

## Canine Temperament

### Part I

Whenever a person or family buys a dog they should always make sure it has a good temperament. While much of this can be inheritable, much more will depend upon how the dog is brought up.

As a professional dog trainer and instructor, I am often asked for my advice as to what I think would be suitable breeds from which prospective owners could choose. The first piece of advice I give would be for those people to really do their homework in finding out as much as they can about the breeds they have in mind. I strongly advise them not rush out to purchase a puppy just because it is a very attractive and handsome looking breed.

Regardless of breeds they may choose, they should always shop around and examine the fully grown dogs with special regard to their weight, size and strength, then ask themselves if they have the physique and strength to manage those breeds. Furthermore, even if people have managed large dogs for many years, they must face up to the fact that they are getting older and therefore not so capable to manage large dogs anymore. Therefore, they may well have to consider “down sizing”.

Purchasers should always ask to see both parents and observe their temperament. In most situations the mother will be present with her litter; therefore much can be seen as to how the puppies romp together and how they relate to their mother. The sire of the litter, which may live elsewhere, needs to be seen too to ensure he has a good temperament. One should never just accept the word of the breeder that the sire is of excellent temperament and even produce fantastic looking photographs of him. That is no proof. Ask to see him. If the request is refused, it could well be that someone has got something to hide! Personally, I would thank them for their time and go elsewhere to view other litters.

In selecting a puppy one must decide on gender – male or female. Generally speaking bitches are more adaptable to training and managing as opposed to males. But there are always exceptions to the rule. I’ve come across some females which are much harder than most males. It does happen.

What makes up a dog’s temperament? There are a number of traits which have been studied by trainers for years, and it is generally accepted that most traits are partly mental and partly physical. It greatly depends on the way in which the dog is being handled or the environment he or she is in at the time. For example, a dog may be aggressive towards other dogs when it is with its owner, yet not aggressive when taken in hand by an experienced trainer whom it respects. Or a dog may work well at home, but not at a dog club, possibly because it is excited and distracted when it is in a large company of other dogs.

Let’s now look at an extensive list of temperamental characteristics found in the dog:

Body sensitivity	Nervousness	Aptitude
Hearing sensitivity	Suspicion	Wilfulness
Capacity to learn	Sound shyness	Stubbornness
Willingness	Anxiety	General distraction
Curiosity	Animal aggression	Animal distraction
Initiative	Protective aggression	Scent distraction
Attentiveness	Pure aggression	Excitability
Concentration	Apprehensive aggression	Dominance
Energy	Jealousy	Submissiveness

That is quite a collection, isn't it. This month and in subsequent issues of this magazine, I wish to talk about all these traits and hope you'll find it interesting regardless of whether you are a breeder, exhibitor, competitor, veterinarian, trainer, instructor or just an enthusiastic and responsible dog owner.

Today I shall start with the first two — body sensitivity and hearing sensitivity because they are the most important characteristics for everyone to know about when training and handling dogs.

### **Body sensitivity**

This characteristic is very important to note and be aware of when you are physically training and controlling your dog on the leash. Some dogs are so highly sensitive that just a little jerk on the leash will be all that is needed to get a good result, whereas a harsh jerk is likely to make the dog somewhat afraid and unwilling to respond to training. Other dogs might be quite the opposite —their body sensitivity is much lower. When a dog has an extremely low degree of this, it is almost impossible to train him! In most cases a low sensitivity is the result of the dog having received light niggling little jerks on the leash over a long period of time. The dog has therefore become so hardened to a physical jerk that even when a much firmer jerk is given it has no effect. Ideally, the degree of sensitivity should be on the higher side of the scale to make training and handling easy. Although it is rare some dogs tend to flinch when touched because of their very high body sensitivity. This is usually because they have not been handled enough by humans during early puppy hood. However, with careful handling over a period of time, this can improve.

### **Hearing sensitivity**

As with body sensitivity, this can range from high to low. Most dogs' hearing sensitivity lies somewhere between medium and high, providing an easy means for vocal control in training. One must be careful not to use too harsh a voice when correcting a highly sensitive dog; otherwise he could just go to pieces. When I use the word harsh, it does not just apply to the intonation of voice, but also to the volume of voice. There is no need to shout, unless the dog is a long way away, he's not deaf.

Dogs which have a low hearing sensitivity give you the impression that they have not heard you. They too are almost impossible to train. They usually become like this after continuous nagging and inconsistent training from their owners. Because they have been allowed to get away with everything, they turn on 'deaf ears' to their owners' commands. You'll often hear an owner say, "One word from me and my dog does as he likes." How true that is.

The dog's sense of hearing is very acute. He has a far greater range than we have. In training he learns to respond to different words. But really it is not so much the words we use as to how we say them that counts. If you say a word using a different intonation from normal, he may not respond or he may show signs of being confused. On the other hand you can use some words, even the dog's name, with as many as three or four different tones to get the required results under various circumstances. For example, you could use the command 'Heel' in an inviting tone when you wish to walk forward at a normal pace, you could use it in a deeper slower tone when you want to walk off at slow pace, and an excitable tone for a faster pace. He will pick up the clue as to which speed you are going to use. On other occasions you may have to say 'Heel' in a very firm tone when your dog is

distracted. So, it is up to you to use your voice in the appropriate way to get the response you want.

How a dog uses its ears can be a fascinating subject if we take time to study it. Amongst the many pricked eared breeds let's take, for example, the German Shepherd dog. If it needs to listen to a faint sound, its ears will become erect to capture the sound waves being transmitted. By the same token it will drop its ears back to block out a certain amount of noise when working in busy traffic conditions. It can also rotate its ears independently when the need arises.

Imagine your German Shepherd is looking through a glass window at a dog on the opposite side of the road. If you stand behind and a little to its right and say something like, "What are you looking at", your dog will rotate its right ear to listen to you for a moment. If you move across to the left and say the same thing it will rotate its left ear, and if you carefully stand directly behind the dog's head it will rotate both ears to listen to you whilst it steadfastly gazes at the dog across the road. That is how he can concentrate on two things at the same time. Clever, isn't it!

Similarly, a Border Collie working in a Sheepdog Trial will concentrate diligently on the sheep it is herding and at the same time listen and obey the commands and whistles given by the shepherd. It truly is a joy to watch.

I hope readers will have found these topics both interesting and helpful. Next month I will talk about the dog's capacity to learn, curiosity, willingness and initiative. Till then, enjoy your dogs.

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