

Canine Temperament

Part XI

The domesticated dog of today still expresses his position on the ladder of social status, just as we believe he did when he lived in the wild state. Dogs in a large pack range in order of social status from the most dominant, who is the pack leader, down to the most submissive. When caring for many dogs in kennels, it is vitally important that you pair off dogs that are completely different in their social positions. You should have no fear of a fight between a dominant dog and a submissive one. The former, being in charge, will not worry about the other challenging him, and the latter will be quite happy to accept the other dog as the boss. But if you kennel two dogs or two bitches of the same social status, then it is highly likely that disputes will arise between them. Such disputes will often erupt into severe fights with possible fatal consequences.

You may now well ask, what is the ideal temperament? This really depends on what you really want the dog for and what you want to do with him. Dogs are needed for various types of work, such as in law enforcement agencies, security work in the armed services, sheep herding, guiding the blind, pets as therapy, show work, field trials, obedience trials, or they might just be wanted as companions in the family. For each type of work there is a different combination of temperamental characteristics which is considered ideal for the job. If a dog has the ideal temperament, for any work, then with expert training he can become a specialist within his own field.

However, as a general guide, you should have a dog which has no form of aggression or fear. His body sensitivity and hearing sensitivity should neither be too low nor too high. He should not be unduly distracted, but should be attentive, willing and able to concentrate. It is also advantageous if he is curious, shows a fair degree of initiative, and has a great capacity to learn. It is a nuisance when such things as jealousy, wilfulness, stubbornness, and excitability exist in a dog, but these things can be overcome with training.

Dominance

One of the most dominant dogs I have ever come across was a three year old male Foxhound. It was owned by two sisters in their mid-thirties. They had purchased him as an eight week old puppy. Having explained about all the terrible things he got up to in their home, they invited me to visit them. He naturally barked when I pressed the front door bell and was quite happy to see me as I entered to meet his owners for the first time. It was not long before I saw how dominant he was and how he ruled the roost. He would force either of the two women off their arm chairs as they gave into him. Seeing that situation indicated to me what had been going on in the past. They informed me that he had done that ever since he was about five months of age. Whenever they tried to get him off, particularly the settee, he growled and snarled at them, then attempted to bite them. He displayed the same bad behaviour when he took hold of something which belonged to them, and refused to let them take it from him.

After some time I handed them my slip-chain collar and leash and asked them to put it on him in order to pull him off the settee. They both tried and he was ready to attack them. Finally, forming a noose with the handle end of the leather leash, I lassoed him. Although he put up a strong resistance, I pulled him off and immediately proceeded to the front door to take him for a walk down the street. After a few minutes, I discretely put the slip-chain collar on him. Accompanied by his owners, we walked for nearly half an hour, during which time he showed how determined he was to have his own way more so with them of course than he did with me. In short, he was too much of a liability and he was potentially dangerous. It would have been most unwise for them to keep him any longer. After the walk, I advised them of my findings and in conclusion I honestly felt

that, for the safety of all, he should be painlessly destroyed. Like many owners of dangerous dogs, they fully understood what they had taken on and how the problem had become progressively worse, but found it hard to make that final decision. In seeking professional advice, as they had rightly done, the weight of having to make such a final decision was lifted considerably off their shoulders. In such sad cases I always suggest that they might like to get a second opinion. They nearly always reply that I am their second opinion; often the first opinion, that is the same as mine, is from their veterinarian. Supportive opinions from a veterinarian and dog trainer often convince dog owners of the necessary step they need to take. Because I always like to see owners have happy relationships with their dogs, I further advised the two ladies not to choose that breed again, but to choose perhaps a smaller breed, something like a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel — a dog which they could love, find easy to manage and enjoy its great companionship.

Submissiveness

You will generally find that bitches are a bit more submissive than male dogs in any breed. But I hasten to add that there are exceptions to the rule. I have found, as I'm sure some of my readers have, that some females can be extremely hard, in fact harder than some males. I often recall an old dog trainer friend of mine in the UK saying, "It happens in the human race as well old boy."

One of the most submissive bitches I have received for training was an 18 month old German Shepherd, which was owned by a lovely lady whose capacity of control was limited due to health reasons. I have always been pleased to say that they both sailed through training with very little effort. Her dog was a quiet little soul, and would never think about doing anything wrong. Every exercise we taught her, she picked up immediately. Off the leash in an open park, she never went far from her handler. They were like a couple of peas in a pod. So attached. The dog responded even to a whisper. Truly, one could not have wished for a better temperament than she had, especially in view of the handler's disposition. How lucky we were.

Personally, if I were choosing a dog for myself, I would pick a dog or bitch whose temperament was somewhere between the two examples I have given above. But I feel that there is always a place for the very submissive dog and the latter example illustrates that well. What do you think?

This concludes my series on Canine Temperament. I hope you have found each article both interesting and helpful. It is a very big subject. Sometimes I feel that I could have written more, but one has to know when it is enough. Once again, I thank DOGS Victoria for putting this series, together with Dog Training – the Basic Steps, on its website for all to read. I also thank the readers who have kindly written to me and conveyed their appreciation and have asked me to keep writing. There are, of course, many more subjects on which to write. So stay tuned. Enjoy your dogs, help and encourage others wherever and whenever you can. Good luck.

Michael Tucker