



HARD TO TRAIN?

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A look at “difficult-to-train” breeds and the reality of what shapes these canine minds.

By Suzanne Clothier

Imagine two balloons hanging over your dog's head. One balloon asks "Why?" as in, "Why should I heel/stay/come/retrieve/jump?" The other asks "Why not?" As in, "Why not chew the shoe, walk over here, eat your sandwich?"

I believe that these two questions (along with the answers received) constitute the primary inquiries that shape a dog's relationship with his humans. To the extent that we are able to provide satisfactory answers to those simple questions, an extraordinary amount of information can be communicated between ourselves and our dogs. But there is, inevitably, a catch. The answers that we think are satisfactory may fail to satisfy the dog. And being a dog, he turns away from us and gets on with his life while we fumble for more appropriate responses.

In a deliciously ironic twist, our deliberate selection for certain behavioral traits in purebred dogs has led to the development of breeds who, more strenuously than others, insist on interesting, well thought out answers to the two primary life questions. For example, a Border Collie might ask "Why?" and be perfectly satisfied with an answer of "Because I told you to." Driven by a nearly insatiable desire to do anything - even busy work - a Border Collie questions no further. On the other hand, a Siberian Husky receiving such an answer might simply cock his head and gaze at his handler with barely contained amusement. (Every Siberian worth his salt knows that "Because I told you to" is not an acceptable answer.) And the dialogue begins.

Handler: You should do this because you love me.

Siberian (truthfully): Love is a feeling, not a reason.

Handler (a bit pompous): It is important that you do this.

Siberian (with great wisdom): Humans give importance to the wrong things.

Handler (growing angry): If you don't do this, I'll punish you.

Siberian (with dignity): Then I may have no choice but to comply. But I can choose not to trust or like you.

Handler (calmer, trying another approach): I'll make it fun for you.

Siberian (interested): How much fun?

Handler: So much fun that you'll beg for more!

Siberian: On that basis, I'll try it. But remember, I'm easily bored. This better be good.

Now, if the handler was trying to get this Siberian to run, the dialogue would be much different:

Handler: I want you to run like the wind.

Siberian: I'm already gone!

At one of my seminars, a handler presented her dog with this complaint: "She just won't stop sniffing the ground while we're heeling, and I'm tired of being embarrassed in the obedience ring. I just don't understand why she does

this. What can I do to stop her from sniffing?" Looking down at her dog, I had a hard time not laughing. It was a Bloodhound, behaving precisely as generations of selective breeding insisted that she behave. When I asked why she was so determined to put advanced obedience titles on this dog, the handler responded, "Well, very few Bloodhounds do well in obedience. So, I'm going to do it with this dog."

Technically speaking, all of the obedience exercises were within the dog's physical and mental abilities. The trick, of course, was in the training approach. Whatever the approach being used, it obviously failed to answer the dog's very legitimate question of "Why?" (Or, perhaps more accurately in this case, "Why not sniff?") And until the handler came up with a better answer, the dog was going to continue doing what she enjoyed doing - sniffing the ground.

Here's a basic formula for one cause of training problems:

The greater the distance X is from Z,
the more you will have to explain Y.

X= Desired behavior

Z= Genetically programmed behavior

Y= WHY?

In other words, it's not difficult to get a retriever to retrieve, a herding dog to herd or a Siberian to run. But you better have some pretty good answers when you send a Mastiff or a Greyhound out to retrieve a duck in icy waters.

There are three basic qualities that make a dog "easy to train":

1. Intelligence (which I define as the dog's awareness of and curiosity about his world)
2. Willingness (the dog's desire to interact socially with other beings), and
3. Confidence (physically, emotionally and intellectually).

Now, to be sure, a good many of the "difficult to train" breeds possess these qualities in generous measure. Add in the considerable athletic ability of many "difficult to train" breeds, and you have, in theory, a dog who can learn to do almost anything. Of course, the less a dog possesses of these three basic qualities, the more difficult it becomes to adequately answer "Why?" and "Why not?" The dull witted, shy/timid or highly independent dog simply may not care much about your answers!

There are three other qualities which impact training:

1. Sense of humor (what dogs find tremendously funny is not always what tickles the human on the other end of the lead)
2. Boredom threshold (often much lower than humans imagine)
3. Selectively bred behaviors (which are not always in

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alignment with human behaviors or in keeping with our training goals - thus the Bloodhound in the obedience ring!)

Each breed is a unique blend of these six characteristics in varying proportions. The "easy" breeds are characterized by high boredom thresholds - they are willing to repeat even relatively meaningless tasks for long periods - and a range of selectively bred behaviors which are either very broad or particularly well suited to the various tasks of obedience or agility ring. The "tough" breeds are characterized by low boredom thresholds and a fairly narrow spectrum of selectively bred behaviors. Handlers who are successful with "tough" breeds are creative handlers who are willing and able to make training fun, interesting and relevant to the dog. They can answer "Why?" and "Why not?" with great clarity, humor and respect for what makes that breed unique.

As with any breed, successful training of the "difficult" breeds begins with a relationship of mutual trust and affection. There is also a degree of intimacy involved - you must know the dog for who he is. Not what you hope he will become, but who he is at any given moment in your journey together. What amuses him? Does he like exuberant praise or games or treats? What does he consider a reward? What worries him? Delights him? How does he learn - in intuitive leaps, or seamless progression or in small chunks that are struggles to master? Whether Siberian or Schnauzer, there is no single recipe for training success except this: intimate knowledge of the individual dog and of yourself.

In our pack of 7 dogs, we have 7 vastly different minds. For example, my husband's Golden, Molson, is willing to work hard, even if the handler's mind is not totally on the training process. But teaching her new tricks is difficult. She believes, for reasons we cannot fathom, that each successfully mastered step is the whole trick, and is momentarily frustrated when we ask for a bit more, like a slightly higher or longer wave of her paw. So, we train slowly, in small chunks, and often intersperse her old tricks to offer her some relief - "This I know how to do!" Food is a powerful motivator for this dog.

In contrast, Grizzly, our youngest German Shepherd makes intuitive leaps, is highly creative and often generalizes his knowledge to fit new situations. He is not easily frustrated but he requires that we are as enthusiastic and focused as he is. Half hearted training gets half hearted responses from Grizzly. While motivated by food, he loves to retrieve and roughhouse, so games with toys and sessions of tag are powerful rewards for him.

In a world of trainers who often prefer dogs who don't ask many questions, dogs who bend easily to the control and demands of rather arbitrary rules and regulations, there are far too many breeds who have a reputation of being stubborn, tough to train, willful. What this often means is that this "difficult dog" is an intelligent dog who asks too many questions for the average trainer. Such a canine mind is not automatically compliant, and comes equipped with its own view of the world and its own definitions of what constitutes meaningful, enjoyable activities. This is not to say these dogs are not willing - one of the great charms of these breeds is their keen interest in life and in people. If given the right answers to "Why?" and "Why not?" many of these dogs can be not just agreeable but downright brilliant in the execution of a task.

There are breeds who "carry" their handlers, politely ignoring human failings while carrying out the assigned task with style. By and large, the "difficult breed" dog comes just half way, standing his ground in confidence, with a glint of humor in his eye, waiting for the handler to match him stride for stride. Seeking precision? Then you, these dogs often insist, must also be precise. Fun on your terms? Then you must also learn to have fun on the dog's terms. Is it enthusiasm you seek? Then you must not only find a way to make learning and performing enjoyable, and you must also give yourself 100% to the task - the "tough to train" dog works well in a team, but he will only pull his share of the load.

(With thanks to Bonnie Blair for pointing out that dogs also ask "Why not?")