

Canine Temperament

Part II

Last month I wrote about the dog's body and hearing sensitivity in relation to training. To-day I shall continue to talk about the traits which we should observe when handling and training our dogs.

People often refer to a dog or breed as being highly intelligent. Well, we all know what they mean, but is the true meaning of the word *intelligent* being used? It would be better to say that the dog has an extensive capacity to learn and possess great instinctive powers. The word *intelligent* should, I believe, be applied to the human race only. We know that $5 \times 6 = 30$ and can work out a great number of things in mathematics and other subjects, but a dog cannot.

Capacity to learn

Usually, if a dog has a good temperament it will have a good capacity to learn. However, there are certain breeds which have a much greater capacity to learn than others, and even within each respective breed different strains and individual dogs will learn more than others and in a shorter space of time.

So much depends on the human element – how the handler trains the dog. Provided he or she shows the dog exactly what is required, that the task is made very simple and that the dog is praised immediately it responds, the dog should learn. From the outset the training programme should be carefully designed so that it is progressive and interesting for the dog.

A dog doesn't just learn by being taught exercises on the leash. It also learns through experience when it is living with you. Dogs are creatures of habit and so are we. They get to know our daily routine in life, the things we do, when we do them and so on. Even if your dog is apparently asleep, it is always listening. It gets to know the sound of every cupboard door opened in the house, it watches you put on certain clothes which indicate your intention to go out for a walk! There are a multitude of things your dog will recognise and these will increase with experience as the days, weeks, months and even years fly by.

I shall always remember what was said by a blind physiotherapist on one of my early guide dog classes. On behalf of the class of eight she thanked us for providing them with such wonderful guide dogs and the one month's training. She went on to say, "On our arrival we were told that the dogs had had about four months training and that we were going to be trained with them in four weeks. Well, the amount of work we've covered has been incredible. It has all been cleverly worked out. I would never have thought that a dog could be taught so much in such a short time." Well, she was right. Any programme must be planned with the utmost care if success is to be achieved.

Willingness

Fundamentally, when you train your dog you have to use two incentives: a positive one which is praise, and a negative one which is correction. Both have to be used in varying amounts depending on each dog, and both have to be applied vocally and physically. In return for all this work you put in, you will get back from your dog true affection, respect and willingness to work. But you need to make the training interesting. There are several ways of doing this. Take your dog on different walks along which you can include obedience exercises. Go to different parks and work your dog from one end to the other so that it feels it is going somewhere. Avoid training in one small area which will be boring for your dog. Go to different shopping areas and even to the city – provide a great variety of conditions. Your dog will love it! It saddens me when I hear of some show dogs that live virtually in three places, namely, the kennel area in the backyard, the show ring where they are exhibited and the vehicle which conveys them there and back! A lot of those dogs are not even allowed in the house, in which trophies adorn items of furniture and ribbons and certificates are displayed on the walls. Now here's a funny story! Many years ago I gave a public lecture in Western Australia and mentioned all this. Unknown to me at the time, a gentleman sitting at the back of the

audience drove seventy kilometres home, woke up his wife and said, “Hey! You know we’ve arranged for Michael Tucker to hold some training classes here tomorrow. Well, we’ll have to take down all those ribbons and certificates on the walls, and get all the dogs up from the kennels and into the house! We must create a good impression! “So what I said must have pricked his conscience. Naturally, I was highly amused when he and his wife told me all about it the next day.

Curiosity

When you take your dog for a walk there will be a number of things which will catch his attention. You should be able to judge his curiosity. So why not share that together by saying something like, “Oh, what is that, let’s have a look at it shall we!” Invite him to examine whatever it is with assuring praise, “Good dog. Do you like that?” When you take these steps you are allowing him to satisfy his curiosity. It is all part of his up bringing. Often when I have taken a dog for a walk and he has eyed with curiosity men working on the side of the road, I have taken steps to introduce him and let him examine their implements. Workmen eagerly welcome a brief break to meet a dog, who in return wags his tail as he examines everything in his own way. Perhaps the greatest encounters in this respect of showing curiosity can be seen in working police dogs and drug detection dogs. They just about have to go everywhere and anywhere – sometimes they are conveyed by helicopter in the course of their work. What a thrill for them!

Initiative

This can be closely linked to curiosity. I think initiative can be best described as a trait which can be brought out of a dog to help you once you have given it sufficient training.’ One of the best examples I can give is in training of a guide dog to find places and work out, by trial and error, how to solve a problem! When it has been taught basic obedience, stopping at down kerbs, obeying the commands forward, back, right and left, how to negotiate obstacles etc, it is then taught how to find a shop. Let’s imagine it is a chemist which has a multitude of smells. Stopping on the footpath and getting the dog to do the required turn to the door with the phrase “Find the chemist” a few times, the dog is then praised as it enters. The next day the same phrase is given a few times just before reaching the chemist. The dog associates those words with the chemist and gradually turns towards the door and is praised on entering. The trainer, therefore, draws it out of the dog to use its initiative to find the required shop. Later, a guide dog will find a chemist on a street it has not walked along before.

Another example can be seen in tracking, where the dog is required to lead out in harness on a long tracking line. Although he is using his great scenting powers he is also using his initiative to lead out. Out of all the tracking classes I have held, there was one in which five of the six dogs had obedience qualifications CD, CDX and UD. Although they were very obedient, the handlers had great difficulty in getting their dogs to lead out because they had had years of obedience training. In other words, too much obedience training can deter a dog from using its initiative. The sixth dog which had had about seven weeks in basic obedience excelled itself immediately and on every track. Imagine how the other five handlers felt when they saw that dog work so willingly! However, they all agreed that with future dogs, they would teach tracking much earlier – before they even achieved getting passes in obedience trials.

Quite a number of handlers who come to me for training declare that their dogs are very naughty! When I tell them that they should consider themselves lucky, they think I’m joking! “On the contrary,” I tell them, “I’m quite serious!” I then explain that their dogs are so naughty because they are bursting with initiative. However, with training that initiative can be channelled in the right direction. Some of the naughtiest dogs have turned out to be brilliant workers, even to the point of saving their owners lives.

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