

The Importance of **DOMINANCE TRAINING**

What makes dominance training so important? There are several answers to this question and most of them are very simple. But before we explore the principles of dominance training, it is important to understand that dogs are pack animals. From the time puppies are whelped a pecking order begins within the litter. Some pups will be recognized as more dominant alpha and others will fall into a more passive beta category. It is also important to understand that these puppies are constantly challenging their order in the pack. A dog will continue this behavior throughout its lifetime.

Breeders will study the puppies' temperaments to help future owners decide which dog will be the best for their training regi-

men. Some buyers will prefer to take a beta puppy and others will prefer an alpha pup. Therefore, it is important to evaluate how we believe ourselves to act as trainers before making this decision. Never neglect an honest breeder's advice about taking home a puppy that the breeder thinks may be wrong for you.

Now that we are taking home our new puppy, it is time show pup where he stands in his new pack's hierarchy. Believe it or not, our dogs perceive us as part of their pack. For the most part, dominance training is very simple, but it takes a strong will to get past some of the initial stages.

First, it is important to understand that we want to build a loving trust between ourselves and our new companion. We are not try-

PHOTO SUBMITTED BY SCOTT SHIREY — CARLISLE, PA



“A 70-pound gun dog that has had a successful foundation of dominance training will be much easier to handle in demanding situations with little or no conflict.”

ing to hurt pup or cause him any harm. Our goal is to teach pup that we are the alpha, or the pack leader, and any challenge to this will result in correction. But with a strong foundation of dominance training, challenges will be few and far between. Remember this little ball of fur will become a very strong puppy in just a few months, and within the next several months a powerful dog that can be very difficult or impossible to handle. This is why it is important for us to establish “rank” over our dogs while they are still small and their minds are still blank slates waiting to be filled with information.

With this in mind, let’s look at some basic techniques of dominance training. First, while the pup is small you should cradle him in your arms, so he is lying on his back. Sounds uncomplicated, and it is. You have taken pup’s paws from the ground and away from his element. Second, place your forefinger and middle finger into pup’s mouth. Place your ring finger on top of his muzzle and your thumb underneath his chin to keep him from pushing your fingers out and biting too much. Use your opposite hand to control the scruff on the back of his neck; this will help to subdue him. (Tip: By using a tug on the back of the scruff of your dog’s neck,

the implication will be a hardwired instinct for him to surrender.)

Be prepared for a struggle. As a matter of fact, it is very important that you approach this training session with a calm attitude, and the knowledge that it is not going to be neither as easy nor as fun as you would like. Expect a series of groans, cries, a lot of kicking and an out and out temper tantrum. Pup is not being hurt by any of this, so don’t give in. Our goal here is to reach a point where pup allows us to place our fingers in his mouth and does not try to push them out. We decide when to remove our hands. Pro trainer George Hickox says, “This is not a democracy, it is not a case of whether he doesn’t want my fingers there - it is that I want them there; I am in control.” After a few sessions pup learns that when he complies there is no struggle, and you can release your grasp. Fighting gets him nowhere, except a longer bout with your hand in his mouth. Soon you will be able to place your hand in pup’s mouth and handle him with a gentle ease.

A second form of dominance training is to roll the pup onto her back and place your hand on her chest and lean over her. Your pup will soon understand your body language and that you want her to submit. But you never want to reach a point where your

PHOTO SUBMITTED BY DUANE STAHL — FREEMAN, SD



dog becomes afraid of you; or cringe when you reach out to pet her or put on her collar and leash. We are not trying to act like harsh bullies; we are establishing ground rules for leadership in a way that dogs think. Dominance training is based on principles from normal pack behavior, and as I mentioned before we are part of our dog's pack. It is important for us to build a solid foundation from this for our future training regiments and life with our four-legged companions.

So why go through all of these mental games? Why is it important for my dog to think that I am the alpha? It is important to establish these ground rules for future training. We will later need to pick our dogs up and steady them on point. We will need to make our dogs sit steady in a canoe or lay down in a blind. Many of us will decide to put our dogs through the rigors of force fetch training. And all gun dog owners will have to perform some type of first aid and grooming throughout a dog's life. All of these activities will involve handling our dogs and keeping them under our physical control and mental will. A 70-pound gun dog that has had a successful foundation of dominance training will be much easier to handle in demanding situations with little or no conflict. Remember, when training a puppy: Take baby steps, not giant leaps. Patience is a virtue that will help form the solid foundation necessary for each step of a training process.