



Fixing Behavior Problems

Temperament, biggest problem in dogs today

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 to me. Because of the word ‘serious’ in the question, my one word answer was, “Aggression.”

I replied this way because when it comes to dog problems, there is nothing with more serious consequences than a dog’s 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?” erupted.

I gave one possible reason and immediately the audience jumped in with their comments and anecdotes. All too soon, my 30 minutes in the speaker’s chair were ended and the next speaker was brought on. So, as I wasn’t able to really answer the question fully and explain the root cause of behavior and training problems in gun dogs, I will give a more complete response here, where the only time constraint is determined by how quickly 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, indeed, most behavior problems in dogs today is 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 current evaluation systems either ignore it or inadvertently select for a temperament specifically desired 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 sorts of things to all people. Therefore, so that we are all on the same page, 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) that directs whether a dog will or will not do it. It is the dog’s mindset, the attitude with which he approaches whatever is expected, for whatever is or is not to be done. This requires the trainer to have 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 stopwatch. It is the attitude the dog possesses.

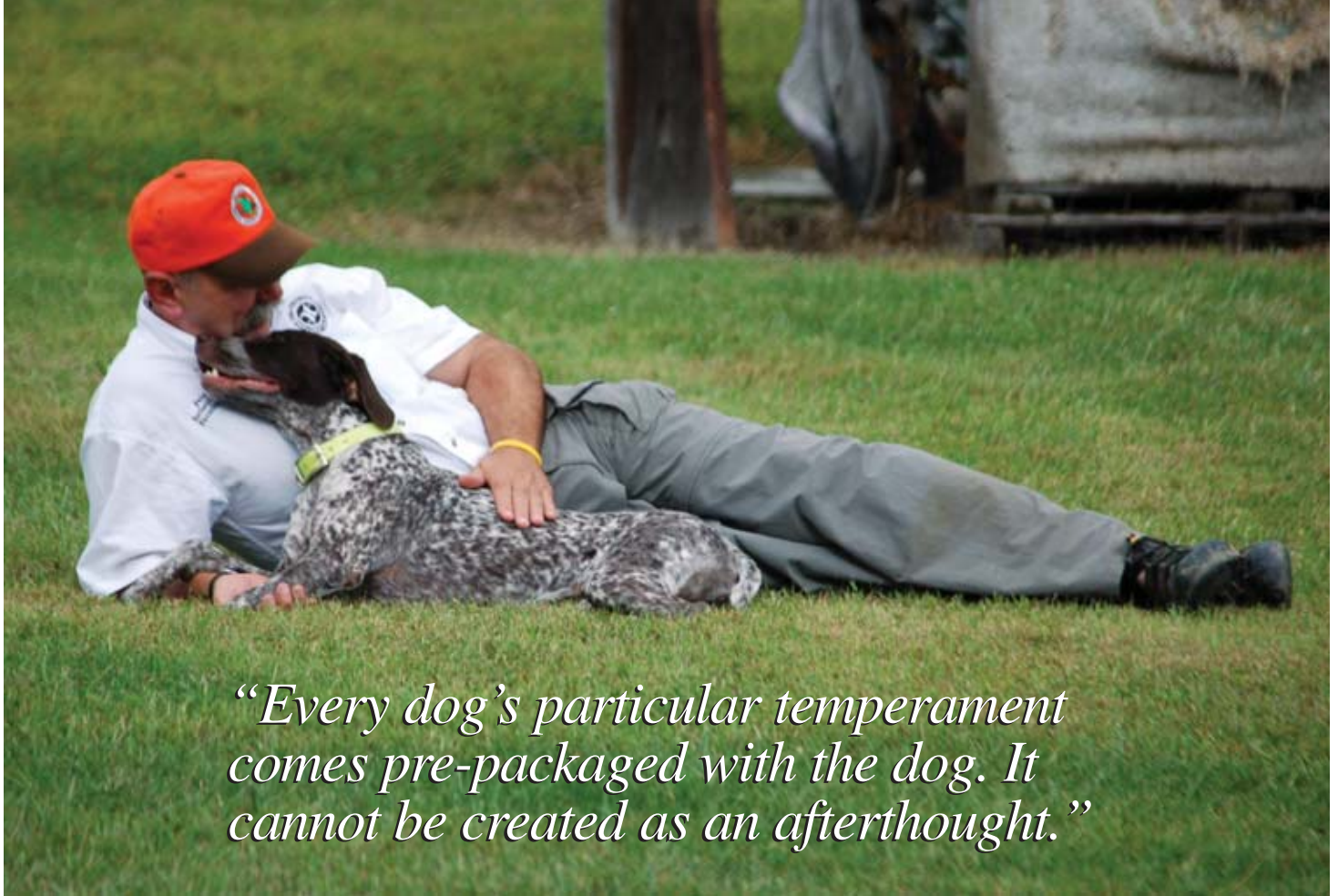
Every dog’s particular temperament comes pre-packaged with the dog. It cannot be created as an afterthought. A desirable hunting dog temperament can be maxed out by learning experiences or, if undesirable, it can be masked to greater or lesser degrees by training programs that inhibit the dog’s instincts. But in reality, temperament is innate, inborn, genetically dictated and carved in stone by the breeding behind the dog.

We can selectively breed for whatever temperament we want. And we have pretty well done just that—mostly wrong for dogs for on-foot hunting in the normal, relatively small, dense bird covers that are all that remain for many of us. These are errors of commission because we direct the breeding.

About 14 years ago, Bob Wilbanks (the editor of *Gun Dog*) suggested that I write an article to explain why dogs of his favorite breed were now all so “wired.” (He was looking for a successor to his aging, laid-back dog, and he wanted a pup with a cooperative temperament.) The resulting article was titled, “Hello Wired Dog; Goodbye Cooperation” and it appeared in the June/July 1993 issue. It was an explanation of why cooperation is apparently disappearing among the sporting breeds.

Cooperation is a huge part of the temperament required of a dog for hunting, as in, “the dog has a cooperative temperament” opposed to “he has an overly independent temperament.” We can’t say a dog has an obedient temperament because obedience is induced or taught. But cooperation cannot be taught. Like the rest of a dog’s temperament, it is innate.

The cooperative type of temperament is often overlooked in breeding, however, because it won’t win field trials or attain the top qualifying placement in various hunt 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 or earned a title in an ersatz hunting configuration—no matter how farfetched from the reality



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of hunting wild game that test or trial might be—then it will be a useful hunting dog.

Trials and tests are supposed to weed out the poor dogs so that the best will rise to the top, the purpose of which is to improve the breeds. But the question is, improve it for what? Nowadays, mostly they select for good field trial or test dogs... and these may differ markedly from the type of dog wanted by the average hunter.

William F. Frown, 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 Brown calls the Real Purpose of Field Trials. He starts by saying, “Fundamentally the real purpose of trials is breed improvement, the elevation of pointing dog performance in the hunting field.”

Okay so far, but Brown 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.” (Emphasis added.)

Brown 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 politely correct way of saying there is a field trial temperament that 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 again, do field trials really improve breeds? For the field trials, yes, but for the average hunting dog, they are probably detrimental. 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 super hot field trial competitors... in fact, the breeding rule of thumb among trialers now seems to be to produce dogs that require e-collar training.

But does the use of the e-collar change the dog’s temperament or form a near-bolter to a subservient, cooperative hunter? Well, perhaps... at least as long as the dog is wearing the collar. But only rigid selective breeding can produce dogs with the inherited cooperative temperament that will keep them under control with a minimum of “juice.” And the majority of field trial breeding has moved in the other direction.

Knowing that cooperative temperament was being 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 breeds, borrowed

the testing criteria from Germany, modified it very little to suit North American hunting standards and introduced the package 30-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 any 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.

Our efforts seemed to jump-start the entire "hunt test" movement in North America, and other dog organizations were fairly quick to jump on the bandwagon. Of course, as in any system of evaluations based on abstract and subjective criteria, the value of the system depends on the judging. And among the various hunt test organizations, judging criteria seems to have changed with each subsequent generation of ordained judges. Though probably unintentional, this is the nature of the beast.

Changes have occurred so that the original intent of the tests – evaluating the dog's instincts, temperament and performance as a suitable hunting partner has sometimes been eroded or now tends more toward competitive, field trial-like performance. In fairness, there are still more of the necessary elements for a hunting dog present in these tests than in a regulation field trial.

However, successfully completing the elements of the test—and earning a title—has many times become the end in itself rather than a means of evaluating the total dog as a hunter in the field. It's worth noting that some tests are now dominated by professional handlers of dogs that are professionally trained and specifically groomed for the tests... and those earning the highest scores are those usually selected for breeding, even though they may have had very few wild birds killed over them.

The calm, useful hunting dog—possessing the temperament to hunt intelligently with controlled enthusiasm every day and to be trusted to live in your house without reducing your furniture to kindling, adapt to sudden changes in its life without eating your significant other's undergarments or dismembering the neighbors six-year-old—is becoming an endangered species.

This dog is being replaced by hyperactive and disagreeable, noisy dogs with an "attitude," dogs that manifest multiple behavior problems, dogs we cannot live with unless we keep them mellowed out on one drug or another and/or keep them under control with extreme training techniques.

The temperament we get in our gun dogs is the one we selectively breed for. The temperament most people want is not in the books on how to live with a neurotic dog.

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