

PROTECTIVENESS???

by Jeanne A. Cook

Why are temperament problems so often interpreted as "protectiveness"?

I have heard some Mastiff breeders proclaim, quite proudly, "This 6 month old pup is so protective, he growls at everything". I have had people in my all-breed obedience classes think that their 5 month old puppy is growling at people because the puppy is "protecting" them, when the owner's welfare is one of the farthest things from that puppy's mind at that age. These people continue to encourage (overtly and/or covertly) the pup's growling, nasty behavior, etc. as the dog grows, delighting in the idea of how "protective" he is. They avoid any kind of socialization because they want a "protective" dog. That is not protective, and very often the growling stems from shyness.

There is one breed (not a Mastiff) that I see very often in my classes (which for purposes of this article I'll call the "XYZ" breed). This "XYZ" breed has a tremendous temperament problem. 95% of the "XYZ" dogs I see are absolutely bonkers and dangerous. Yet, owners say "Well, yeah, I noticed that behavior too, but the breeder says that's how they are. The parents are like that too", or "But they are a protective breed, so they act like that", or "they are supposed to be aloof". They dismiss the dog's behavior with these reassurances as if that makes it all right. Sadly enough, the problems are compounded because they breed their bitch with temperament problems to a like male (because they want "protective" puppies). Thus, it continues, generation after generation.

At matches and shows I have seen people who almost "glow" when their dog is barking and/or lunging on the leash at people simply walking by. They seem proud that the dog is so hard to hold. They really seem to be caught up in the "macho dog" scene. But wait a minute -- why does he need to be so macho in a match situation (scaring sweet old ladies and children)? Odds are, you probably won't be knifed at a fun match. If the owner does not correct him, he is condoning that kind of behavior, and he is giving the dog confusing signals. (And by "correcting", I don't mean holding him around the neck with your hands and whispering a wishy-washy "no, don't do that".) I have actually had people say, "She sure isn't acting very protective", just because my dog is wagging her tail and enjoying affection from strangers when they approach us at a show. Why shouldn't she? I've never been attacked at a show, so why should she be apprehensive? But someone at the door late at night is a different situation, and she's a different dog. Dogs learn by what is usual, the norm.

A truly protective dog can and MUST have a confident, stable personality. He should also be somewhat outgoing and encouraged to meet strangers, etc. as this shows him what the "good" people, situations, etc. are like, as opposed to someone who intends harm. At the risk of being stoned at the next specialty, one of the best true protection dogs I've had was Grizzly, a black lab. He was friendly and very outgoing to strangers, but proved his protective nature for my family when occasions arose. One time Grizzly (13 mos.) had played all evening with Dave, a friend of ours who was spending the night with us to play golf in the morning. Grizzly just loved the guy. Later, Dave went downstairs to sleep, and my husband and I went to our room. Around 4:00 a.m. Dave came up the stairs to get my husband up, and Grizzly wouldn't allow him past the kitchen. With teeth and growling, he held him at bay until we got up. Compare the 2 different situations and you'll understand why Grizzly adored Dave and played with him all evening, then met him with the teeth later. The norm was: non-family didn't roam around the house when we were asleep.

We sometimes talk about a Mastiff having problems because he was "traumatized". Things that would "traumatize" a lot of Mastiffs fairly "rolled off" Grizzly's back. Nothing phased his basic disposition. In Schutzhund practice, an agitator would run up to Grizzly and I, yelling and shaking a stick, and Grizzly reacted to the aggressive situation with the best of them. What could be more traumatizing to a dog? Yet, 2 minutes later, when the agitator strolled up to us with a friendly attitude, holding out his hand, minus the stick, Grizzly fairly loved the man.

By now, you might be thinking "so why don't you go back to your Labradors? A Mastiff is not a Labrador." WRONG. A dog with temperament problems is a dog with temperament problems regardless of the breed. What I am saying is: Mastiff breeders should not so easily accept the fact that even Mastiffs with pretty decent personalities are far too fragile, too easily traumatized. Our Mastiffs have a majestic heritage, and there is nothing majestic about a shy dog trembling with fear or snarling with aggression. We must strive to breed a mentally sound dog above all else. What good are championships, type, size, head, etc. if the dog is mentally unstable? REMEMBER, HE IS OUR GENTLE GIANT.