

Fixing Behavior Problems #46

By Ed Bailey

Problem: At a seminar for a major versatile hunting dog breed club, I was asked what I felt was the most serious dog problem the readers of Gun Dog sent me. Because of the word ‘serious’ in the question, my one word answer was, “aggression”. I suggested it because when it comes to dog problems there is nothing with more serious consequences than dog aggression toward your dog, toward other dogs or toward people. But before I could elaborate on my one word answer, questions of ‘why was that’ came. I gave one possible reason and immediately the audience joined in, my thirty minutes in the speakers chair was ended, the next speaker was brought on. Therefore, as I wasn’t able to really answer the question and explain the root cause of behavior and training problems in gun dogs, I will give it here where the only time constraint is how fast you read.

Answer to the Question: The basic root cause of an aggression problem or an anxiety problem or a behavior related training problem, or obsessive–compulsive behavior, individual stereotypic behavior, or most behavior problems in dogs today is a flawed temperament. The remaining causes of problems are based on improper, or too short, primary and secondary socialization, and those causes attributable to learning. These latter problems are acquired by our errors of omission. However, temperament is our biggest source of dog problems because our evaluation systems either ignore it or inadvertently select for a temperament specific only for the testing system.

Temperament is one of those words that everybody uses and nobody bothers to define because it is a word that means all things to all people. Therefore, so that we are all on the same page, I will explain what I mean when I say temperament. Perhaps the closest one word synonym for temperament might be personality. But like most synonyms, it is a tad short of fully defining what temperament really is. And, like so many of the behavioral catch words people like to banter about, temperament needs an explanation rather than a pat one or two word definition in order to comprehend it.

I view temperament like this: Temperament is the root cause (determining factor or modifying factor) which directs whether a dog will or will not perform some given behavior and the manner in which he will or will not do it. It is the dog’s mind set, the attitude with which he approaches whatever is expected for whatever is or is not to be done. It requires some level of ability to read what the dog is saying or transmitting. It is not measured with a tape or a weight scale or stop watch. It is the attitude the dog possesses.

Every dog’s particular temperament comes pre-packaged with the dog. It cannot be created as an afterthought. A desirable hunting dog temperament can be maxed out by learning experiences or, if undesirable, it can be masked to some degree by normal training techniques or as is the modern way of doing things, by e-collar inducement. But in reality it is innate, inborn, genetically dictated, carved in stone and very well fixed by the breeding behind the dog. We can selectively breed for whatever temperament we want. And we have pretty well done it—mostly wrong for dogs for on foot hunting in the normal, relatively small, dense bird covers still available for hunting. These are errors of commission because we direct the breeding.

About fourteen years ago, then editor of Gun Dog, Bob Wilbanks suggested that I write an article to explain why dogs of his breed of choice to replace his aging laid back hunting dog were all so wired. He wanted a cooperative gun dog. The article was called “Hello Wired Dog; Goodbye Cooperation” and it appeared in the June/July 1993 issue of

Gun Dog. It is an explanation of why cooperation is apparently disappearing.

Cooperation is a huge part of the temperament required of a dog for hunting and indeed can be used as a descriptive word for a kind of temperament as in ‘the dog has a cooperative temperament’ as opposed to having ‘an overly independent temperament’. We can’t say a dog has an obedient temperament because obedience is induced or taught the dog. Cooperation cannot be taught. Like the rest of a dog’s temperament it is innate. But, the hunting dog type of temperament is overlooked in breeding because they don’t win field trials or attain the top qualifying placements in the various field tests or hunting dog tests. In North America, we have the attitude that winning is both everything and the only thing. We select winners of trials and tests for breeding stock under the assumption that if the dog has won in an ersatz hunting configuration, no matter how far fetched from reality of hunting wild game that it will be a useful hunting dog. But, the trials and tests are supposed to weed out the poor dogs, the best will rise to the top and the purpose is to improve the breed(s). The question is, to improve it for what? Do the trials and tests, dog sport really have much to do with selectively breeding a good hunting dog? Mostly they select for good field trial or test dogs. And, this seems to be what the trials and tests were designed for.

William F. Brown, the father of modern field trials, published the bible for field trailers in 1934, “Field Trials—History, Management, and Judging Standards” .Chapter XXV defines what he calls the Real Purpose of Field Trials. He starts by saying, “Fundamentally the real purpose of field trials is breed improvement, the elevation of pointing dog performance in the hunting field.” Good so far, but then says, “There are many desirable secondary objectives, but occasionally some of these cause novices, particularly those with shooting dog experience to be confused by certain yardsticks applied to field trial competition. Therefore, it might be well to stress that field trials were not instituted for bringing to the front a dog or class of dogs eminently suited to the wants of the average gunner.” He further explains, “These dogs are not at all times the most desirable to shoot over for the reason that their individuality is such that it cannot be dominated by use of ‘foot rule’ methods whereby a dog of subservient temperament is made to range close. In some instances the really high class field trial performer verges on the edge of bolting....dogs whose independence is so great that it is with some difficulty they are persuaded to work to the gun in a manner satisfactory to the average sportsman.”

This quote is a flowery, but politically correct way of saying there is a field trial temperament which is not to be confused with a hunting dog temperament. Independence is the cornerstone of the trial temperament and a subservient temperament (cooperation) is the main component for the hunter’s dog. So, do field trials really improve breeds? For the field trials, yes, but for the average hunting dog, they are probably detrimental. However, today we don’t need to use a check cord or tie up a leg, or have the dog drag a chain to keep it in the same county. The e-collar is now the training tool of choice for the super hot field trial pointers. In fact the breeding rule of thumb seems to be to produce dogs that absolutely require e-collar training. When is the last time you saw a picture of an English Pointer or English Setter or a German Shorthair, for that matter that was purportedly hunting and not wearing an electronic collar? Does that change the dog’s temperament from a near bolter to subservient, ergo, cooperative hunter? Hardly, only rigid selective breeding can do that. And the field trial pressure is all in the other direction. If you want a better gun dog you have to breed specifically for it. If you want a better field trial dog you have to breed specifically for it. It is relatively easy to breed for the field trial dog temperament because winners have the correct temperament to win in trials, so breed winners to winners and crank it up a notch. We don’t seem to have winners among hunting dogs, at least not in the record books.

Knowing that hunting dog temperament was overlooked in the trials and that there was no forum for testing hunting dogs, a small group of us who wanted a way to evaluate dogs for the purpose of standardizing the hunting dog temperament and hopefully improving the various hunting breeds, borrowed the testing criteria from Germany, modified it very little to suit North American hunting standards and introduced the package thirty plus years ago.

The individual aspects of the total test were all designed to evaluate a dog's hunting dog temperament. The real question asked was –How much of all the qualities of a versatile hunting dog does a given dog possess? Those qualities that make up a maximally useful hunting dog, what the German hunter calls der Jagdgebrauchshund are: a dog that has self control of his enthusiasm so he can keep focused and concentrate on the job at hand; a dog that can adjust his speed and range to suit the situation, a multi-gear dog which can use all the gears; a dog that is extraordinarily cooperative, sensitive to the handler's wishes; a dog that is easily and readily trainable because it possesses these characteristics.

However, as in any system of evaluations based on abstract and subjective criteria, the value of the system depends on the judging. And, like in the child's party game, the story is passed from person to person until it gets back the originator, unrecognizable as compared to the startup story, corrupted in the retelling. So judging criteria has changed with each generation of ordained judges. Though unintentional, this is the nature of the beast. Changes have occurred so that in the test for dogs under 16 months, officers of one testing organization now refer to it as entry level dog sport. The original purpose of evaluation of a young dog's potential as a hunting dog is fast disappearing. The original intent has been eroded or tends toward field trial like performance. In fairness, there are still more of the necessary elements for hunting dog present than in the regulation field trial. However, the elements of the test have become the ends in themselves rather than a means of evaluating the total dog. The objective has become the Prize I and the very competitive top test for dogs that have precisely jumped through the hoops through the series of tests now feature professional handlers of dogs that are professionally trained and specifically groomed for the tests. The top winning dogs are bred to the top winning bitches to produce the next winners of the contrived tests. The field test is not yet as far removed from the hunting dog temperament as is the field trial, just quickly approaching.

Very experienced hunting dogs will do dumb things like walk in and pick up a planted bird because they have retrieved hundreds of dead or dying birds and have pointed hundreds of healthy wild birds and know the difference. Such dogs are given low scores because they were supposed to point the pen reared dizzied bird, rocked to sleep and smelling of surgically sterile latex gloves. These dogs are never the sought after stud dogs or brood bitches. Again, the selection in breeding is for the winning field test dog and not for the 'subservient temperament' hunting dog Brown alluded to in his purpose of field trials chapter.

There are at least six breed clubs in North America that maintain ties with the parent clubs in Germany or the Czech Republic where the North American tests are simply not accepted. These clubs all have developed their own testing programs close enough to those in Europe to be acceptable, necessary to maintaining the parent club affiliation. As in the field tests, the evaluation is dependent on the ability of the judges, most of which are now a few generations removed from the original judges who learned in Europe. There is also the problem of all judges being from the breed they are judging with an overly exuberant fidelity to their breed. Many have never evaluated dogs of other breeds. I spoke with one such judge who leads clinics to teach others how to judge. When I questioned the evaluation of the temperament of several dogs in one test, he told me he could not truly evaluate the temperament in the three or so hours he saw a dog in a test. I

saw no reason to pursue the temperament question. I do question the value of the evaluations given their young dogs, however.

The calm working, useful hunting dog, with the temperament to hunt intelligently with controlled enthusiasm every day out and yet that can be trusted to live in your house with out fear of the furniture disappearing into kindling, able to adjust to any sudden change in its life without eating the significant other's undergarments, or dismembering the neighbor's six year old, is becoming an endangered species. It is being replaced by hyperactive, disagreeable noisy dogs with an attitude, or having any and all sort of behavior problems, dogs we cannot live with unless we keep them mellowed out on one drug or another. The temperament we get is the one we selectively breed for. The temperament most people want is not the one described in books on how to live with a neurotic dog.

For solutions to your dog's behavior problem or behavior related training problem, you can contact Ed Bailey at edbailey@uoguelph.ca

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Updated may 10th, 2008