

This article was originally published in THE AGGRESSION NEWSLETTER in 2001. Although it was written with the Doberman Pinscher in mind, the fact is that all working dogs including the German Shepherd may be subject to these tests when they find themselves in the world of shelters and some rescue groups. Those who claim to love dogs may unquestioningly accept the paint-by-numbers temperament test as a fair assessment tool for pets, but we need to see it as a dangerous step down the primrose path toward the homogenization of dog breeds. At a time when misinformation and the lowered standards of pet dog training threaten our right to practice our sport and even to own some of the breeds we enjoy, we should take a critical look at any institutional push toward the “dumbing down” of dogs and dog ownership. This begins with an understanding and respect for the behavioral heritage of the breeds we love.

DEAD DOGS WALKING

The importance of breed subjectivity when assessing temperament.

Julia V. McDonough

Cancelled insurance policies, BSL, negative public sentiment about certain types of dogs, dog sports and training methods...there seems to be an ideological war on common sense regarding canine issues these days. But while it is easy to point the finger at the usual suspects of the media, politicians and John Q. Public, we must also be aware of a more insidious element in the formation of public opinion about dogs. This element is the influence of the widely accepted belief that all dogs are exactly the same and should be held to exactly the same standards when it comes to issues of temperament and behavior. This homogenizing effort is best exemplified in the popular temperament tests designed for dogs in shelters and pounds which are now used by some groups and individuals who deal with the rescue of working breeds.

Rescued or Railroaded?

For practically every recognized pure breed of dog there is a "rescue" organization. Whether it is a single person taking in one or two dogs at a time or a large scale shelter facility with paid staff and officers, a rescue group exists to help the dogs which fall through the cracks. Among the services it provides to its breed of choice are veterinary

care, temporary or "foster" housing, and quite often, some sort of obedience or manners training. Because the majority of rescue efforts are charitable organizations which rely on memberships and donations to support themselves, they are by necessity limited in the number of dogs which they can accommodate. Deciding which dogs are good candidates for adoption by the general public and which dogs should be euthanized can be an arbitrary and emotional decision without some sort of guideline. The temperament tests so widely embraced today were designed to alleviate the haphazard nature of that process. This in itself is commendable in theory. In practice, however, it has caused much confusion, and in my opinion, some harm.

Those of us involved in a breed with negative publicity are quite often on the defense about our dogs' undeserved reputation. In our zeal to answer the old wives' tales we can sometimes err too far in the other direction. Many owners of Doberman Pinschers are quick to point out that their breed is comprised of lovable couch potatoes who are afraid to get their feet wet, family dogs who welcome the relentless attention of a toddler, etc. I have actually heard a person involved in Doberman rescue agree that the ideal Dobe is a "Lab with a stub tail". While realists and those with some respect for our dogs' working heritage will always speak out for common sense, the "couch potato" folks are now being encouraged in their "one size fits all" mentality about temperament via the evaluation process which is being used in some form by many rescue groups today. There are many variations of the temperament evaluation ranging from an extremely structured and well-thought out booklet to the rather arbitrary "in-house" forms which ask the evaluator questions such as "Is this a dog you'd like to own?". Even within our own close-knit group of rescuers where I train, there are many dogs I wouldn't choose as pets but which are perfect companions for some of my colleagues, who have different standards than my own. Likewise, my favorite dogs tend to wear out the patience of many of my friends at our shelter. Should any of these dogs be passed over because one man's "hyper" is another man's "drive"?

Diagnosis or dumbing down?

Based on the belief that the average person who adopts a dog from a shelter is not a dog trainer, and is, in fact, the "lowest common denominator" of potential dog owner, these evaluations are meant to weed out all but the least complicated dogs. They are also

used to reliably predict behavior in the adoptive home. In a general shelter and with the most popular "family pet" breeds it is an excellent tool and has helped many adopters end up with a good, sociable, easy-going dog. Also, included in the most popular booklet for shelter professionals many of the accompanying ideas about behaviorally maintaining the dogs in the stressful shelter atmosphere are outstanding and should be followed by anyone directing a rescue organization which kennels its dogs.

However, breed subjectivity is hardly given a nod, and what might pass for unusual "aggression" in a Golden Retriever seems also to be considered a capital offense in a Doberman or Chow. The test is generally administered in a single sitting, and in the tests I've examined, any failure of a particular exercise is cause to stop the test in its tracks. The term "aggression" is bandied about very freely, with all of its trendy prefixes: "barrier aggression", "fear aggression", "gender-specific aggression", "wheel aggression", and "toy aggression", to name a few. Among various instructions to the evaluator is the administration of a 15-second "hug test", to stroke the dog while he is eating and to attempt to remove a high value object such as a pig ear or rawhide bone from the dog. Responses to various scenarios in the tests are meant to be predictions of future problems, although some of the connections are tenuous at best. For example, one popular variation on the evaluation process instructs the tester to note how much time the dog spends with or apart from him as an indicator of potentially aggressive behavior. In an article about temperament testing in the Winter 2001 issue of *Protecting Animals*, Emily Weiss, PhD states "There is no data to support that a dog who spends more time away from a tester is not an appropriate pet. In fact my research found no correlation with such a test and future behavior." Indeed, when the breed in question is either aloof or slightly suspicious of strangers, it seems given that a dog with correct temperament for its breed may pay for it with its life.

Likewise, the current requirement of heavy "socialization" with other dogs neglects to address the inherent intolerance of many adult male Dobes for others. "Dog aggression" is a common label bestowed on Dobermans in shelters and even more disturbingly, by the rescue groups which purport to understand them best. Rather than learning how to differentiate between frustration, obnoxiousness and true aggression, the shelter evaluator is to simply interpret any forward moving behavior as unaddressable, unacceptable dog

aggression. Perhaps those who wish to better understand Doberman temperament should turn to the AKC breed standard, which has an instruction to the judge which reads: "An aggressive or belligerent attitude toward other dogs shall not be deemed viciousness". Of course, we should not be placing stone-cold dog fighters in the hands of novice pet owners. Nor should the owner of a belligerent Doberman simply throw his hands up in helplessness if his dog is a miserable bully to inoffensive dogs passing by. We must promote results-based training and sound management of any dog we place or teach. But we should also recognize and respect the limitations an adult male dog of a working/guarding breed may have when presented with a similar neighbor. And above all we should educate the adopter of such a dog as to these limitations. Many adopters are relieved to hear that they really *don't* have to allow their new companion to suffer the attentions of every loose dog in the park, or to feel guilty when he responds to those attentions according to his heritage!

The danger of false negatives and false positives

Based on the invasiveness of the evaluation techniques, one would assume that dogs which pass the interrogation would be complete shoe-ins; totally uncomplicated, high threshold dogs. Indeed, in her experiments with a variety of shelter dogs, Dr. Weiss was able to prove that big issues like food and toy guarding were reliably predicted via a standard evaluation. However, in my own work I have encountered many working breed dogs which pass the initial evaluation only to fail in the new home once they are settled and comfortable enough to assert themselves more confidently.

The Dobe which tests out poorly for a total stranger in a shelter is quite often behaving as a person with working dog experience would expect: disoriented, defensive and responding to invasive handling by a stranger. However, the dog which is more accepting of its interaction with a tester may wait until it has settled into its adoptive family to throw its weight around in a meaningful way. Rather than a simple reaction to sensory overload and a natural amount of defense, the negative behavior that erupts in the permanent home speaks more of a deeply rooted pushy and possibly aggressive disposition. The family, assured at adoption that the dog is "easy-going", "kid friendly", "dog social" or what have you, is totally unprepared for this development. The placement organization, restricted by time, lack of funds and inexperience, is unable to offer any

meaningful help and is usually quick to advise returning the dog. And who could blame them? After all, they can't afford to have an "aggressive" dog out there with their name on it. One may assume that the dog is euthanized. The rescue group assures itself that they must have "missed something" and adds another few tests to its evaluation process. Meanwhile, the family is emotionally trashed and can now offer empirical evidence in support of the "they turn on their masters" mentality. And more proof has been provided for the shelter professionals who are warned that adopters are not able to problem solve.

Even when the adoption works out beautifully there may be a potential bit of damage to the big picture. The adopters of a laid-back "goofasaurus" Doberman which suffers the attentions of all comers, human, canine and feline, are now "experienced" Doberman owners. If the next dog they adopt is a bit more limited in his ability to accept anything that happens to him, they may be in for quite a surprise. Because it is outside their realm of experience and is straying from the definition of acceptable temperament learned from the experts at the shelter, the dog is given an armchair diagnosis of "hyper" or "dominant" and is deemed a defective animal not suitable for pethood. One of the most frequently voiced comments we hear when we get a dog turned in by owners who are overwhelmed with its behavior is along the lines of "Our last Dobie was nothing like this one!" Again, the popular mentality which paints all Dobses with a brushstroke of instability and handler aggression is simply being replaced by the one which assures us of the Dobe's inherent softness and tolerance for careless handling and little training. That it is being supported institutionally by rescue and humane groups should cause anyone involved with this brilliant and multi-faceted breed to step up to the plate. Check into your local breed rescues and find out what they are representing as acceptable temperament, and how they have come to their standards. Ask about the screening process for adopters and foster homes. Many applicants to Doberman rescue groups have expectations which would be better met by Beagle, Golden Retriever or Greyhound rescue! If you can, offer to help develop more meaningful, breed-subjective evaluation techniques and to assist in the follow up training of adopted dogs. The majority of rescue groups truly have the best interests of the dogs in their care at heart. While some groups or individuals will resist hearing anything outside of their accepted belief system, most will welcome the experience and educational opportunity a "real world" trainer brings to the table.

In his article "America vs. Europe" (*The Doberman Quarterly*, 1998), the internationally respected breeder and judge Ray Carlisle advises Doberman breeders on the issue of correct Doberman temperament: "Rather than run away from our responsibilities because we might not understand them fully, we should embrace them by educating ourselves. If you love the breed, preserve and protect it." Those of us involved in the rescue and rehabilitation of these special dogs would do well to heed that advice, also.

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Julia V. McDonough has been a commercial dog trainer for over twenty years, and recently retired from her seven year stint as Training Director for Doberman Rescue Unlimited, Inc., one of the largest breed rescues on the East Coast. She specializes in the rehabilitation of dogs with major behavioral issues such as bite histories, dog aggression and extreme shyness and is currently on the training staff at Olympia Kennels under the direction of Mike Pinksten. Julia is a self described "Schutzhund rookie" who has put several BHs on her dogs, and is currently working with her young Dobe bitch, Corazon v. Rubenhof, and her GSD pup, Elvis v. Olympia, with hopes of going all the way to a 3 this time. You may visit her online at www.fortunattek9.com