

## Canine Temperament

### Part X

When I wrote Part I in this series of Canine Temperament, it included a list of 27 traits. I have taken these in order and would imagine that many readers have been most anxious to read what I have to say about excitability. Well, thank you for being so patient. Hopefully, my advice will be well received and that readers will develop a deeper understanding about their dogs and the ways in which we rear them.

I receive many telephone calls from dog owners who are at their wits end to know how to cope with their highly excitable dogs. Naturally, I take a few notes during our telephone conversation. They give me a fairly good idea of the dogs' behaviour and the root causes of the problems. Then a simple appointment is made. That first step is often met with a sigh of relief from the owner.

I am somewhat amused when owner and dog arrive by car. The dog is often jumping frantically around inside the car, like a 'Bull in a China Shop.' The owner manages to struggle out of the driver's door, then attempt to open a rear door to get the dog out. Sometimes the dog will fling itself against the door giving the owner a nasty knock. However, once out on the leash the dog often jumps up at the owner or pulls on the leash in several directions screaming in excitement. It is absolutely out of control. I invite the handler to bring the dog to me. In nearly every case the dog will jump up at me, whereupon I quickly take hold of it with both hands, one each side of its neck, say, "Get off" and give one firm up and down shake and let go. As soon as the dog responds and remains on the ground, I quietly and slowly say, "Good dog" because it has responded favourably.

Owners are absolutely amazed to see their dogs respond so quickly to that initial correction. Then I offer to hold the leash which is a great relief to owners. I take it for two main reasons. First, to allow owners to relax while they tell me all about their dogs— how long they have had them; how they misbehave; how they meet other people and other dogs, etc. The second reason is to show each owner that, whilst I hold the leash, I convey to the dog that I am the boss, I'm in charge and I will stand where I am. Very soon the dog will attempt to pull me in one direction or the other. When it does, I say, "Steady", give the dog an appropriate jerk on the leash and as soon as it responds by remaining in front of me on the full length of the slack leash, I praise it. I point out to owners that if you conduct yourself in this way, dogs will learn very quickly that you will not allow them to pull you anywhere. They're not dumb. What has happened in the past, of course, is that the handlers have allowed their dogs to pull them from one place to another with the result that each dog becomes the boss.

Well, that is how you can make a good start in reducing much of the dog's excitability, but handlers need to know much more. So, we go for a casual walk up the road. The speed at which you walk is very important. You should walk at a slow to moderate speed when walking an excitable dog. If you walk quickly, you are likely to excite the dog more and it will start to pull. You should also talk quietly and slowly in order to keep the dog calm. It is amazing how a very easy going voice will calm a dog. It's like magic. So many people talk far too quickly and loudly and wonder why their dogs leap around all over the place. Once the dog is calm, basic obedience is quite easy.

During the course of our initial conversation, I ask owners how often they take their dogs for walks. Whilst most take them out daily, others only take them out about once a week or less. Not being taken out every day leads to dogs becoming frustrated and highly excitable. Some owners openly admit that, because their dogs have become so excitable and therefore difficult to manage, they don't take them out any more. Instead, they let them run around the back yard which often leads to boredom and barking which in turn annoys the neighbours. To bring this point home to the owners, I ask, "How would you like to be shut up in a confined area day and night?" After a brief silence, they sheepishly reply, "I wouldn't."

Many dogs, particularly the working breeds, need something to do. They are bursting with mental and physical energy. If this is not used up those dogs become quite excitable and unmanageable. By giving your dog even basic obedience, you are giving it something to do, something to which it can apply its brain power. Not only are you getting your dog to respect you in obedience, but you are preventing it from becoming either bored or excitable. You owe that to your dog. I'll always remember a man who brought his German Shepherd to me years ago. The dog was highly excitable. They had been attending an obedience dog club for over a year. So I asked him to do some heelwork with a few sits along the footpath. In its excitement the dog continuously encircled the man. After about fifty metres I stopped him and asked why his dog's encircling habit had not been corrected. He replied that the instructors had told him that it was incurable and that he would have to live with it. None of the instructors had taken the dog in hand to show the owner how to correct the dog. Apparently, it was not their policy in case the dog played them up. That would reflect badly on the instructors. I knew that to be quite true. They told me.

The man welcomed me taking his very friendly dog and I commenced heelwork in a long straight line along the footpath. It tried several times in the first twenty metres to cut across to the right in order to encircle me. After consistent immediate corrections, the dog never attempted it again. Instead, I could see that he enjoyed the heelwork for the next hundred metres which included several sits. I maintained my straight direction all the time. I gave the dog long, quiet, sincere praise at the last sit, and then I dismissed him to walk free. Two minutes later, the dog, mentally tired, lay down and went to sleep. His owner couldn't believe it. Weeks later, the members at his dog club couldn't believe it. It was all quite simple. No food rewards.

Over the years I have trained an increasing number of clients who have been under stress for many reasons. After a few weeks of training them individually, during which time they've learnt how to use a calm voice and to stroke their dogs slowly and gently, they start to settle down. In fact, the training they and their dogs have received together has become very therapeutic. As the weeks progress the training becomes easier for them to absorb and enjoy. Interestingly, other members of their families have commented to me that they have noticed a marked difference in those who have attended the training sessions. I have also observed that people who live in the country districts, not just in Victoria but other States too, are far more relaxed than those who live in the big fast-moving cities like Melbourne. The difference is quite noticeable.

As I look back over my life time of three score years and ten, plus a little bit more, I have seen many changes in peoples' lifestyles, not always for the better I might add. People don't communicate as they did before; their eating habits have changed. They depend on the fast food outlets instead of eating more fresh fruit and vegetables. Many are grossly overweight; they don't exercise enough by going for walks with their dogs. They constantly depend on electronic devices. The list goes on. I believe people need to return to a more natural, stress free way of living. What better way could they do this than taking daily walks with their dogs, leaving their mobiles, radios and earphones at home for a while as they enjoy the companionship of their dogs as they romp around. Then to be able to sit on a park bench or fallen tree trunk and admire nature as birds sing and be slowly stoking their dogs in relaxation.

Next month I will conclude this series of temperamental traits with a few words about dominance and submissiveness. Till then, keep calm and enjoy life with your dogs.

Michael Tucker