

CANINE BEHAVIOUR - BY LANCE COLLINS

Travelling in search of information on training has provided many opportunities to broaden my understanding of canine behaviour.

Understanding canine behaviour is the essential ingredient in developing training programs which will produce a dog that works correctly and enthusiastically.

It is the understanding of canine behaviour which determines correction or stimulation, the levels of each and the timing for each. With a clear understanding the handler is able to select a technique which will achieve the desired response or behaviour from the dog.

Inexperienced handlers are often found applying a technique they have learned at a seminar or in training. The result is not always as expected because the ingredient that is missing is knowing the correct moment and the necessary level to give the reward or correction. Knowing canine behaviour will provide the handler with the necessary information. The understanding of the most likely response gives the handler the tools necessary to make a quick constructive decision.

The sport of Schutzhund is founded on the premise that even under a potential fighting situation the dog will comply with the handler on the first command.

Canine behaviour is typical and predictable.

The predictability, consistency and uniqueness of their behaviour is what makes them dogs and distinguishes them from all other animals on this planet.

All canines exhibit the same behaviour patterns. Some individuals demonstrate more pronounced behaviour than others but it is present to some degree in all of them.

Specific behaviours can be enhanced through selective breeding which combines dogs of similar pronounced tendencies. This can be seen most readily in hunting dogs.

The combining, through breeding, of dogs with the same pronounced tendencies has been done both naturally and artificially for thousands of years. The African wild dog and the hyena are natural examples of naturally selective breeding. The Labrador Retriever and the German Shepherd are two, of many, artificially created. The same tendencies are in all of them, but each shows more pronounced in different ones.

The artificial selection of tendencies by man has led to the "pure bred" dogs of today.

Tendencies necessary to understand, ensuring a successful working team, apply to all breeds. Some tendencies are more pronounced in specific blood lines of breeds and care must be taken to address them.

The handler must accept that the canine world does not accept or recognize the concept of "equal". There is no equal in the canine world only dominant and submissive. This is often referred to as "pecking order".

Canines establish this "pecking order" as young puppies through play and rough housing. As the puppies develop, conflicts over food will quickly establish who is on top. Handlers must see that this is done through conflict and stress not through discussion and bribery.

The establishment of order through stress is natural for dogs and it is a system under which they have thrived for thousands of years.

Handlers who can properly manage the use of stress in the development of their dogs are successful because they are working within the dogs natural behaviour patterns. Knowledgeable handlers do not substitute human response behaviour for the dogs behaviour and are therefore not asking for responses the dog cannot provide.

Dogs which are properly prepared can work equally well on or off the competition field.

Today we have many new people entering the sport searching for an easy method. There are training programs which suggest that a dog trained exclusively over a reward system (play, food) will be successful. Those of you who fall victim to these methods will find that you suddenly have a dog which no longer listens to you. The dog will go along comfortably until a situation arises where the dog's drives change, such as after puberty, or as the dog matures and other drives like the sex drive start to become pronounced. This change or maturing is often very pronounced in dogs with character, drive and hardiness.

Situational or pattern training will be of no value for basic obedience outside of the club training grounds.

When this maturing happens, handlers are left with establishing control through compulsion as a pack leader would have to do with a young upstart. This would be settled in the wild by confrontation and conflict. There is always a decision on position. The handler must win or lose in this situation, there is no other conclusion possible for the dog.

The young dog may assume the top position, by overcoming the pack leader in such a conflict. It is the natural order to have the young dog continually challenging the leader to ensure the most capable is at the top of the pack. It is essential for the survival of the pack.

Handlers must recognize the risks of establishing a dominant position with an older dog. Dogs with pronounced courage, hardiness and fighting drives may choose to utilize them.

Handlers must recognize that the continual attempts by the dog to assume the role of leader is natural. It is one of the primary behaviours that has kept canines around for thousands of years. Failure by the handler to maintain leadership through dominance will result in a complete role reversal. Ensuring compliance ensures dominance.

A dog who is dominant over the handler may not show its hand all the time. Dogs often appear to be satisfied with most normal daily situations and may show their dominant position only at certain times. We see it often in behaviour such as, growling when eating as the handler approaches. The protection phase is included in the sport to identify handlers in this situation. The out command is a clear indication of who is in charge.

Young German Shepherd puppies often get overly aggressive while nursing and can cause a bitch a great deal of discomfort. Mothers will discipline the overly aggressive ones by taking them by the muzzle and biting down hard enough to get a squeal of apology. After several "corrective bites" the puppy learns to ease up on feeding.

Handlers must learn the value of working dogs within their natural behavioral patterns.

Dogs chosen to work in the sport of Schutzhund are expected to have high play drives, high protective drives, high fighting drives and a willingness to bite objects such as tugs, sticks, training arms and in extreme cases, threatening people. These dogs are chosen and bred for pronounced tendencies along these lines.

Establishing pecking order dominance with dogs of these tendencies bring its own inherent difficulties and risks.

Understanding the importance of maintaining dominance will radically increase the handlers chance for success.

You can take the dog out of the pack but you can't take the pack out of the dog.

Lance Collins is a Canadian judge and President of the German Shepherd Schutzhund Club of Canada. He has conducted seminars in Canada, USA and Germany. He is the 1992 Canadian SehH3 Champion and in 1993 placed fourth in the World Championships in Holland. Lance is a member of the West Coast German Shepherd Schutzhund Club and breeds German Shepherd Dogs under the prefix vom Haus Bergblick