

Kitty kindergarten

Class teaches 'teacher's pets' to do the tasks dogs can do

STORY BY LOLITA CUSIC · PHOTOS BY ART VASSY

The phrase teacher's pet takes on a whole new meaning at "kitten class."

Although the class, which tries to do what some think impossible — train cats to do specific tasks — is new to the Chicago area, it's been taught in Australia for a decade.

"You can train your cat to do anything a dog can do," said Steve Dale, who taught the first session earlier this month sponsored by PAWS Chicago, the city's largest no-kill humane society.

Dale, host of the WGN-AM (720) "Pet Central" radio show and a syndicated newspaper columnist, discovered the class while attending the North American Veterinary Conference Post Graduate Institute, a continuing education program.

"I immediately thought, 'Why aren't we doing this?'" Dale said.

"Part of my goal is to get the word out about these classes so people can offer them in their markets where they live. And I've got a big mouth, and I can do it," he said, with a laugh.

Kevin Morrissey, PAWS communications director, said the class "sounded like a really imaginative idea. ... The common rationale is that you can train dogs, not cats."

During the first session, Dale found himself surrounded by kittens — black kittens, calico kittens, kittens with white boots. Litter boxes and a scratching post were set up in strategic places.

"When you heard about this class, you probably rolled your eyes and thought this radio guy is crazy," said Dale, speaking to the cat owners and PAWS staff members in attendance.

"What you're doing is cutting edge. It's new. It's different."

Cats can be trained, and that's especially true if you start socializing them when they're young. They'll be less likely to be afraid of things, Dale said.

Lori Hess, of Chicago, brought her son's feisty 11-week-old kitten, Alexandra.

"As the vet said today, she has a big attitude," Hess said. "We were curious to see if she could hang with some other kittens and have little less attitude."

One of the first things Dale did in the class was to show a video, part of which featured Dale's cat playing piano, a skill he taught his pet.

Socializing cats and exposing them to things help them learn, Dale said.

"You can socialize cats, but you have to do so safely," he said to the class. "I hope you keep your cats indoors, not outdoors. They don't live as long outdoors."

Next, Dale had the kittens placed together to play and explore. Only one, Sawyer, kept trying to make a break for it, but he was quickly captured by 13-year-old Daniel Asseo, son of PAWS vice president Peggy Asseo.

"He's an experienced cat wrangler," his mother said.

In an effort to socialize them further, Dale had each class member pick up a cat, hold it for a moment, and then pass it along to the next person.

Only one kitten wasn't game for this game, but Dale was able to calm her by stroking her fur and offering canned cat food.

Dale said cats can be taught to walk on a leash or in a harness and to ride in a stroller.

"You can train your cat to actually go on a leash," said Dale, who's also taken his cat out in a kitty stroller — much to his wife's embarrassment. Now, he said, neighbors are doing it, too.

Cats safely can be placed in the yard if cat fencing is used, he said.

They can also be taught to play with a plethora of toys, Dale said, although the least expensive — simple cardboard boxes, balls and the like — sometimes can be the most fun, he said.

"Cats love balls. ... It's about the chase," he said.

Cats are also natural hunters, so he suggested pet owners put cat food inside a ball or hide food bowls around the house, he said. Cats think they're "hunting" for their food, Dale said, which is important.

What about teaching a young cat tricks?

It can be done using clicker conditioning, Dale

said. Essentially, the pet owner teaches the cat to carry out a specific task based on the sound of the clicker, he said. When task is performed, the cat is rewarded with a treat.

The clicker is a variation of the whistle that trainers use to train dolphins, he said.

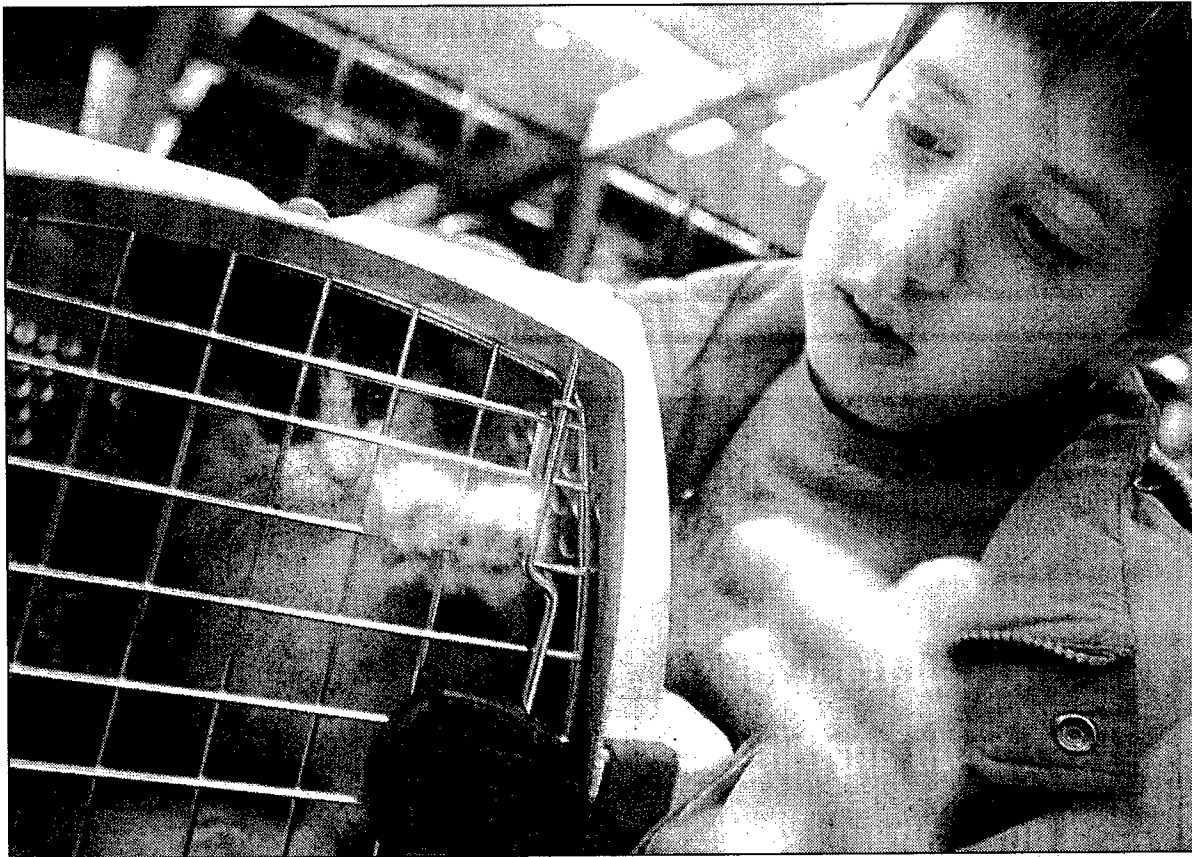
As the evening drew to a close, the cats were allowed to play together again.

"This (socialization) is so good for them," said PAWS staff member Rochelle Michalek of the class, especially if a pet owner has both cats and dogs.

Said Dale: "The message I want to leave you with (is) ... I hope we socialize our cats more and make the indoors more interesting," Dale said.



Want to find out about more kitten classes? Dale said he will post information about them on his Pet Central blog at WGNRadio.com. Dale's show airs from 6 to 8 p.m. Saturdays. PAWS Chicago can be reached at (773) 521-7729 or www.pawschicago.org.



Julian Hess and Alexandria, an 11-week-old kitten, wait for instructions during a class to show people how to train their cats.



Steve Dale (left) works with kittens and their owners during a class sponsored by PAWS Chicago, the city's largest no-kill humane society.