

Breed Profiling – Prejudice in the Canine World

Most civilized people believe that prejudice, bigotry and racial profiling are intolerable. Then why is it acceptable in the dog world?

Many trainers, kennel clubs, large organizations, behaviorists and behaviour specialists continue to teach and preach breed profiling. I believe this to be discrimination and downright perilous for dogs, handlers, and non dog owners alike. Dogs are dogs, plain and simple – forget the breed because in the end, their brains work the same. Like us, what makes them tick is universal.

It's true that each breed has certain characteristics, like herding, guarding, or retrieving - but to state for example that Rottweilers have a greater propensity towards aggression or that Pit Bulls are more dangerous than other dogs is preposterous and totally misinformed. All dogs are capable of aggression – in fact it's part of their communication. All dogs are capable of a dangerous bite if the circumstances call for it – it's part of who they are. Any way you slice it or justify it, a breed ban is segregation.

Dogs quite simply become what humans create and shape. In fact, a very important concept for handlers to realize is that we're shaping and reshaping our dogs every day. Humans are notorious for categorizing things into neat little boxes. When dealing with canines, handlers must think outside the box because each dog has a unique personality. However, they all learn, think and reason the same way – through a cause and effect brain. So if a Boxer is a bully, that's what it's learned. If a Jack Russell is a biter, that's what it's learned.

In order for a dog to be well rounded, regardless of its breed or combination of breeds, it all comes down to four basic pillars: Breeding, Training, Socialization and Meeting Basic Needs.

Breeding in North America and to a certain extent worldwide is in my opinion, out of control. The proliferation of puppy mills, farm breeders, and backyard breeders is evident by simply visiting your local SPCA or surfing rescues groups and classified ads on various Internet community sites. No real regulations are in place and penalties and repercussions are virtually non existent for those who operate irresponsibly and inhumanely. A lack of regulations, inbreeding practices and over breeding bloodlines, which has been proven to cause psychological and physiological issues in canines continues to occur and in fact has become the norm with many breeders. Some registered breeders can be just as damaging to the industry; it's simply a numbers game that involves pumping out and selling as many puppies as possible without regard for the home they're going to or their overall temperament. I don't want to paint all breeders as irresponsible because that's not true. It has however been my experience through years of consultations that many are generally misinformed about canine psychology and thusly operate their business and interact with their dogs in a manner that is damaging to the dogs' temperaments.

Look for breeders that allow you to meet the parents. Make sure the parents are healthy, well adjusted and happy. If the father is off site, ask to meet him. If one or both parents are fearful or aggressive, there's a good chance it'll be passed on to the puppies. Look for breeders who socialize their puppies outside of the litter as well as with other humans outside of their family. Make unannounced visits to the breeder, ask them questions about their training philosophies and watch how they interact with their own dogs. If they talk about dominance, pack leadership or alpha dog schools of thought, chances are they're employing corrections, fear and intimidation with the dogs.

The demand for breeders whether registered or otherwise is rampant because we the general public feed it. I'm a firm believer that potential new dog guardians should rescue a dog – both of my girls are rescues and are absolutely amazing! The Mystery Mutt is very Darwinian in that all the best characteristics of each breed rises to the top creating a truly remarkable and distinctive dog.

Even with a growing movement toward positive training, many self taught and formerly taught trainers continue to employ dominance based training techniques. Dominance techniques only create avoidance behaviours and reinforce the very behaviour you're trying to extinguish – any psychologist worth a pound of salt can attest to that. Unfortunately, it's the dogs that pay for this type of training by living a daily existence in a state of flux shrouded in anxiety. How would you like to live every day of your life paranoid, in angst and constantly fearing reprimands for every wrong move or decision you made? You shouldn't wish that on your worst enemy and that's certainly no way for any creature to exist.

Let's for a minute pretend that positive training and dominance based training both work equally well for teaching behaviours without compromising the dog's temperament. It really boils down to a straightforward question: How would you rather treat your dog? Just ask yourself how you would rather be treated? Would you rather be rewarded for your successful choices or punished for your incorrect ones?

Socialization is probably one of the most paramount factors for a well adjusted dog. However, many people think that socialization is complete after puppyhood. Socialization skills are communication skills and in order for skills to stay sharp, they must be practiced and honed throughout all canine developmental stages as well as into adulthood and maturity. Think about it: if you sequestered yourself in a cave on a mountain with no human contact for the next year, your social skills would deteriorate to the point where interactions with other humans would be awkward and may even cause you to fear some people and/or be aggressive towards others. Why would we think a dog is any different?

Much like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for humans, canines also have a hierarchy of needs and when those needs are met, they can achieve doggy Zen. Dogs require all the basics like a healthy diet, water, safety, and shelter. They also require daily exercise, mental stimulation, positive leadership, and to be around positive handlers as well as their own kind - other well socialized dogs. Dogs that are deprived of one or all of their basic needs end up exhibiting stress, anxiety, and unwanted behaviours.

As dog trainers and dog guardians, we have to stop making excuses for our dogs' temperament and behaviours because they're a certain breed. If you drill down and problem solve, you'll find that a particular behaviour is occurring because:

- a) Its been repetitiously reinforced
- b) The dog's basic needs aren't being met
- c) Both a & b

A dog is a dog – four legs, a wet nose, and a tail - with a cause and effect brain directing the whole show! Embrace your dog for its uniqueness and troubleshoot issues instead of making excuses for them by breed profiling.

Happy shaping.

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