

Temperament or Character Testing

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Ongoing training and testing of each canine generation, in which aggregate working effectiveness is enhanced as dogs found wanting are discarded from breeding, is the engine which drives the working dog world. In the police dog trainability, the willingness to cooperate, to take pleasure in working with his leader, is essential, as important as aggression, fighting drive and olfactory prowess. Initial and ongoing training is a substantial component of overall deployment cost, and the willing dog who takes joy in working with the handler rather than rendering only sullen, passive compliance requires less training effort and time and thus less ongoing cost. More willing dogs are by their nature under better handler control and thus less inclined to inappropriate aggression, with the associated liability vulnerability.

Furthermore, the inherently willing dog, with sufficient drive, is much less likely to be discarded from a training program, with a substantial waste of time and money, than the aggressive but difficult dog which ultimately has to be dropped after extensive training. These are serious considerations for the amateur trainer, but are even more critical issues for police and military agencies where cost effectiveness is the prerequisite for long-term viability of canine deployment programs. This does not imply soft dogs for marginal handlers, but rather hard, aggressive dogs which can be effectively molded through training for reliability as well as effective work in capable hands. On the other hand, typical police handler candidates may in general be inappropriate for extremely aggressive and difficult dogs that the exceptional experienced trainer might be able to deal with; there is a fundamental need for mainstream dogs in the sweet spot of the balance among aggression, trainability and willingness.

Training dogs, especially breeding and show stock which will never actually work, is time consuming. Training good dogs is generally pleasant and rewarding, but training mediocre, reluctant dogs soon becomes drudgery, and sometimes reveals what you do not want to know, inadequacies in the dog which should eliminate him from a breeding program. The obvious solution, and the way the system is supposed to work, is to breed stronger and more willing dogs. But conformation oriented breeders tend to keep many dogs and do not want to put forth the effort to train them, or to eliminate for character defects revealed under training dogs which otherwise have the potential to be show winners. Conformation exhibition is extremely competitive, and breeders which attempt to have balanced programs, under slogans such as "the golden middle," are often unable to compete with breeders with large operations which simply ignore character unless it interferes with show ring performance. Even character flaws such as spookiness which would be a detriment in a simple companion home are brushed aside because most of these dogs spend a dreary life in a kennel run.

Essentially it comes down to a marketing problem: people in general buy a Doberman or Rottweiler based on the police or protection dog image, imagining that their families will become more secure and especially that they will feel, and be perceived as, more virile and manly as the proud owner of a police breed dog.

In response to these needs and desires many conformation oriented organizations, in Europe as well as America, devise and promote so called character or temperament tests intended to certify totally untrained dogs. As we shall see, there are several reasons why such tests are patently absurd, not the least of which is that trainability, in and of itself, is an important component of correct character,

and trainability obviously cannot be demonstrated without actually training the dog and demonstrating the results in a credible public forum.

Almost from the beginning the police dog breeders began to split into those primarily focused on producing dogs actually capable of police, military and high level civilian and sport work and those interested in success as conformation show breeders, selling most of their pups, increasingly weak in character, to the indiscriminate companion market. Those focused on the commercial companion market, the pet sellers, know very well that what they are selling is the image of the robust police dog, the aura of working character, just as those seeking an automobile sometimes desire the aura of racetrack excitement even though they drive only on mundane local errands. They further know that selecting and training real police level dogs interferes with selection for the conformation win, a problem that only becomes more difficult as show fashions require increasingly grotesque physical form and gait, as witness current German Shepherd show lines in Europe as well as America.

Thus over time the show breeders found that their weaker and less trainable dogs were less and less in demand by deploying agencies and serious amateur trainers, with the result that the breeder's customer base became increasingly tilted to companion owners that could not really tell the difference and were less able to manage the more intense dogs. Training unwilling breeding stock for the trial field became more onerous and time consuming, and being competitive in the show ring increasingly required retaining dogs in the program which are inadequate for work, and pass this on in their progeny.

It is thus the natural desire of the show breeder for a simple certification process, not involving any real work or effort, and not likely to disqualify their breeding and show stock, sort of a mass production universal verification process. The SV solution has been the subversion of the trial itself through less stringent rules, more lenient judges and home field or quasi-private special trials. This was possible because the conformation elite of the SV was in real control of the Schutzhund trial, that is able to establish the rules, designate judges and condone ever increasing leniency. This was an option not as easily available in other nations or other breeds.

As an alternative the so-called character test has been extensively promoted and deployed. Such tests are based on the premise that training is actually unnecessary, and is in fact an impediment to effective breeding selection. The thesis is that by devising clever tests for the natural or untrained response we can see the true nature and potential, unhindered by human manipulation, thus gaining a more accurate insight as well as avoiding the time, cost and effort of training. In this view of the canine world, training serves to unnaturally conceal and cover over the essence of the dog. Various temperament or character tests have been proposed and implemented for these purposes, often under the auspices of conformation oriented national breed clubs.

There is a tiny grain of truth here, for all trials are and always will be imperfect, it is possible that a combination of clever training, a cozy home trial field, a less than ruthlessly diligent judge and a simple lucky day can get a dog – sometimes a very seriously inadequate dog – through the trial, perhaps even with an impressive score. It cannot be said too many times, a title is not an absolute proof of inherent quality.

But there are larger and more pertinent truths. It is impossible to create a system for testing untrained dogs because they will not be untrained, owners will extensively prepare for the tests, know the weaknesses of their dogs and the expectations of the testers, and acclimate them. Rather than a test for untrained dogs it will become an emasculated pseudo trial, a self-defeating charade. This is precisely what the currently implemented systems have become.

At the heart of the matter, dogs are useful because they are trainable, that is, willing to respond to the needs and commands of the handler and thus bring the physical and moral aspects of the dog – his power, his quickness, his olfactory prowess – into harmonious partnership and service. The responsiveness to command and training is especially important to the police canine team, where any break down in discipline can result in injury or the loss of life to innocent civilians as well as criminals and police personnel.

Much of this cooperation and control is the consequence of environment, a sound upbringing with appropriate socialization and effective, timely training. But working willingness is in fundamental ways genetic, inherent in the dog, the consequence of generations of selective breeding. This underlying genetic predisposition to cooperation and trainability is fundamental, and can only be verified through the actual training and testing process.

The idea that it is possible to evaluate a dog for breeding or service without hands on validation of his trainability, his inherent willingness to be a partner, is an absurdity only the most naïve or disingenuous could put forth. Unfortunately, people profoundly ignorant of the real process of canine deployment and training become conformation oriented breeders, officers in canine organizations, conformation judges and in general those in control of the canine establishment.

If the canine working trials are imperfect, as they are and always will be, the solution is not to contrive superficial tests for untrained dogs, but rather to incessantly work to improve trial procedures, require more advanced titles at regional trial fields and move the selection of judges into the hands of regional officials rather than local club officers. No baseball team, after all, expects to select, hire and pay their own umpires. No football team – in the European meaning – expects to bring their own referee to issue yellow cards to irksome opponents.

Furthermore, because it imposes compulsion the training process exerts psychological pressure on the dog. Since this pressure is likely to be greater under the stress of deployment, where the consequences of a breakdown in discipline can be very serious, the resilience of the dog during training pressure is in and of itself an important factor in service worthiness. The decision to continue or discard the dog under training is an ongoing process; every trainer will dismiss candidates because of observation and contrived tests in order to make as good a selection as possible before investing further time and effort. And it is true that mistakes are made, for it is not uncommon to select a dog and yet in the future discard him when he is revealed as inadequate under the pressure of training. Indeed, for this reason, the trainer will typically give the benefit of the doubt to the questionable dog for this very reason, so as not to make a mistake and bypass a good dog. And no doubt dogs who under some trainer, some place, sometime could have evolved into excellent workers are discarded and lost; such is the nature of life.

But the fundamental fact remains that canine excellence is proven only in the crucible of training, and that projections or evaluations of untrained dogs are mere speculation. The most courageous and hard dog in the world, capable of the most impressive olfactory feats in search and tracking, agile, swift and powerful, is useless if that dog cannot be molded into an effective, obedient working partner.

The unwilling dog is a useless dog, and no dog who has not demonstrated cooperation in training is of fundamental use. Making breeding decisions on untrained dogs, to speculate that they have the potential for police style service, is akin to having untrained people picked at random on the street operate to see if they are potential surgeons.

An intrinsic problem with these character tests is that they inevitably wind up being conducted by the show-oriented breeders who control the national clubs and others under their direct influence and control. Inexorably, standards are lowered

and ongoing weaknesses in the show lines are dealt with not by selection in breeding but by lowered expectations and ever more lenient evaluation criteria. The weaknesses are simply swept under the rug and ignored.

As an example, in such tests the dog is generally required to engage the helper wearing the padded bite suit as a verification of courage and defensive potential. But it is often a sham. On one occasion I was present in Belgium when the well-known Bouvier des Flandres breeder Felix Grulois presented a bitch which exhibited marked avoidance of the helper, even though he averted his gaze and showed great weakness so as to encourage a response. Finally, Grulois just picked her up, touched her to the suit and she was passed, became certified. Nobody seemed to notice, it was just more business as usual. These tests degenerate because when you strip away the pretense and propaganda they are just taking turns certifying each other's dogs. None of them have any real concern about character, they just want show ring glory and to quickly sell puppies for the best possible price.

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