

*Charlie's Tale*  
By  
Donnell Campbell

Charlie and I made a great team. We were training each other, sharpening one another's skills. I had been working with him for a few weeks and I realized that he was the smartest dog that I had ever had the pleasure to work with.

I watched other trainers work with Charlie and noticed that he knew what he could get away with while working with them. His intelligence was obvious. It seemed as though I had Charlie outsmarted, until he figured out that some days I had more confidence in my training skills than others. He would become stubborn and ignore my commands. If I became frustrated, or unsure, he would pick up on it and take advantage of the situation. Charlie outsmarted me on a regular basis.

A little background on Charlie: He is an Akita, Shepard mix, about eighteen months old. He has a mixture of colors to him tan, brown, and white, with funny colored eyes. A beautiful dog, he was found in an animal shelter and saved by an amazing group of dog lovers called Paws for Life K9 Rescue. They brought him to our program, Paws for Life (P.F.L.).

Charlie had an advantage on me, he had been a dog all his life but I had been a trainer for only a short period of time. In the beginning, he trained me more than I trained him. Just as I thought I had this training thing conquered, Charlie brought me back to earth, showing me I still had a lot to learn.

One day while out on a walk, I was teaching Charlie loose-leash walking skills, which he is to walk by my side without pulling forward or lagging back. The leash should form a "J", which it did. He was on his best behavior, making me look like a professional trainer, or better yet, the Dog whisperer. However, I wanted to further highlight the discipline I had taught him. So I reached down and grabbed his tail. I know that dogs do not like for anyone to grab their tail. I was taught that as a kid. Charlie turned and gave me a look that seemed to say, "Leave my tail alone!" I thought this was funny and got a good chuckle. We continued on our walk again, I reached down and grabbed at his tail (not heeding his first warning). This time he gave me a good hard look and shook his head as if to say, "Okay you asked for it." We continued down the road and he fell behind. I really did not think much of it because the leash continued to be loose. About twenty or thirty yards down the roadway, in front of a group of trainers and spectators, he would exact his revenge!

I passed the other trainers, with my head held high and my chest poked out, proud of myself for Charlie's obedience. With no less than thirty sets of eyes observing my superior loose-leash walking skills, with the smartest, sweetest, and kindest dog in the program, I did not realize he had been setting me up to demonstrate what it feels like to get your tail tugged on. Without warning Charlie struck – he nipped me on the backside! "Aaaah!" I jumped and let out a loud "yelp." Witnesses claim that my yelp was several octaves higher than a man of my size and stature – all 6 foot, 5 inches and two-hundred fifty pounds – but I can promise you that a deep bass voice filled the air when he nipped me. I thought he had bitten me, however, when my feet returned to the earth and our eyes made contact, Charlie was jumping around with what looked like a grin on his face, as if to say, "How's that tail doing, big fella?" Everyone broke out in laughter and a few trainers shouted out advice. With my ego clearly bruised, I couldn't do anything but laugh at myself. I must say, I learned a very valuable lesson that day: If humans had

a tail, Charlie knew how to find it!

Charlie is now living a great life in his forever home. If you are a dog person, I am sure you have many stories such as this one. However, what makes this “tail” unique is that it happened on a maximum-security prison yard.

As one of Charlie’s trainers, I am serving a life sentence for a non-injury attempted murder. After twenty-two years, I can tell you that being able to work with dogs, having the support of my family, and my P.F.L. family, has given me new hope, and has changed my life from a meaningless and hopeless existence, to one that is fruitful, hopeful, and fulfilling.

By saying I am doing something positive with my life in prison is good, but showing that I am doing great things is nothing short of amazing!

With almost five years in the P.F.L. program, I am now training Service Dogs for our military veterans suffering with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D.). To see the veterans work with their new companion and knowing that the dog is going to improve their quality of life is the ultimate reward, and is very humanizing for me. Despite being in prison, it is a great honor and a privilege to stand up and help those that have served our country.

Paws For Life K9 Rescue.org

Donnell Campbell