaviors in obedience, to create a stronger relationship, to overhaul a dog's belief system, and to rebuild trust after severe aggression incidents. It's not just versatile. Play is everything. It's the most powerful tool in dog training, and it cannot be faked or duplicated or installed or bought. You must engage in play sincerely and with purpose, patience, and persistence.

So, if play is the answer, how do we do it? Which game should we play? How do we get our dogs into it? How can I personally play in a way that isn't too physically taxing on me? What if my dog isn't super into toys? How do I make sure that my dog knows when it's time for play and when it's time to be free, at rest, or in work? We are going to break all of this down in this Play Book, which used to be known as the Coaching Handbook.

Think of raising a dog as designing the transmission of a car. Flying through downtown Franklin at 80 mph will certainly get you arrested. So will crawling at a measly 30 mph

on the interstate. We need to be able to help our dogs figure out what drive state or “gear” we’re in right now instead of saying, “You can never be aroused or aggressive.” I can learn to accept my dog’s performance of certain behaviors as biological, which means no one had to teach them how to do them. If I put these biologically inevitable behaviors inside of a window, and assign that window a label, I now have the ability to accept and fulfill my dog while also creating control and compliance that I need to keep my dog surviving, striving, and thriving.

Building the Drive States

Before we talk about the actual words that I use to verbally shift into each gear, I have to take it upon myself to actually make sure they exist! After all, I need to *lead* the dog proactively instead of following the dog’s lead reactively. Do I have a free, play, work, and rest time built into my schedule? Try catching the dog’s rhythm and create these gears at times that you can actually do them consistently. If your dog’s “witching hour” is 4:30-6:00 PM like my dog’s, maybe consider putting your freedom & play into that slot instead of a super long, boring walk around the neighborhood. This is likely going to take you less time with a higher yield of fulfillment than anything you’re currently doing. I feel like I need to say that before you tell me how busy you are.

What I find is that most people spend about 45-90 mins a day attempting to tire their dogs out through boring walks, sniff games, puzzles, and meaningless delegation of play at the dog park, doggy daycare, or their own back yard. This is not going to cut it! The novelty wears off extremely quickly. What if I told you I want you to cancel all of that for the time being? All of it. Instead, I want you to do four things every single day

you are able. If you do these four things, 90% of bad behavior goes out the window in two weeks, the last 10% will subside over the next two months.

Training through these four activities is literally 100% of our training program. There is not another way to train a dog in a way that it sticks forever. I will show you how to do each and every step of these activities in person, allow you to make mistakes, ask questions, and push you until you succeed. If I didn't believe you could do it, you wouldn't have this Play Book in your hands. My commitment to you is that I am all in, but I will not do it instead or in spite of you.

Four Gears in 15 Mins

1. Freedom – 5 mins of sniffing, running, digging, exploring, hunting, chasing, and stalking at a park on a 50 ft long leash.
2. Play – 5 mins of tag, tug, or fetch at a novel location or wherever the dog will engage with you to vent off aggression and arousal.
3. Work – 5 mins of obedience, whether this is shaping with food, structured walking, or place practice.
4. Rest – 100% of the time that the dog is not directly supervised, put them in their crate with a Benebone, and let them be.

Now, let me hear all of your objections...

This is a Partnership

Yep, you thought that I was going to do all your work for you. You thought there was a magic bullet, a secret shortcut. Our motto is “Training Dogs Together.” This is a partnership, and your role is the only one that is permanent. I am only in each dog’s life for a matter of hours. You are **there** forever. You are **their** forever. You might have other dogs, but you may well be their only owner, leader, and best friend.

Naming the Gears

As you are going through the process of making these activities non-negotiable for yourself and your dog, you can go ahead and start subtly naming them. Jay would call these “window words,” but I usually refer to them as drive states. The key is to intentionally signal them into each drive state before you show them the physical cue that *means* they are entering that gear. By inserting these verbal signals (things said) before the contextual cues (things done), we are harnessing the actions’ arousal or acceptance by preempting them with a word. This will take some time. But things learned in this way are learned deeper and with more clarity than any marker or command. After I give some examples of verbal signals that I use, we’ll discuss the rest of the verbal lexicon.

Examples:

1. Freedom – I say “Free!” excitedly and then run out into an open field.
2. Play – I say “Wanna Play or Ready?!” right before I initiate play.
3. Work – I say “Alright, time to Work” as I transition back into a walk.
4. Rest – I say “All done or Enough” to transition into chill mode.

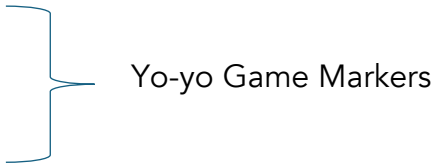
So, by naming these windows, I am in essence answering my dog's ever-present question, "What are we doing right now?" By doing this proactively instead of reactively, I am becoming an intentional leader instead of a reactive follower. By doing this consistently, I am fulfilling the dog, creating a deeper bond, exhausting existential energies otherwise inaccessible, and I am changing the trajectory of our relationship. You will have control and compliance, but not at the cost of your clarity, connection, and cooperation.

Verbal Lexicon

The Four Window words tell the dog what drive state we're in

- "Free" – High Arousal, Low Relevance – Go adventure!
- "Play" – High Arousal, High Relevance – Engage with me!
- "Work" – Low Arousal, High Relevance – Let's Learn.
- "Rest" – Low Arousal, Low Relevance – Go Chill.

Positive Markers – Markers or Bridge words used to build behavior

- "Break / Get it" – paid release away (send out)
 - "Yes" – paid release on handler (recall)
 - "Good" – paid in place (implied stay)
 - "Gooooood?" – unpaid progression marker to offer something totally spontaneous
 - "Yeah" – unpaid recall marker
 - "Nice" – unpaid continuation marker
 - "Okay" – boring, unpaid release out of the crate or through a door
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Negative Markers – Markers or Bridge words used to reduce behavior

- "No" – a correction is coming

- “Off” – all four paws on the floor, or else correction is coming
- “Leave it” – don’t pay attention to something
- “Easy” – give me less of what you’re giving me
- “Out” – let go of something in your mouth
- “Nope” – no correction, no payment, keep trying

The Yo-yo Game

1. “Break / Get it” – Reflexive release to payment away from handler
 - a. I always start with break
 - b. Can be done in any direction away from you, make it fun
 - c. Throw a piece of food, a toy, or send to a person who will pet them
2. “Yes” – Reflexive release to the handler for reward. Yes functions as the recall marker after “Come / Here”
 - a. Repeat Break & Yes about 10x before proceeding to Good
 - b. Yes always pays on the handler who says it, whether through treat, toy, or touch.
3. “Good” – Implied stay marker, move to dog for payment
 - a. Used for Free Shaping the sit, down, and eye contact
 - b. Great for building distance, duration, distraction, and directionality into a stationary position

Advanced Yoyo Game Progression

- “Nope” – not what I was looking for, no payment given. Dog will eventually return to last paid position.
- “Gooood?” – a longer, tonally insinuating, progression marker. Dog will progress from a sit into a down.

- "Okay" – General Release with no reward

Verbal Commands – used to name and prompt existing behaviors

- "Go" – the opposite of a recall, a send-out
- "Come / Here" – come to handler and stay close by
- "Sit" – butt on the ground
- "Down" – tummy on the ground
- "Heel" – walk with me with eye contact, sit when I stop
- "Let's go" – walk with me on a loose leash, change in direction
- "Place" – lay on placemat / bed
- "Stay / Wait" – no command was given you just want them to freeze
- "Back" – give space at door
- "Up" – load up in car or on grooming table
- "Crate" – enter the kennel