

GENTLE WHEN STROKED

Temperament is a fascinating study and merits at least a book of its own. Temperament is such a complex subject, any treatment of it must be full of modifiers and involve heavy use of words like usually in most cases, sometimes, often, etc. but there is one basic fact of which a lifetime of interest in animals has convinced me: temperament is determined by heredity. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say temperament potential is determined by heredity since, of course, environment plays a large part in the extent to which Temperament potential is realized. But a shy dog is born shy. A confident dog is born confident.

Handling and training can modify behavior. A dead-shy dog can, by skillful handling, be made over into what appears to be a confident, well adjusted animal. But the basic shyness remains and is usually visible to any skilled observer. More importantly, if the dog is subjected to sudden pressure the veneer that careful training has applied will crack and the dog will react with flight or attack.

The stable, confident dog can survive almost unscathed the most stressful and destructive environment and, coming in to the right hands as an adult, can come close to his full original potential.

I think the outstanding characteristic of a dog with good temperament is optimism. Every puppy learns the hard way that the world has its pitfalls – the vet sticks him with needles; when he runs he crashes into things that don't yield; older dogs put him in his place; he is not allowed to do perfectly normal things like relieve himself on the rug. The confident puppy's attitude is always "that's alright, the next thing will be better." As he matures his reactions to new situations are appraisal, investigation, and acceptance. He is above all predictable and consistent.

But we also unhappily have the aggressive puppy who reacts to new situations by snarling or snapping and the shy puppy who fears anything unfamiliar. Puppies born aggressive are rare: puppies born shy who learn aggression are much more common. More common still is the puppy born shy that remains shy and fearful all his life.

There is no necessary relation between shyness and intelligence. If there is any relation at all it seems to be an inverse one. Many shy puppies and dogs are highly intelligent, and are ideal companions on their home ground. They are practically sensitive and loving, perhaps partly because the world outside is a threatening place and they need the reassurance of attention and affection from their owners, and partly because their fear makes their world a narrow one and so focuses their attention entirely on the people in that world. The owners of a shy dog often say: 'But he doesn't act that way at home.' No, he doesn't, and he never will unless and until something at home is new and threatening.

We have Wolfhounds because we love and enjoy them. Of course, we want to improve our breed physically, but to what avail do we improve toplines or shoulder angulation, or coat, or any physical characteristic, at the expense of temperament?

A sound, beautiful, physically healthy Wolfhound with a bad temperament experiences very little pleasure in life, can give very little pleasure to his owner and can do nothing but damage the breed. And I submit that we, as breeders, have a duty to make the primary objective of our breeding the preservation of the temperament which is the Irish Wolfhound's greatest asset.

By Kelly Fox, past president of the Irish Wolfhound Club of America,
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