

Quiebus: pioneers of gentle training

Interview with dog training and behaviour therapy entrepreneur Gerda Doedee

By Laure-Anne Viselé, May 2010



In this interview, I speak to Gerda Doedee: founder and director of Quiebus. Quiebus is one of the top two dog training and behaviour therapy academies in the Netherlands. Read on to find out more about one of the most influential pioneers of gentle training.

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This story is part of [Canis bonus' What's in a job](#) series, a collection of interviews showing the life of life of successful dog professionals behind the scenes.

About the interview: I plucked up the nerve to ask for an interview when Gerda was standing in for one of her many instructors in a dog training class. A lot of nerve it took too, as Gerda is quite the icon in the Dutch dog world, and I was more than a little star-struck. To my relief, Gerda immediately accepted with what I later found to be her characteristic helpfulness. This article formally transcribes our conversation.

About Gerda: Gerda is what you would call a big personality. She has a no-nonsense demeanour, speaks her mind, has tons of natural authority, and demands extremely high standards of her students and licensees. So, at first glance, Gerda's bearing can be a little intimidating, à la Barbara Woodhouse.

But spend a little more time with Gerda, and the picture quickly gets more complex. Take her reaction to my announcing I was studying to become a behaviour therapist. Where most would have seen me as unwanted competition, she could not have been more encouraging. I also could not help but notice the countless little shows of affection that her team pays her. Combine this with her self-deprecating sense of humour and finely-tuned sense of empathy, and you begin to get the picture.

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How I first met Gerda: Gerda was giving a lecture on dog behaviour when, to my horror, I was taken by the worst fits of laughter (I was quite pregnant, those hormones...). Her stern look could have frozen hell, but the more she looked, the more hysterically I laughed. When I had managed to recover enough to ask: 'So a dog walking in front of you does not mean he is being dominant. But what does it mean?', her answer was characteristically and disarmingly straight and true: 'It means it's walking in front of you'.

About Quiebus: Quiebus consists of the following units:

- a cynology learning centre providing highly sought qualifications for dog training instructors and behaviour therapists;
- a behaviour therapy practice; and
- a network of over thirty licensed dog schools and sixty behaviour therapists.

The methods taught at Quiebus follow a strictly positive approach, and do not use any aversive methods or equipment.

L-A – How did **Quiebus start**?

G – About fifteen years ago, I was asked to give behaviour therapy lessons at the '[Cursus Centrum Dierenverzorging](#)' in Barneveld, the Netherlands (roughly translated, 'Instruction Centre for Animal Care'). I also started giving lectures and practicals at the [Katholieke Hoge School Kempen](#) in Belgium.

Five years ago, we decided to officialise the curriculum under the licensing network called 'Quiebus Kynologische Centrum', i.e. 'Quiebus Cynology Centre'. So, although the name is only five or so years old, we have been teaching our methods for ten to fifteen years already.

Gerda and dogs

L-A – How old were you when you had **your first dog**?

G – I was six years old. It was a Friesian stabij cross.



L-A – All in all, **how many dogs have you had** (approximately)?

(After counting and getting the odd nostalgic spark in her eyes) G – I must have had in the region of 23 dogs.



L-A – How many **dogs** do you **have now**?

G – Right now, I have seven dogs.



L-A – Is your family behind you on the dog life, or can your dedication to dogs cause friction?

G – There are no problems there.

About the learning centre

L-A – **How many instructors** have been **through the Quiebus learning centre**?

(Gerda counts, and consults with her one of her licensees) G – I think it's in the general vicinity of two thousand, maybe more.

L-A – How far are we from **nationally recognized qualifications** in dog training and behaviour therapy in the Netherlands?

G – We have been working closely with [Martin Gaus](#), the other top Dutch training academy. We now recognize each other's training instructor qualifications. The behaviour therapy qualifications remain distinct, though.



L-A – In the UK and US, the APDT is increasingly taking a leadership role in acting as a **central professional association** responsible for professionalising the industry. Is there something similar in the Netherlands?

G – I am familiar with the APDT. Right now, there are a lot of associations trying to set one standard for the whole country, but not one has stood out yet.



L-A – How do you ensure your graduates keep their **knowledge up-to-date**?

G – In order to keep the Quiebus licence, the licensees must follow refresher courses twice a year.

About behaviour therapy

L-A – How often do you come across behaviour therapy cases where there is **nothing more to do to rehabilitate the dog**?

G – It happens to me, say, once or twice a year. When you consider how many dogs we are treating every year, this is relatively little. Of course shelter dog assessment is a different story, as a bite history can severely affect their likelihood of being rehomed. But even then, the majority of dogs at the shelter are successfully rehabilitated.



L-A – Is **owner compliance** (particularly in the long-term) a big issue in your experience of behaviour therapy?

G – Actually no. Ninety five percent of the cases get successfully and enduringly resolved. I think that once people take the initiative to contact a

professional, they are committed enough to their dog to follow our advice diligently.



L-A – I often get a **sceptical** response when I talk of my ambitions to start in canine behaviour therapy. Do you frequently encounter that same reaction? How far are we from the general public seeing behaviour therapy as a serious profession?

G – Actually the profession has taken a lot of momentum in the last few years. An increasing number of veterinarians now refer their customers' dogs to behaviour therapists. This has a very positive influence on the perception of the profession.



L-A – In your recent years of behaviour therapy practice, what was the **funniest moment**?

G – (After some head scratching, one of her instructor suggests the 'Yorkshire story'). There was this really aggressive Yorkshire terrier that weighed the whole of a pound. I took him in as his owners no longer wanted to try with him. One of my dogs was a 65 kg boerboel at the time, and the Yorkshire, true to itself, was being typically contentious. At some stage, the Boerboel quietly opened his mouth, and simply gobbled up the whole Yorkshire. After our initial shock, we had the presence of mind to just give the Boerboel the 'let go' cue. I guess our training methods paid off, because he just spat the Yorkshire right back out, soaking wet, but completely unharmed. It took us about six months to rehabilitate that Yorkshire, but he is quite the sweet old dog now.

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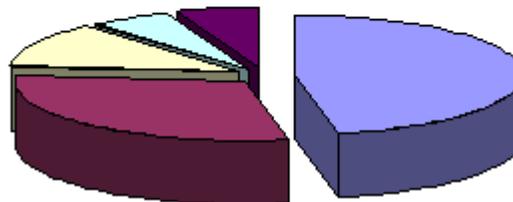
The life of a successful dog entrepreneur

L-A – What is a **typical week** for you?

G – A typical work week is between 80 to 100 hours for me. Here is how it goes:

- **Giving theory seminars and practical classes:** three days and two evenings;
- **Supporting instructors in their group classes:** two evenings;
- **Free behaviour therapy and temperament assessment for the shelter:** one afternoon;
- **Working directly on behaviour therapy cases:** half a day per week; and
- **General administration, communication (contact with customers, assisting instructors, etc.) and management:** About twenty hours a week.

- theory and practical lectures
- general admin and business management
- supporting training instructors during class
- advising the shelter
- behaviour therapy cases



L-A – Given how many dogs you come across, how do you **stop yourself from giving 150%** for each case, or from trying to save every dog in the world? This would put you at severe risk of a burnout.

G – I don't stop myself from giving 150%. On the contrary, every successful case renews my energy. Nothing gets you going more than seeing a marked improvement in a dog's behaviour, or watching the human-dog relationship develop as the owner understands the dog better and better.

The Quiebus philosophy and scientific position

L-A – Where do you stand on the **use of aversives** in training?

G – We are firmly against the use of ANY aversive training equipment. That includes, among others, haltis, Gentle Leaders, choke collars, electronic bark collars, and citronella bark collars.

These methods aren't even always effective. Take the citronella collar for example. The timing of the aversive odour release is all wrong, as the smell hangs around long after the dog stopped barking so he can't associate the unpleasant smell with his barking.

Besides, there is a fundamental flaw with any anti-bark collar. Barking can be self-reinforcing, as it can help the dog express its stress, and goes a little way to relieving it. If you prevent the dog from barking, where does the internalised stress go?

In my whole career, I have not once had to resort to this kind of equipment. I want to go on the record in saying this: I find the use of such equipment is downright unprofessional.



L-A – How do you stand on the **dominance and pack controversy**?

G – I draw a clear distinction between dominance and aggression or violence. I believe you have to be the alpha. But I believe that natural alphas do not assert their authority through aggression or violence, but through a self-assured, secure attitude. Aggression is perceived by dogs as a sign of insecurity, not leadership. So by being violent, you are actually undermining your leadership position in your dogs' eyes.

Besides, using physical violence sends your dog the message that violence is a valid mode of communication. As followers will imitate leaders, you are effectively teaching your dog to add aggression to its communication repertoire.



L-A – I have read scientific papers on wild dogs that support the assertion that dogs are not **pack animals**. Any grouping we witness would only be a temporary congregation around a resource, rather than a coherent pack. What is your view?

G – I have no doubt that dogs are pack animals. I am involved with charities managing stray dogs in Spain, and I definitely see street dogs there forming

permanent packs. Either way, dogs are most definitely social animals. There is even talk of outlawing one-dog households, to reduce the stress of solitude.



L-A – When did you make the **shift** from traditional to **positive training methods**, given that positive methods were the minority opinion in the eighties and nineties.

G – I have always been against the use of aversives for the simple reason that I have dogs because I love dogs. If I hated them, perhaps I would want them to be stressed or uncomfortable, but that is not the case. So when I was told to start using a choke chain back when this was a perfectly normal handling accessory, I flat out refused. No one will make me believe that having a choke chain on is a pleasant experience.

L-A – So you were a **pioneer**?

G – (Laughs modestly)

In conclusion

So, if you are based in the Netherlands and in need of a training school, or some canine behaviour therapy, chance is you live close to one of the many Quiebus licensees.

With the surprisingly high number of trainers yet to switch to positive methods, a Quiebus license is a guarantee that the trainer has followed high standards qualification and is using positive methods.

Here's hoping that Quiebus' enormous influence on Dutch dog professionals will give the cause the momentum it needs to completely eliminate aversive training methods in the Netherlands.

For more information about Quiebus, visit <http://www.quiebus.nl>