

Tell Me About Your Dog! – Part I

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By Armin Winkler

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The SV celebrates 100 years this year, so for all intents and purposes Schutzhund training has been around for close to 100 years as well. In that time countless books have been written, and even more seminars have been taught, and let's not even start on how many conversations and discussions were held late into the night on the topic of dog training. In all these discussions about dogs, their qualities, and their training a lot of terminology is used. Being one of those people that often talk late into the night until I lose my voice, I have discovered that very few things in training are quite as diverse as the interpretations of terminology. Why is that?

Many terms used in dog training today had a certain meaning assigned to them through the way they were used. But often as the use of the word changed, so did its meaning. One of the most difficult things in discussions about training today is to establish a basis of understanding and interpretation of terminology. Usually once the people who are having the discussion are “on the same page” the discussion becomes much more productive. I feel that the concepts of dog training are often oversimplified. Traits are generalized and labeled in such a way that it has become virtually impossible to visualize a dog from its description.

We all have to assess dogs in order to have the correct approach in their training. To develop a training approach we need to know as much detail about the dog as possible. And to learn details about the dog we have to break things down into smaller pieces that make up the dog's motivations. So rather than generalizing something I notice about the dog I try to get a read on every separable trait I can find. Every trait is like a piece in a complex mechanism, and to ensure that it functions properly, we have to inspect every piece.

It is not my intent to “preach the gospel” and state undeniable truths. Dog training is not an exact science, it is educated guesswork. Hopefully, the more education we get, the more accurate the guesses will become. But we have to remind ourselves that they are still just guesses. This article is intended as an analytical discussion of the complexities involved in this type of guesswork. I hope it provokes some thought and leads to closer examination of details.

Stimulus Thresholds

This is the most logical first subject, since every response a dog shows is triggered by a stimulus. Webster defines threshold as “the point at which a stimulus is just strong enough to be perceived or produce a response.” In other words it is the lowest level of stimulation that will trigger a response.

Unfortunately, this term is not used often enough when a dog is assessed. When we talk about drive, nerve, hardness, etc. most of the time we are in fact talking about the stimulus threshold of the dog, and nothing else. Let's use the example of pain to examine this. Pain is nothing more than discomfort, and every dog has a different point at which a particular physical stimulus becomes uncomfortable. In other words every dog perceives the sensation of pain at a different level of physical influence. This has nothing to do with the dog's character or temperament, it simply describes his body's response to a physical stimulus. We often use words like "hardness" to sum this up. But hardness has become a quality assessment. Can we really simplify it that much? I don't think so. I will address hardness a bit later in the article, for now I want to stay on the topic of thresholds.

Another example to help illustrate the point. Often dogs are assessed as being "defensive." That does that really mean? I guess that depends on the person making the assessment. But again, the term "defensive" leads to interpretation. The broad range of dogs that have this said about them are vastly different, yet they are all categorized with the same term. One thing that most of the dogs that are called "defensive" have in common is this. They all have a low stimulus threshold for defensive stimuli. You may say, "Isn't that the same thing." The answer would be, "No!" I will also discuss defense drive a little bit later, for now I will just say this about it. A dog's self defense drive is activated when the dog perceives a stimulus that leads him to feel concerned or worried about his own physical welfare. The response could be active defense (aggression) or passive defense (flight or other types of avoidance behaviors). And that encompasses all the dogs that are called "defensive," the only common thread is their stimulus threshold. Each of these dogs may require a different approach in training, depending much more on their response to the stimulus than to the stimulus threshold. Some dogs may have a very high stimulus threshold for defensive stimuli, this says nothing at all about their ability to handle the stimulus once they perceive it.

Prey drive also has stimulation thresholds. Many quality assessments are made about dog's prey drives when in reality all that was assessed was the stimulation threshold. This often leads to faulty conclusions about the dogs and consequently less than optimal training. A dog may perceive a prey trigger stimulus very easily. So it is easy to activate the prey drive the dog has. But this in no way means that the dog also has good prey drive. The quality and strength of the dog's prey drive requires separate careful assessment that goes beyond the stimulus threshold. Just look at puppy testing. How often do we see puppies that are very easily stimulated in prey and find that the puppy grown up falls far short of the expectations we had for him? Again, under more careful examination we see that the ease of reaching stimulation is a different assessment category than the quality of the drive itself.

Another example is the stimulus threshold for noises. I believe that the test currently in place to test so called "noise-sensitivity" does nothing more than allow a small assessment of the noise stimulus threshold. My friend Thomas Baumann also views the current test as an inadequate assessment of noise sensitivity. He is currently conducting research into this matter at his private training facility as well as at the police service dog school

(Naustadt/Sachsen/Germany) he heads up. He set up a training room with high-tech stereo equipment over which he plays a collection of about 15 different noises for three minutes with short pauses between the different noises (ranging from a bicycle bell to breaking glass, to engine noises and fireworks) to each dog who is left alone in the room while being tested. The results of these tests were amazing. While some dogs appeared completely unfazed initially some broke down completely after about one minute. Others initially showed reactions to the sounds, light fear or aggression, but some of those steadied themselves and handled the test fine. The range of reactions included panic stricken flight, cowering in a corner, standing completely frozen shivering with fear, aggressive reactions and neutrality. This research is far from over, and more researchers will become involved to interpret the final findings of the studies. For now, it is enough to allow me to illustrate that noise sensitivity is much harder to assess than often thought. And once again the thresholds of when a noise becomes bothersome to a dog is an important factor in the assessment. To determine more than that one has to look at the reactions, and interpret those with great thought and detail. Again oversimplifying a character assessment of the dog does not help us to get a clear picture of who he is.

Stimulation thresholds have to be assessed individually and for every separate assessment category. They represent sub-categories to every trait a dog may exhibit. Many dogs may have identical stimulation thresholds, but their responses could vary a great deal. It is not uncommon that the thresholds are different levels in each category. I will refer to stimulation thresholds probably in every subject still left to discuss which hopefully will help to further illustrate where and how they fit into reading a dog. The conclusions I would like the reader to draw from the discussion of stimulation thresholds is that they require separate examination, that they are only parts of traits, that they should be designated separately, and that they in themselves tell us nothing about the quality of a dog.

One final comment on thresholds. Many can be manipulated through experiences. In other words, training can raise or lower some thresholds of stimulation. The process of raising a stimulus threshold is what we call de-sensitizing. If this process is done correctly, a dog will require a much higher level of stimulation to show a response. Stimulus thresholds are lowered by setting up situations which will pre-dispose the dog to perceive a stimulus at a lower level. While in the beginning it is actually a combination of stimulating factors that trigger a response, if it is done correctly a single low level stimulus may later be enough to trigger a response.

Hardness

Hardness is another term that is used too broadly. Dogs are generalized with this label. But what does hardness mean? Let's have a closer look at it. The Swiss behaviorist Dr. E. Seiferle defined this term the following way. "The ability to take negative influences and experiences such as pain, punishment, defeat in a fight without being affected significantly at the moment

they happen or in the long term.” In this definition, it is very clear, that the dog in question has to perceive the influence he is experiencing as adverse or negative and deal with it without being significantly affected by it.

When a dog is called hard, many interpretations are possible, unless more detailed examinations are done to truly assess a dog's hardness. In my mind, the first logical factor to assess is the dog's stimulus thresholds. For example, one of the influences specifically mentioned in Dr. Seiferle's definition is pain. But as I have already mentioned, dogs' pain thresholds vary a great deal. If a dog has a very high pain threshold, that means it takes a pretty severe physical influence to cause the dog discomfort. But if the dog does not perceive a physical influence as painful, can we really say that he is “taking” pain? I don't think we can. Not perceiving the negative gives us no indication on how the dog would deal with something negative.

I would say that most of the time when someone speaks of a dog's hardness, all we really learn about the dog is his pain threshold and his level of reactivity. What is reactivity? Well, by that I just mean a tendency to show a reaction. It doesn't seem to matter nowadays what kind of reaction a dog shows. A dog that shows any reaction is too often automatically labeled as not as hard as a dog that shows no reaction. Often even positive and strong reactions are interpreted as signs of weakness. While dogs that either are not very reactive and/or have high stimulus thresholds are often called hard.

I guess we could break down hardness into three areas. Pain-hardness, hardness to the helper, and hardness to the handler. These are the main areas where the term hardness is used. I think pain-hardness can simply be called pain threshold. It is in fact the level of physical influence that the dog perceives as uncomfortable or painful. It makes no statement about the dog's character or temperament. Hardness to the helper depends clearly on the dog's threshold for defensive stimuli. A dog that does not feel threatened by the helper should not be called hard. Hardness to the handler depends on how easily a dog is affected by the emotions of the handler. Yes, I did mean to say emotions. Naturally there are overlaps in these three areas. Often dogs link a neutral stimulus like pain to the helper, or the handler in which case the threshold of stimulation relating to helper or handler becomes a factor in how the dog deals with the pain. Think about dogs that can't wear a pinch collar for obedience because they would crumble. Many of those same dogs will pull their owner on a bicycle by a Springer fastened to a pinch collar without blinking an eye. The difference is that there is no handler influence during the bike ride. Another example, dogs who have no problem if their owner slaps them with a soft stick, some even get excited by it. Those dogs if their thresholds for defensive stimuli are low will show extreme reactions (positive or negative) if a helper were to do exactly the same thing.

Another factor that greatly affects a dog's ability to ?endure? something is his drives. I chose the word ?endure? to differentiate it from the word ?take? that Seiferle used in his definition of hardness. For example, a dog may endure a negative influence to satisfy his prey drive,

that is not the same as being able to take the same negative influence in a situation where his prey drive is not activated.

The standardized testing for hardness in Schutzhund trials, in breed suitability tests, and in breed surveys are generally the two stick hits during protection work. This gives us barely a glimpse at the dog and nowhere close to a detailed picture. The things we learn are quite useful, and informative, but I don't think they tell us much about the dog's hardness.

I hope I am not confusing anybody. I no more have a perfect system for assessing hardness in dogs than anyone else does. But a superficial label is not enough, we have to dig deeper. We have to keep the definition of hardness in mind and look at all the details surrounding the situation and keep all observations in their proper perspectives to get as accurate a picture about the dog as possible. This is crucial for making the right training decisions.

Continued in Part 2

Armin Winkler

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Tell Me About Your Dog! – Part 2

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Nerve

Nerve has become a catch phrase for almost everything. Good nerve, bad nerve, weak nerve, strong nerve, thin nerve, thick nerve. Where do these terms come from? And more importantly, what do they mean? The nerve itself is nothing more than a fibrous long cell that transmits impulses from parts of the body to the central nervous system and back again. I don't think anybody is talking about one dog actually having "thinner" nerve cells than another, that would be a bit hard to measure. Webster also refers to nerve as a "boldness or brazenness." And even though that is a bit more useful, it still does not really address the uses of the term. I personally believe that all the talk about nerve came from conversationalizing a behavioral concept that many people using the term are not even familiar with. I will attempt to give a brief description of this concept before talking about a practical assessment of nerve.

The concept I am referring to is one that the behaviorist Ivan P. Pavlov developed to type temperament. He used a system to differentiate between four basic "types" of higher nervous system activity (This where the term nerve came from.) He based his terminology on a concept that leads back to Hippocrates (500 B.C.) where the temperament types were based on four different bodily fluids, namely blood (sanguine type), mucus (phlegm/phlegmatic type), bile (cholera/choleric type), and black bile (melancholic type). That is just to explain where the names came from. Now the breakdown of what the types actually mean.

What does Pavlov mean by "higher nervous system activity?" The two basic types of nervous system processes are arousal (excitement) and inhibition (blocking). Both of these processes are necessary for an animal to adapt to its environment and to learn and perform skills and tasks in order to function. These processes take place in the cerebral cortex of the brain as physiological studies have shown. It is the strength of these processes as well as their balance and speed of mobility between the processes that gave Pavlov the separation criteria for his temperament typing.

Dogs who displayed weakly developed arousal and inhibition processes were categorized as "weak types." The name for this type is the melancholic type. Since these dogs are identified by their weakness of nervous system processes they will never function properly in their environment. Any degree of difficulty when performing a task leads to failure. They generally show passive behavioral tendencies and weak reactions. Avoidance and flight tendencies are pronounced. They appear often inhibited, anxious, and unsure, which are results of this weakness of nervous system processes. They generally have low stimulus thresholds.

“Strong types” are split into three different separate types as well.

First there is the “strong, unbalanced arousable (excitable) type.” This type is referred to as the choleric type. In this type display very strongly developed a rousal (excitement) processes with weakly developed inhibition processes. They often appear unruly and out of control. They have aggressive tendencies, and are very active dogs. Their responses to commands and handsignals that trigger arousal (excitement) processes are very fast. But the accuracy of the performances of tasks is often poor, since inhibition (blocking) processes are weakly developed and arousal processes dominate them. In other words, they do not differentiate as clearly between tasks. The active defensive reaction is pronounced. These dogs appear irascible (easily angered or quick tempered). They have low stimulus thresholds.

Second there is the “strong, balanced, mobile type.” This type is called the sanguine type. The word balanced refers to a balance between strong arousal (excitement) and strong inhibition (blocking) processes. These types perform all tasks very fast and accurately. They rarely make mistakes and learn very quickly. If they have the right attributes for protection work they make excellent service and performance dogs. They generally have medium stimulation thresholds.

Third, there is the “strong, balanced sluggish type.” This type is called the phlegmatic type. They have strongly developed arousal (excitement) processes and strongly developed inhibition (blocking) processes and a good balance between the two. The designation sluggish refers to a slow mobility between the two processes. These dogs are generally described as calm. They work consistently but slowly. They require strong stimulation to stay motivated and require repetition of stimuli. Their performance potential is limited due to the slow mobility. They have high stimulus thresholds.

I hope this gives the reader a bit of an understanding of the basic temperament types that have lead to the term nerve. Naturally there are still differences within each type. Again I would like to stress that the more detailed an assessment is, the better.

Now that we know where the term nerve comes from, we have to examine what we should look at when discussing the nerve of a dog. One big misconception is once again the stimulus thresholds a dog exhibits. A low stimulus threshold does not make a dog weak nerved. But it is likely that such a dog is a more reactive than one with higher stimulation thresholds. But the reactions have to be assessed separately to determine the strength of the dog.

Another misinterpreted trait is the activity level vs. calmness of a dog. Calm and sometimes even passive dogs are often said to have good nerve. And while the calm type still is one of the strong types, they are certainly not the most desirable workers. The passive type is actually more often the weak type than not. To give a little more food for thought on that topic, I'd like to refer to the findings of the behaviorist Krushinsky during the training of “anti-tank dogs” during the war. Anti-tank-dogs were trained to run under tanks with a pack of explosives strapped to their backs and remain there until the explosives could be detonated.

Putting aside the wasteful aspects of this use for dogs, it needs to be said that it was an extremely difficult task for dogs to perform. Aside from the distractions of battle noise, smell, and people everywhere which made it difficult to direct the dogs, they also had to overcome natural fear and inhibition to stay only a few feet away from the steel tracks of the tanks. So it only stands to reason that dogs which were required for this task were dogs who had especially strong nerves. But to quote Krushinsky “it is a mistake to expect to find these dogs among the calm and passive types, instead they were all very highly arousable (excitable) and very active.” This didn’t become apparent however until all the candidates who showed great results in training were also tested for their arousability (excitability) and activity level. They performed tests measuring ease of arousal and physical mobility. The results were very clear, the dogs who performed their tasks in a reliable, fast and precise manner under these extreme demands were all dogs who also displayed very high activity levels and low stimulus excitability.

So all the talk about nerve that I hear in discussions is quite vague and not very descriptive at all. People’s tastes regarding which of the temperament types (or nerve types) they prefer seems to play a large role in which adjective they put in front of the word nerve when it comes to describing a dog. Again, I feel that we need much more detail in our discussions if we want to get a true picture of the dog in question.

Courage

The word courage implies a willingness to face and withstand something that is recognized as potentially dangerous or harmful. I have to agree with Dr. F. Brunner by saying that this is a much too anthropomorphized description to be used when discussing dogs. Another description of courage is also a fearlessness. That comes much closer to being useful in our discussion about dogs. We should probably go even a bit further in the dissection of the word to ensure that misinterpretations are few. Not showing flight behavior is definitely a part of what we are trying to say when we call a dog courageous. I guess a high stimulus threshold for worry causing stimuli may cause the appearance of courage as well. It is a very difficult term to define as a useful dog training term. I would change the term altogether and try to express what we are trying to say with the word courage by giving a quantitative analysis of a dog’s tendency to show avoidance behavior (this may range from none to outright flight). I am again not alone with this idea. My friend Thomas Baumann has developed a similar rating system for his police dog character test. Naturally there are more parts to what we are trying to say with the word courage, but those have more to do with the level of prey drive, and the particular active responses a dog shows in situations. Because when we talk about courage, we expect the dog to do something, and not just not show fear, or not run away. These responses depend more on the active behaviors dogs display during work. More on those later.

Boldness

I feel I have to mention the term boldness after discussing courage. Too often they are used as the same word. When people say courage there is the implication that some struggle or confrontation took place to test this trait. We get the image that the dog did something “in the face of danger.” Boldness is a different trait. I believe that it relates to a dog’s sense of exploration and curiosity. Many dogs in breeds that are simply incapable of doing protection work still display boldness. To borrow from “Star Trek” for a moment, “To boldly go where no one has gone before” sums the trait up fairly well. To describe a dog as bold he has to be inquisitive and be willing to check things out. He may even be unsure about objects and other things in his environment, but the inner desire to see what it is and check it out makes a dog bold. We can use this term without touching on the subject of how a dog may deal with confrontations. It implies a certain level of confidence, but moreso it describes an active sense of curiosity that allows him to explore his environment in a bold fashion and approach anything that peaks his interest.

Energy and Hyperactivity

These terms are kind of my own. I want to briefly describe what I mean by them. During the discussion of nerve I talked about activity levels in dogs. While during that discussion we were talking about specific arousal to stimuli, I’d like to mention here that excitement and arousal can also occur non-specifically. High-energy and hyper dogs often appear as if they have a lot of drive. In those cases I then ask myself, what drive is it? Upon closer examination I find that the dog’s energy is not directed at anything specific. The worst case scenario is a dog who is just hyper. Hyperness is the worst kind of undirected energy imaginable. At seminars I refer to these dogs as having Attention Deficit Disorder, because that is truly how they act. Hyperactive and completely unfocused. With careful manipulation we can harness this undirected energy and give it direction by channeling it into a drive. This will not happen on its own, it is something we have to do as trainers. It is important to recognize that these traits exist. They have to be understood and put into perspective in order to design correct training methodology for a particular dog.

Conclusion

This brings me to the conclusion of part one and two of this article. It was meant to deal with certain general concepts that are important in the assessment process of reading a dog. In part two I will deal with the actual responses to stimuli and drives as the working part of the assessment process. I hope you join me for that one as well.

Continued in Part 3

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Tell Me About Your Dog! – Part 3

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By Armin Winkler

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Continued from Part 2

I believe that reading dogs is one of the most important parts of dog training. In part one of this article I tried to address general qualities in dogs that we hear often when dogs and their training are discussed. I deliberately limited myself to traits that deal with perception and reception of stimuli. In this part I would like to tackle the active side of dogs' characters and talk about the traits that determine how dogs respond. As always my intention is to share ideas and provoke thought.

Directability

I put directability at the beginning of this article because it is an important aspect of a dog's personality when it comes to training for any type of performance, be it sport or service. Two terms are commonly used in the discussion of this trait, they are "biddable" and "tractable." However, I was never really happy with the picture I got in my mind with those terms. Webster defines "biddable" as "ready to do as commanded" or "obedient." To me that describes more what we achieve through training than an inborn trait in the dog. Webster defines "tractable" as "easily managed, taught, or controlled" and as "docile and compliant." This term comes a little closer, but it almost contradicts the picture I have of a high spirited working dog.

The German term that is used to describe what I am talking about is "Führigkeit." Loosely translated it describes a dog that is willing to follow a leader. I like the image I get from this term. And even though some trainers still equate this with a subservient and even submissive attitude, I always chose to translate the term "Führigkeit." as directability.

Directability is truly the willingness to follow the directions of a leader. Think about this for a moment. I am not talking about a dog that works great for food or a toy. I am not talking about a dog who is submissive. I am not talking about a dog who can handle heavy compulsion and learn his lesson that way. I am talking about a dog who has an internal trust that following the direction of the leader must be in his best interest. This is a dog who can be shown what to do. Not a lot of coaxing with rewards is necessary and neither is a lot of force. I guess one way to assess directability is how much or how little coaxing or force was necessary to get a dog to take the direction. (When I am talking about force, I am not describing a correction -soft or -hard dog.)

High-drive dogs that are eager to work and that learn quickly are not necessarily examples of directable dogs. Dogs like that often figure things out quickly on their own in order to satisfy their drive. But there is an attitude that shows, this attitude has a "I know, I know! Let me do

it on my own!” feel to it. A directable dog welcomes guidance from the handler and does not see it as an interference in his quest to satisfy his drive.

The directability of a dog shows in all phases of the work— tracking, obedience, and protection. It is a great trait to work with and gives the trainer a unique opportunity to help his dog. It does not mean the dog is dependent on the handler that he lacks confidence and needs help. It simply means that the dog can be shown what to do, and how, more easily. With this trait, achieving team harmony is much easier. The team spirit flourishes.

One thing I have noticed with directable dogs: they seldom display a lot of dominance behavior (more on that later). Now, that does not mean they are submissive; they simply do not have a strong desire to seek top rank.

Drives

What are drives? Unfortunately, people have forgotten what the term is meant to describe. It shouldn't be used to give a name to every little thing a dog does. Drives are the internal impulses and urges that motivate animals— in this case dogs— to take certain actions. In order for something to be classified as a drive there has to be a drive specific stimulus, drive specific action, and a drive goal. We can manipulate the drives in our dogs during training to suit our purposes and to get them to perform tasks that are the results of these manipulated drives. However, we should never lose sight of the fact that a drive has biological significance for the animal and its species. It is this biological significance that is specific to every drive that gives us a better idea of what we can and cannot achieve by manipulating the drive. Drives can be split into two main categories. The criteria that create the division are the drive goals. One category contains the drives that lead to the gain of something positive or pleasurable; for example: sex drive, prey drive, pack drive (in this case the desire to be with members of the same species). In this category there is a tone of excitement and lust during the drive action and deep satisfaction when the goal is reached. The other category contains the drives that lead to the prevention of something negative or harmful; for example: defense drive, flight drive, the desire to remain unscathed. In this category there is a tone of stress and tension during the drive action and relief when the goal is reached.

Fighting “Drive”

Let me say one thing right off the top that I have stated in previous articles. I do not believe that there is a natural drive to “fight.” I believe that what we refer to as fighting “drive” is a package made up of a number of components which are in turn individual drives, drive-products, and behaviors. How good or strong a dog's fighting “drive” is depends on how many of the components are usable in the dog's training, how strongly the individual components are present in the dog, and how well promoted all usable components are when the dog is being assessed. I will now discuss the major components that I have been able to notice separately. I will wrap up my thoughts on fighting ?drive? at the end.

Prey drive

A lot has been written about prey drive, so I won't re-hash all of that again. Prey drive is part of the food acquisition behaviors of dogs. The stimuli triggering prey drive are erratic, fast evasive movements. The prey drive actions are chasing, pouncing, biting, pulling down, shaking to death, re-biting, and carrying. As I mentioned above, prey drive is a lust oriented drive. This means that all drive specific actions will be performed in a lustful manner. During training this should be kept in mind to ensure that we are in fact working in prey drive. The end goal of the drive is possession of the prey with the intent to eat it (at least from a biological standpoint before human manipulation).

I'd like to make one point here. Prey drive in itself will generally not motivate a dog to bite a human being (I said generally, there are some exceptions). Since prey drive has consumption (or eating) as the end goal of the drive, and canines are not cannibalistic by nature, a properly socialized dog who views humans as his own (even though only adopted) kind will experience very strong inhibitions when it comes to carrying out the follow through drive actions. The fast evasive movement of a human can stimulate prey drive and it can even lead to pursuit and chase. But when it comes to biting, there is a mental block. I will get to why I brought this point up a bit later in the article.

Now, this article is about assessing the traits in dogs. So let's look at the things to consider where prey drive is concerned. Naturally we have to look at the stimulation threshold of the drive. By this I mean how easy or how difficult it is to trigger the drive. Then we should look at the intensity with which the dog carries out the drive actions. How fast the dog pursues and how hard the dog bites, relative to his physical capabilities needs to be looked at. We can assess how strong the dog's prey drive is. In other words, how much difficulty is the dog willing to overcome in order to engage in drive specific activities and to satisfy the drive. And one final assessment category for prey drive is the drive endurance. How quickly does the dog have enough of doing prey drive actions? Or how soon does the drive exhaust? Drive intensity, strength, and endurance even though related can appear in different levels. So a dog with low intensity can have strong and enduring drive, etc..

Defense drive

A lot has also been written about this topic, however, I feel it is an aspect of protection training that is often misinterpreted. Therefore I will spend some time discussing the defense drive. Defense drive definitely falls within the category of aggressive behaviors in dogs. But I think the biological significance of this drive needs to be examined closer in order to get a proper perspective. Defense drive can appear in conjunction with other behaviors and drives, or as self defense. Defense of prey, defense of territory, and defense of a weaker pack member (such as a puppy) are common overlaps during which defensive behaviors will appear. I will address these overlaps a bit more later. For now I want to discuss self defense further.

Self defense behavior does not only belong in the realm of aggressive behaviors. It also falls into the realm of self preservation mechanisms. The trigger stimulus for defense drive is threat or the perception of threat. I'm sure you are familiar with a variety of techniques that are used to threaten dogs for the purposes of protection training. So I don't need to go into too much detail. One thing I want to point out though is that once the dog experiences a threat, he feels a worry or concern that harm may come to him. So the true trigger of defense behavior is the feeling of worry.

The goal of defense drive is always the same, namely making the worry go away. This is achieved when a safe distance is reached between the dog and threatener or when fear is caused in the threatener.

I use the drive specific actions as a way to split dogs' defense behaviors into three divisions. The first major division is between the active defense reaction and the passive defense reaction.

Active defense reaction

The active defense reaction is a very aggressive form of defense behavior. This type of aggression falls in the category of re-active aggression. My description of the active defense reaction is that once the dog gets the trigger stimulus for the defense drive, he uses physical violence as a means to achieve his drive goal. I am deliberately using the term violence here to make a point. Dogs who show this reaction will resort to biting as the first or one of the first responses that their programmed behavioral pattern dictates for this drive. This is my personal line of distinction that I use when I assess dogs. The reaction is strong and powerful and stems from confidence in the dog. Dogs exhibiting this form of defensive reaction will go towards the threat and attack the threat physically. They show a clear "offence is the best defence" mentality.

Passive defense reaction

The passive defense reaction is split into two separate forms to give us our three divisions.

First there is the strong passive defense reaction. This reaction is one that we see in confident and strong dogs. The dog uses threatening displays such as barking, growling and gesturing while confidently standing his ground. The big distinction is that behaviors other than biting appear as the first responses to the trigger stimulus. And because the initial response is not physical, I classify this reaction as passive. Why a passive or non-physical response appears before the biting response can have different causes. One major one is simply the predetermined behavioral response pattern that the dog was born with. Another cause in highly social dogs is that they realize the threatener is human, and the biting response is inhibited, so other forms of defense behaviors are used first. I do not believe that dogs who show this type of reaction are any less tough or strong than dogs showing the active reaction.

Generally dogs who fall into this category of passive defense can be taught to bite in defense quite readily. They will bite when a threat cannot be driven back by other means and continues to advance.

Second there is the weak passive defense reaction. During this reaction we can see the dog using threatening displays such as barking and growling, etc., but he is retreating to maintain a safe distance. How quickly a dog will retreat will vary. These types of dogs are definitely weaker and have less confidence than the two types discussed previously. They will only bite as a last resort when retreat is blocked and the threat continues to advance. This falls into the category of fear biting and is everything but an active response.

Continued on Part 4.

Armin Winkler

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Tell Me About Your Dog! – Part 4

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By Armin Winkler

June 10, 2004

Continued from Part 3

There are a few more points I'd like to mention regarding defense drive. I strongly believe that these three defense drive categories are pre-determined and that this predetermination sets limits to how much we can change through training. Comments like "we need to put more defense into this dog" make me cringe and feel sorry for the dog. All we can do is work with what the dog brings with him. Less mature dogs generally cannot show either of the two strong reactions, so the only defensive reaction that can be elicited from them is the weak passive reaction. The strong reactions rarely appear in dogs before 18 months of age. An important point to remember when training young dogs.

As with all drives, the stimulation threshold is a factor during the assessment process. In this case the threshold is at what point the dog feels concern or worry. This threshold can be raised through deliberate confidence building exercises.

Frustration aggression

The next component of the package we call "fighting drive" is frustration aggression. Frustration aggression is also a form of reactive aggression that is created by depriving the dog in one of the lust oriented drives or at least by preventing their satisfaction. This form of aggression in my opinion serves the purpose of relieving built-up drive energy that has no proper outlet. The most useful drive to create this type of aggression in training is naturally prey drive. But other positive gain motivated drives can also be used. Such as hunger, sex drive, social reunification (or pack-)drive, or simply a high desire to expend physical energy through movement. When the satisfaction of these motivations is blocked, the dog experiences a sense of frustration. This frustration will reach a point where the dog reacts aggressively. Once this stage is reached, the aggression appears in the same form as all forms of aggression. Barking, growling and biting are the actions that are visible.

I made a short point during my discussion of prey drive, that a properly socialized dog will generally not bite a human being in prey drive. However, if the prey drive builds up to a certain level, and no outlet is presented, frustration aggression will set in. And once a dog is in a state of aggression, he will bite a human being.

Good examples of this model are high drive Malinois, who reach an aggressive state very quickly, because of their high drive and the fact that they seem to frustrate easily.

This is a very useful form of aggression, as it presents a much less risky training methodology than, for example, defense drive, yet still adds intensity and seriousness to many dogs.

Social aggression

Social aggression is the only type of aggression that can be categorized as active aggression. Even though the term active aggression is used frequently, it really only applies here. The reason social aggression is called active aggression is because it really does not require any specific action as a trigger stimulus. Social aggression serves two purposes of biological significance. One is ensuring the even distribution of a species across a given territory by repelling equally strong individuals. And the other is to establish and maintain order in social units such as a pack. Social aggression is always directed at the individual's own kind. In the breeds that were created for police and military service, selection took place that expanded the direction of social aggression to also include the dog's adopted kind, humans. As an example of contrast, in the dog fighting breeds, selection took place to ensure that the social aggression would not include humans.

Let me give you a couple of other reasons why I hold this view. In virtually all older texts describing the police service dog breeds a few points were always made. They were that the dogs show mistrust and aggression against strangers and that they are very devoted and loyal with the family and very loving with children. To me this combination of qualities stem from a very strong closed pack oriented social behavior. That means loyalty and devotion to members in the pack and aggression against all outsiders, even those belonging to the same species.

Unfortunately, this form of aggression is not very common in our dogs anymore, because many people find it to be socially unacceptable. Dogs today are supposed to be social and to a certain degree friendly. And while I see nothing wrong with a social dog, I personally also see nothing wrong with a socially aggressive dog. These dogs are not unpredictable menaces to society or vicious animals. They simply have inborn motivations that include this form of aggression. Social aggression is a trainable trait, meaning it can be directed and controlled. Naturally that requires the right handler, so that accidents are prevented.

Socially aggressive dogs have an urge to be aggressive towards strangers. This can be controlled and the dog can be taught to tolerate strangers. However, the dog will not become a social or friendly dog with strangers, no matter what type of training is done. The only way this urge to confront a stranger aggressively when not under control would go away is if the stranger meets the confrontation and social order is established. This happens either if the person can subdue the dog and subordinate him or if the person unequivocally submits to the dog. (At that point the person is no longer a stranger though but an integrated pack member).

The trend in breeding has been to breed dogs who do not have social aggression. And that may be what many people want. The point I would like to make is that social aggression is nothing that should be made out to be something evil. It is a valuable trait in dogs that are in

the right hands. Such dogs do demand a high degree of responsibility and vigilance on the part of the handler. Socially aggressive dogs who are also dominant are difficult to handle and to train and should be in the hands of experts.

Dominance behavior

Dominance behavior falls in the category of social interaction behaviors. It can appear together with social aggression, but it does not have to. It can appear on its own as well. In many ways dominance behavior resembles aggression, but it really is not a form of aggression in itself. Dominance behavior stems from an internal urge to prove superiority and status. In discussion I use the phrase “this dog likes to throw his weight around.” The reason I am making dominance behavior a component of fighting “drive” is that it has an impact on how a dog physically interacts with other individuals and therefore it becomes part of the picture we see.

Dominance behavior includes climbing up on the helper, eye contact, puffing up to impress, and physical dominance through power. Satisfaction seems to occur when the dog gets a sense of power over the helper. This trait is almost always more strongly developed in males than in females.

Dominance behavior can appear on its own or it can overlap with other components. For example, in a dog with a sense of dominance and good prey drive and a personality that frustrates easily we can see that the dog becomes aggressive only if he cannot get a sense of power. This is not the same as social aggression. This type of dog likes to assert his strength while working in prey, the frustration occurs when he cannot express his power over his adversary for the prey. We can also see a dog with a sense of dominance but only capable of the weak passive defense reaction. This type of dog must naturally have a lower threshold for defensive reactions. For him not being able to feel physical power over the helper triggers the sense of worry which in turn triggers the defensive reaction, which in this example would include retreat.

Naturally there are countless examples of different combinations. There is no need to list them all, the point I am trying to make is that dominance is not automatically aggression. It is not an isolated trait, and always occurs in conjunction with another motivation. But it warrants examination on its own. I feel this is important particularly because the re-active forms of aggression can occur without any expression of dominance (Socially aggressive dogs always have some sense of dominance).

Rage

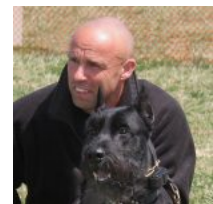
This is the last major component that I want to include in my discussion of fighting “drive.” What is rage? Webster defines rage as “a furious, uncontrolled anger” or “a brief spell of raving fury.” I think that definition gives us a pretty good point to start examining what I am talking about. Rage is a re-active form of aggression. Even though most dogs have some form of rage, only a few dogs have it as a useful trait for training. Rage can be directed, but it is

very difficult to control. It is therefore not a trait that is selected for in breeding for performance dogs. Biologically this trait is if anything a contradiction. It does not seem to have a biological goal. Rage is triggered by mistreatment, pain, and opposition. It can appear as a result of frustration overload. What is unique about rage is that it is extremely forceful and violent and also that it seems to be able to override self preservation instincts. No other form of aggression has that quality. As soon as the negatives become too much and self preservation is threatened dogs will chose other options if they exist in defense, social aggression or frustration aggression. But rage seems to be able to shut out “good sense” even if only for a short period of time. Another unique quality to this form of aggression is that it has a certain vengeful or retaliatory tone to it. Vengeance may be the only goal we can give it. But that is very hard to quantify, and I may be anthropomorphizing a bit here. I am sure that rage differs from the active defense reaction, because I have seen dogs who clearly showed the weak passive defense reaction to all threatening stimuli. But when pain was caused without any further reduction of safety distance, the dogs suddenly became enraged and came forward aggressively without any regard for their welfare. I have seen the term pain aggression used in a similar way. However I feel that is an inadequate description of rage. The Germans use the word “Wut,” which means rage or anger, as part of their protection terminology.

Continued on Part 5

Armin Winkler

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Tell Me About Your Dog! – Part 5

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By Armin Winkler

June 10, 2004

Continued from Part 4

Fighting “Drive,” Conclusion

This brings me to the end of the discussion of fighting ?drive?. The major contributing components I have been able to isolate are the six I just described: prey drive, defense drive, frustration aggression, social aggression, dominance behavior, and rage. All dogs will have these components in some form or another. But we have to draw the line at the point where the components stop being useful. I hope you will agree with me when I say that a dog that everyone describes as having great fighting “drive” will display most if not all of these components in a useful form. I feel that it is important to look at this concept as a package made up of components, and not one drive. The individual components need to be promoted, solidified and manipulated to where a dog can freely switch between all the components he has in order to deal with virtually every situation he may encounter. Only then does a dog have fightin “drive.” We also have to accept that some dogs will have fewer dimensions to their individual fighting “drive” package than others. Knowing which components are workable is very important in chosing the right training approach. I would say that in the good modern day sport dog the package consists of prey drive, defense drive (with the strong passive reaction being the most common), and frustration aggression. Social aggression, dominance behavior and rage are more rare. But when we see a dog that has all six components, we will not forget him soon, because the fighting “drive” that is displayed when those dogs work leaves a lasting impression.

There are few more terms I would like to discuss.

Sharpness

Sharpness is probably the most incorrectly used term in English dog terminology. I may be wrong here, but I thought the word sharpness was a translation of the German term “Schärfe.” But the use of the term sharpness is very much a contradiction of the German term. In every conversation I have, people use sharpness synonymous with spooky or jumpy or nervy. But the word “Schärfe” in German texts is actually defined as being synonymous with aggression. So there certainly is a great discrepancy between the uses of the word.

The type of aggression that is talked about when the term sharpness is used seems to vary depending on the designed use of the dog. For example, in big game hunting dogs and terriers it refers particularly to the intensity and attitude with which these hunting dogs kill their respective prey. It is not prey drive as such; it is the actual killing response that is assessed. I have heard the term “gameness” used in the US in a similar context. For the large

game hunting dogs the word used is “Wildschärfe,” which translates as game sharpness. This assessment is made best when observing how the dog deals with wild boars. Because of the “bringing down” requirement in this type of hunting many of the dogs of these breeds use physical dominance techniques. For terriers the term is “Raubzeugschärfe,” which translates as small predator sharpness. Terriers are used to hunt and kill small predators such as martens, foxes, badgers, etc. It is no easy feat to kill these predators without suffering injury. So a particularly fast and furious shaking technique is very common, as is a chomping bite behavior. These types of sharpness categorize the dog’s prey drive.

Now to the term that we should be most interested in for our service dogs. The term used here is “Mannschärfe,” which translates into man sharpness. The definition of this quality states the following. The quality in the dog that leads him to actively confront any apparent (or feigned) or actual threat from a person in a hostile manner. If I were to use terminology I have already discussed in this article I would say that sharpness could be equated to showing an active defense reaction to a real or perceived threat.

I did a fair bit of research and could not find anything written that stated that this quality has to come together with a low stimulation threshold for threat. So in fact how easily a dog is triggered does not seem to be a factor by definition. But to be fair, when I was growing up, the dogs we called sharp were the ones that would become very aggressive without much provocation. One thing that I never thought of when I used the term sharp was spooking away. In the old East German Koerung system, sharpness was rated from 0-5 with 5 being the most desirable. So when did sharpness become a bad thing? I don’t know. I don’t think it is a bad thing.

Flight Drive

Flight drive is part of the self preservation mechanism of animals. All animals have this in them somewhere. In some cases flight drive is described as just a very strong form of avoidance behavior. I don’t think that is a wrong way of putting it, but I don’t believe it is totally accurate either. Flight drive is more than just staying clear of a threat, it is actually turning around and running away. I generally use the term flight tendency when I discuss this trait. I have seen weak dogs who do not have a high flight tendency. But I have also seen fairly strong dogs who still have in them a tendency to bolt away when the right trigger is hit. I think for us to get a clear picture of a dog we should make an assessment of the flight drive or flight tendency in a dog, so it can be weighed against the other traits the dog possesses. The trigger stimulus for flight is fear.

Defense Drive Overlaps

Defense of prey

This trait is often referred to as guardiness or possessiveness. This is naturally an overlap of prey drive and defense drive. The trigger stimulus is a sense of worry over losing prey. This has proven to be a very useful trait during protection work. Guardiness is to some degree inborn, but it can be created to some degree through training, it most certainly can be promoted. It is a good way to add the intensity that defense drive brings with it without having to threaten the dog himself. As with all defense work, avoidance or retreat is a possibility, so caution has to be taken here also to ensure the work is done correctly.

Dogs seem to have different levels of guardiness depending on the prey object. In some it is limited to actual food related items like bones, etc., in some toys are the focus of their possessiveness, and in others only protection equipment seems to be worthy of defending and only against strangers. I feel it is a worthwhile trait to assess because it gives us additional training options.

Defense of territory

Territorial aggression as it is sometimes called can be one of two things. It can be an actual defense of the territory the dog considers his, like a yard, or even a car. This kind of aggression is a type of defense reaction where the worry is over the potential loss of territory. And this worry leads to a defensive reaction. Dogs who display this overlap don't act like they are personally threatened, for them the dispute is over territory.

Or dogs may sometimes appear to be territorially aggressive, but in fact aren't. This can happen in dogs who actually feel personally threatened, but only feel secure enough on home turf where they feel protected to show a defensive response. While anywhere else the dog would retreat or be avoidant and submissive. For these dogs I would call it a self defense reaction.

Mistrust

I am putting mistrust as part of the defensive drive points. The reason for this is that aside from socially aggressive dogs, we can also have mistrusting active defensive dogs who appear to be almost the same thing. Naturally, the other forms of defensive reactions occur as well, since they are triggered by the same stimulus. But only the active defensive dogs will appear like a socially aggressive dog. To a certain degree this form of re-active aggression does fall under the aspects of social behaviors. Mistrust of strangers is what will lead to the worry that may trigger the defensive response in the dog, no matter what the response may be. The difference between this and social aggression is the following: the socially aggressive dog, as I see it, is not really in defense drive. He treats strangers with aggression, period. I'm sure trust plays a role here but is not a deciding factor. As I mentioned under social aggression, the aggressive response does not stop (if left uncontrolled) until integration occurs. But a mistrusting defensive dog will stop reacting defensive towards the person as soon as the threat of mistrust is neutralized. Once this is done such dogs can be social towards people they would have met with aggression before.

Play drive

I will end this article with a discussion on play drive. What is play drive? Does such a drive exist? I believe it does exist and it is a drive in itself. Now, it also has a certain componential nature, but because I believe it has pretty much a singular biological function I think it is a drive in itself. I believe that play drive is nature's school. The drive to play ensures that young animals practice adult behaviors in a non-risky way. How good a dog's play drive is I think depends a little bit on how many dimensions there are to his play. Dogs practice prey drive by stalking and chasing each other and other moving objects. They practice defense drive overlap behaviors by guarding objects, food, and small sections of territory, they practice dominance through wrestling matches. The desire to compete is a way to practice the survival of the fittest principle of nature. It is this competitive spirit that leads puppies to race each other and play tug of war. Sometimes a puppy won't show any interest in an object or running, until he can measure himself against another. We can capture a part of this competitive spirit and make it part of protection training. I think that it is this competitive spirit of play drive that leads people to link play drive with fighting "drive." I believe that play drive is linked to fighting "drive" on two levels. On one hand the competitive spirit allows dogs to develop the urge to measure themselves against human competitors as well. It is not serious enough to warrant the term fighting however. On the other hand I believe the more extensively a dog plays the more dimensions he will later have to his fighting "drive," since nature's way of practicing techniques allows a bit of a glimpse into what will be. So play drive lets the dog practice the components of fighting "drive" on his own. That is why dogs who have an extensive play drive can develop a well rounded fighting "drive" even if the training people do with him is fairly one or two dimensional. Such dogs are able to develop the other components to some degree on their own. Still, the seriousness we want to see in the adult dog's fighting "drive" needs more work than what play drive will do for the dog.

Another point to make about play drive: since our dogs are infantized wolves, we can preserve certain pieces of play drive long into adult life and even for the entire life of the dog. The desire to play is a lust-oriented drive in the dog. And by keeping this alive we give ourselves yet another drive to work our dog in to make training even more fun and successful.

Conclusion

This article was difficult to write, but it was a lot of fun too. It gave me an opportunity to browse through many books on my shelves that sometimes just sit there. It gave me a refreshed interest in talking about dogs and delving into their minds. I had a hard time putting some of these thoughts into words so that they wouldn't be misunderstood. But in the end my goal is to get people to think about their dogs and talk about them and learn more about them. And I think I accomplished that. Thank you as always for reading my thoughts.

END

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