

Canine Temperament

Part III

Last month I wrote about the dog's capacity to learn, its willingness, curiosity and initiative. Today I wish to make a start by talking about the dog's attentiveness.

Attentiveness

Basically, this is a natural characteristic and one which is present in all dogs to a greater or lesser extent. However, it needs to be developed and it is up to you as the trainer of your dog to use every means you can to enhance your dog's attentiveness when training him. How often have we heard a frustrated dog owner declare that his or her dog never pays attention, it couldn't care less, it is just not interested in its handler nor the work it is expected to do. Where does the fault really lie? Yes, once again, with the handler. It is not always caused by the handler doing the wrong thing — it is more a case of the handler not knowing how to get the dog's attention. The two main senses which need to be developed are, of course, its eyesight and hearing.

Let's take for example a simple obedience exercise where you have told your dog to sit and stay while you walk away a certain distance, turn and face your dog, then call it to come and sit in front of you. Whilst it may stay perfectly still, it may be turning its head to look at other things. It's not really interested in you. Then you call, "Millie, come" What happens? It doesn't even bother to move. Why? The simple answer is that you've not got the dog's attention in the first place. So, what are you going to do? Well, it's all very simple.

When you command your dog to "stay", simultaneously bring your right hand up to your mouth as you turn to face your dog. Having got your dog's initial attention on your hand, walk backwards in an irregular zigzag fashion. This will really keep your dog guessing as to where you are going. With your eyes on your dog you will be able to see how he is gazing at you. The further you walk back you are becoming smaller and smaller in your dog's vision. Because of this, he will pay more attention, so much so that everything else around will disappear far into the back of the dog's mind. The attention he pays you will become so intense, that when you call him he should respond immediately and continue to keep his attention on you until he arrives in the sit position in front of your feet.

So much then for getting your dog's attention through his eyesight. Let's now look at his sense of hearing. Once again, we'll look at the same exercise. Imagine you have left your dog and, whilst walking backwards, you see him become inattentive and gaze aimlessly around. Suddenly say, in a firm tone of voice but not loud in volume, "watch." Having won his attention for a few moments, he may then turn his head a full 180 degrees. When and if this happens, lift both your feet simultaneously and stamp. The sudden noise you make should quickly make him pay attention to you. In that instant he responds he will see you standing quite still. Another effective method you can use to gain his attention is to quickly rattle a half-full box of matches. It can become a quiet interesting noise to attract his curiosity.

Concentration

This is a characteristic which gradually develops after the dog has undergone training or a few weeks. Before he is trained he has nothing to concentrate on, so this cannot be assessed until he has some work to do. A dog with a good concentration is one which looks straight ahead and gets on with the job, so to speak. A dog with a poor concentration is one which looks aimlessly around as he walks along, giving you the impression that he is not really interested in anything. A good trainer can develop a dog's concentration to a certain extent, but much depends on whether or not the dog possesses this characteristic in a potential form.

There are various ways of improving the dog's power of concentration. Perhaps the most common way is to teach your dog a large number of exercises so that you provide plenty of variety. Jumping exercises and a variety of agility exercises can often get a dog to concentrate with precision. Another

way is to provide a goal for the dog. Tracking is a good example of this. The dog learns with experience that there is a person to be found at the end of the track. His powers of concentration are tremendous as he uses his nose along the track, over different surfaces and passes all kinds of distraction, even cross tracks.

Sometimes one has to find and use a particular method by which the dog will develop its concentration. Many years ago, one of my colleagues was training a Golden Retriever as a guide dog. She had a great temperament, but would not concentrate well on where she was going and what she had to do, like allowing enough width and height for her trainer when negotiating obstacles. However, he found that she loved carrying a piece of wood in her mouth. When she did this, she concentrated well. So, he let her carry a piece of wood in her mouth when training her in the town. Incidentally, the sight of that amused many of the local people! Anyway, it did the trick and after a few weeks he was able to dispense with the piece of wood and the dog concentrated exceedingly well with her guiding work.

Energy

This refers to mental and physical activity. Some dogs bubble over with so much excess energy that they prove to be uncontrollable for most people. Such dogs need to be given training and work to do so that this energy can be used up. When this is done, they start to settle down, but regular work has to be kept up if everything is to be maintained on an even keel. These dogs, few as they are, seem to thrive on work. It happens in the human race too!

I shall always remember a man who brought his male German Shepherd dog to me for training. He explained that it was eighteen months of age and that he had been attending an obedience dog club for a year. But his dog seemed to be more than a handful for him! He'd take it for about a five kilometre run every morning, yet when he arrived home it was still full of energy. When I asked him to do some straight forward heelwork with a few sits along the footpath, the dog was continually encircling him to the right. Then I asked him if this most unacceptable habit had been pointed out to him and if any attempt had been made to correct it in order to get it to heel in a straight line. He was told by instructors that nothing could be done to correct it. It was a habit the dog had got into and he would have to put up with the problem.

He willingly handed his dog over to me and I proceeded with some heelwork. Every time he tried to cut across in front of me I stopped him immediately. He soon realised that I was very quick and consistent with my corrections. After about thirty metres he never tried to cut across me again. Instead, he walked reasonably at heel. The owner couldn't believe it. I didn't allow the dog to get away with anything. I soon got his respect and he started to concentrate and enjoy the walk which included several sits. After about a hundred metres I praised him for some time and then dismissed him. His owner, for the first time, realised what a great dog he had and saw with his own eyes, that when handled correctly it responded extremely well. As we talked, his dog lay down and went to sleep! He was not physically tired, but mentally tired! In concentrating, he had been using up mental energy. The results spoke for themselves. A hundred metres of heelwork tired the dog out quicker than a five kilometre run.

As humans we can become mentally tired just like our dogs. When we attend a class lecture for a couple of hours we can become mentally drained. That's natural. But if we did a day's gardening, using physical energy, we'd probably think nothing of it.

A dog training instructor could train several classes in a day and think nothing of it, but the trainees, who are on the receiving end trying to absorb so much of the instruction become mentally tired in a comparatively short time.

In closing, I'd like to wish all our readers a very Happy Christmas and best wishes with every success in the New Year.

Michael Tucker
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