

Canine Temperament

Part VIII

Have you ever owned a willful or stubborn dog? If you have, I can sympathise with you. If you have not had that experience of training such a dog, the chance may well come in the future. When and if it does, it will definitely test your patience. However, I like to look on the positive side of things and can assure you that you will gain valuable knowledge over the time you put into training such difficult dogs. Fortunately, there are not many of them, but it would be remiss of me not to mention these unwanted traits. After all, most dogs are willing to learn and please those who train them. There are fundamental differences between willfulness and stubbornness, so I will write about them separately.

Willfulness

Dictionaries describe this basically as: wanting and determined to have one's own way; done on purpose; self willed or headstrong — and the list goes on. It is a trait that can be found in any breed of dog, but more so in some breeds than others. It can often be an inherited trait.

Let's now look at the willful dog in training. It is certainly a dog which is alert, active, responsive and friendly, but if at any time you command it to carry out an exercise and it doesn't wish to obey, it will often do quite the opposite. In dealing with this problem, you naturally have to correct the dog as soon as it makes the error, adopt a very firm attitude and insist that the dog does what you have commanded it to do in order to get its respect. As soon as it obeys, praise must be given immediately.

One of the best examples I recall, was a German Shepherd Dog I was training to be a guide dog in the early 1960s. She knew the basic commands: Forward, back, left and right and several others. But everyday she would think up some new way to defy me. If I said to her, "forward" she would turn back, if I said "back" she'd go forward. If I said "left" she'd go right and if I said "right" she'd go left. She would play those sorts of antics in nearly every aspect of the work. From day to day I wondered what she would think up next. Only a very clever dog with great brain power could think up such wicked things. However, I was ready for her every time and finally got her through the four month course, but, believe me, it was hard going. Interestingly, my colleague trained its litter sister and he had the same trouble. I'm pleased to say that both qualified as guide dogs. Their mother, 'Reiner', had produced some excellent litters, but 'Brendine' and 'Brumas' were the only two bitches kept from that particular litter which had been sired by a very clever police dog in Leicestershire. Because of the difficulties we encountered, his services were considered unsuitable for any future matings.

Another example was with a male German Shepherd Dog in recent years, who would retrieve a dumb-bell extremely well, but wouldn't give it up. He produced a vice like grip on it. It was impossible to open his mouth. So another method had to be employed. Holding each end of the dumb-bell, I very slowly rotated it saying, "give." His head rotated accordingly as he held on tight. When I turned it to a vertical position, things became too uncomfortable for him to hold on any longer, so he released his grip. On that response, I praised him immediately. Then I gave it back to him again to hold. I repeated that a few times and the problem was overcome.

His owner admitted that she had let him have his own way so much that he refused to let her take any article from his mouth. Being allowed to hold the dumb-bell and learning to give it up several times, his mind changed. He discovered that when he gave it up, he would get it back again. That really pleased him. It was quite different from the past when his owner struggled to take things off him and not let him have them back. So, not wishing to be deprived, he willfully held on to things. Smart dog.

Stubbornness

Here again, the dictionary definition is: unreasonably obstinate; not giving in to argument or requests; hard to deal with or manage, etc. Like the other temperamental trait stubbornness can be found in any breed of dog, but more so in some breeds than others.

A stubborn dog is one which refuses to budge. One of the causes of this is where the puppy has not been introduced to walking on the leash at an early age. Another cause is where the puppy has been kept on its property for far too long. It refuses to leave the house, and sits or lies down as much as to say, "I'm not going anywhere." So what are we to do?

The first method I would try would be to have the puppy on a loose leash and tap the ground with the finger nails of my other hand. Such a faint sound will often make the puppy curious. If and when it approaches to investigate, you should give quiet praise and continue to walk slowly in the same direction.

The second method I would adopt would be to have the puppy on the leash and put my other hand under its rib cage and help it along. This may have to be done several times until the puppy is a fair distance from its home. Then let it walk back on a loose leash praising it quietly most of the way.

A third method would be to use little tugs on the leash to make the puppy move. This is all right if it is on soft grass, but not on hard ground where the puppy is likely to get sore pads as it rigidly sits and refuses to budge as you attempt to tug it forwards. The little tugs must be interspersed with the leash being slackened. As soon as the puppy responds favourably, praise must be given even though each response may only last for a yard or two.

Now let me tell you about a Black Labrador named 'Ebony' that I trained as a guide dog in 1966. I trained her with a lady who had had a guide dog before. About half way through their one month's training, 'Ebony' became very stubborn. She had never shown a sign of this during her four month's training. The stubbornness was so strong that she refused to lead her owner out of the house at the training centre. How had this developed in such a short space of time? I knew that health wise there was nothing wrong with her. So I took the leash and made 'Ebony' walk towards town. She rebelled several times, but after about two hundred yards she got on with her work and I handed the leash back to the blind lady. The rest of the walk to town and return was excellent. Then I worked out why the stubbornness had occurred. The weather had turned suddenly cold and necessitated a coal fire being lit in the students' sitting-room. I noticed that 'Ebony' got as close as possible to that fire and was very reluctant to leave it. So I strongly advised that she should be kept away from the comfortable fire. Her new owner conscientiously handled the situation well and no more stubbornness occurred.

Around the same time, a well known trainer in England, who had trained several Obedience Champions, donated to us a female German Shepherd which he had raised from a pup, but it was so willful and stubborn it proved too difficult to train for the obedience ring. John Byfield, another former colleague, eventually trained her to be a guide dog at another training centre in England. He openly admitted that it was the hardest dog he had ever trained and he had to select a very capable blind person to use her. She had tremendous brain power and once that was channelled in the right direction and she had plenty of work to do every day, she thrived on it. Naturally, her original owner was so pleased that at last she was a working dog, giving immeasurable assistance to a man who had lost his sight. Like me, John had been a dog handler in the RAF Police in which we gained a wealth of knowledge and experience. He later immigrated to the USA where he became director of a renowned Guide Dog School. He now lives in happy retirement.

People ask, "If you had the choice between having a willful or stubborn dog, which one would you choose?" In most cases, I would pick the willful dog, because it is active, whereas the other refuses to move. So, enjoy your dogs.

Michael Tucker