

Canine Temperament

Part VII

Aptitude

This month I have decided to write about one particular temperamental trait only. It is a very special trait. Surprisingly, not much has been written about it. Why? Well, I don't think many people know much about a dog's aptitude, yet alone sit down and write about the subject. First of all let's look at the dictionary definition of the word 'aptitude'. It clearly states: natural tendency or talent, ability, capacity, readiness to understand.

I believe it is true to say that most people who have had a lot of experience in training dogs have owned some, or have known of others, especially working dogs, which have had particular aptitudes for learning and performing incredible feats. When I first started dog training I followed the progress of many dogs as they went up through the obedience classes and competed in obedience at dog shows in England. Some dogs were easy, others were a bit difficult, but in the end they all achieved creditable results. But it was not until I joined the Royal Air Force to train as a dog handler and later as an instructor at the RAF Police Dog Training Centre, that I became very much aware that some dogs possessed, or soon developed, particular aptitudes in different aspects of their work.

All the dogs were German Shepherds, male and female; all were gifts from the general public. All the handlers, like me, were volunteers, many of us had prior dog training experience and, because of the great dedication shown, our work became our hobby as well. We had our demonstration teams touring the country giving displays to the general public, which became aware that the RAF was always in need of new recruits, men as well as dogs. It was a thrill to watch the dogs perform numerous jumping exercises: jumping over the handlers' outstretched arms, through their arms forming hoop shapes, being caught in mid air and jumping up on to their handlers' backs.

One day a handler had to ride up to the office on his bicycle. He left his dog on a drop stay. Suddenly, the dog broke, ran after his handler and jumped up landing on his handler's back and hung on tight to his shoulders with his front paws. The quick thinking handler praised his dog and supported its hindquarters with one hand as he steered his bicycle with the other. That unexpected event was then developed and included in future demonstrations. The handler took it further. He taught his dog to remove his hat which dropped to the ground, the dog jumped down, ran back, retrieved the hat and jumped up on the handlers back again with his hat in his mouth. Over the years several other dogs performed this hilarious feat. They all had that special aptitude.

Years later some of the RAF dogs had the natural aptitude to ascend and descend erected ladders with rungs, others were trained to walk two parallel tight ropes, walk along a long pole, jump through fire hoops and so many more exercises too many to describe here. The point that I would like to make here is that regardless of how experienced and talented the trainer of the dog is, the dog must have the aptitude for doing those things. It must also have great trust in its handler. Without a doubt, there must be a perfect rapport between man and dog.

When I left the RAF, I continued working my Border Collie in our local obedience dog club demonstrations. From the time Bob was about six months of age, he developed an act of taking hold of his tail in his mouth. As he did this, I would accompany his act with the words: "Get your tail." Later, I would only have to say those words and he would take hold of it. Then I got him to walk at heel for a few yards with his tail in his mouth until I said, "give", where upon he would release his grip. He thought it was great fun, and people found it most amusing. Now in the advanced stages of obedience we were required in the obedience competitions to do an exercise called: the send away, drop and recall to heel, as you were directed to walk around in the ring. Bob loved doing the exercise. So one day I decided to teach him a new exercise with a few alterations. I sent him away in a straight line to a distance of about 30 metres, but instead of telling him to drop, I told him to, stand. He obeyed instantly. Then I told him, "get you tail." As soon as he did this, I praised him and told him to "come." He came all the way, stood in front of me, I took hold of his tail, said, "give" and as soon as he released it, I praised him and then did a finish to the recall. After several weeks, for some reason or other, he developed an extra movement by hanging his front paw over his tail so that he was standing on three legs. Naturally, I praised him when he did this and calmly called him. To my surprise and delight he came walking on three legs with the fourth still hanging over his tail. Well, it wasn't long before we were able to do this stunt at public events, in which our club chairman, giving a commentary on the microphone, would announce to the audience, "you are now going to see a Border Collie sent away and retrieve his tail returning to his handler on three legs." The audiences, thinking that he was joking, laughed as if they thought it could never be done. Well, they all got a very big surprise.

In the early 1960s there was a Border Collie called Megan of Monksmead. Not only was she an obedience champion, but she had won far many more obedience challenge certificates than any other dog in the UK. Her owner and trainer was Mrs Muriel Pearce. She had trained so many dogs in her time, but she openly admitted to me that Megan was a dog in a million who had a particular aptitude for learning all the obedience exercises so well and so fast. She knew that she would never ever get another dog like Megan. Muriel also believed that it doesn't matter how skilled you are in training dogs, from time to time you get a dog which possesses special aptitudes. Whenever they were about to enter the ring, nearly every one would rush to the ringside to watch Megan work. It was a joy to watch the consistent precision.

The first Border Collie I owned in Victoria had two particular aptitudes. She could do all the heelwork backwards and sideways, also lip-read. One night I was giving a lecture to instructors and aspiring instructors in my own home. It was part of a three week course. Having spoken about all the exercises in heelwork, I suggested that they might like to teach their dogs to heel backwards, including the turns, and get them to walk sideways to the right, just as you would see horses do dressage work. They all laughed and didn't believe it was possible. So I invited them all outside on to the back lawn where I gave them a demonstration with Zena. They stood there with their mouths open. They'd never seen anything like it before. However, I pointed out that she had that special aptitude for learning. I could not do all those movements with any dog. For some people to believe it, they have to see it. Then we all came inside again for a cuppa.

Later that evening, I talked at some length about the recall because it is the most important exercise in all forms of dog training. I concluded by saying that Zena could lip-read when I wanted her to do a novice recall and finish. I well remember one person saying, "Now, Michael you really are pulling our legs this time. I don't believe it." So I gave them a demonstration. I asked them before hand to watch me and tell me if I made any minute visual signals to my dog during the exercise. They agreed to do this. I gave Zena a hand signal to stay, walked to the full length of the living room and turned to face her. After several seconds I moved my bottom lip as if I would say "come." Immediately, Zena ran towards me and sat straight in front still focused on my face. Then I moved my bottom lip as if I was saying, "heel." She responded immediately. I did the whole exercise once more, and asked them all if they saw me give any extra signals. All agreed I hadn't.

So study your dogs. Do they have particular aptitudes which can be developed? You can learn so much from them. Good luck.