

On temperament and character

- by Dan Smith

After judging the Futurity/Maturity males and all class bitches at the 2006 National Specialty Show, and attending the 2007 National as an exhibitor, I was very impressed with the quality of character and temperament of nearly all the entries. I truly believe our breeders are doing a very good job of striving to improve our dogs' character through selective breeding. It is showing up in the breed ring.

Acceptable temperament is certainly at the top of this list when describing good character. The problems of character are not only a concern of the AKC conformation dogs, but one that has been universal since the development of the breed over 100 years ago.

Less than a decade ago, the SV in Germany was very concerned with the number of working class males and females that were failing the courage test at their annual Sieger shows. They of course put much stronger emphasis on the character of their animals, and we have since seen improvement in the percentage of dogs passing the courage test.

The courage test, by the way, is one of the finest tests of character in our breed. Not only must the dog stand his or her ground confidently, but they also must stop the bad guy who is attacking them in a frontal attack.

So, you see, a temperament test which requires our dogs to stand on a loose lead while being approached by the judge is certainly an excellent test. It does not tell us a whole lot about the dogs' total character.

My hat goes off to the dedicated people in obedience, herding, agility, Schutzhund, and other performance training, **because this is not only a good test of the dogs' character, it actually develops the dogs' character properly.** After all, our breed is a working, herding breed.

This year, I attended several specialty shows as an exhibitor and, surprisingly, I observed several dogs in the adult classes who were very unstable. A male in the novice class attacked the judge and then the handler when the judge attempted to check his testicles. Unfortunately, the brave judge gave the dog not one more chance, but two, trying to examine the dog. And twice more he attacked the judge and the handler. The dog was then excused.

On one other occasion I observed an Open bitch that very visibly did not want much to do with the judge. On the temperament test, she plainly backed-off while the handler struggled to hold her in front of him. On the down and back moving exercise, she began slowing down coming back toward the judge, to the point of almost stopping to avoid the judge. This behavior in the adult classes is unacceptable and should be penalized. This bitch, however, went on to win the major that day.

In this busy, unpredictable world, many of us are guilty of not socializing and training the youngster on a consistent basis. Further, we then expect these puppies to enter the show ring and perform. We sometimes get what we deserve: EMBARRASSED! In many cases it is our fault, because many of these youngsters have not been approached by a stranger, much less in a show ring.

I have always believed that up to the novice classes (6-9 Puppy, 9-12 Puppy, and 12-18 Month classes), we should give the entry at least one second chance if it does not perform perfectly in the temperament test. I believe most judges would agree with me on this because I see them do it and I think they are correct in rechecking.

But from novice up, unless the Bred-by-Exhibitor is a puppy, the entries must pass the temperament test the first time to receive a placement. If the judge wishes to recheck an adult on temperament, that's okay, but I don't think a first place is in order on one who misbehaved during the temperament test.

Overall, I think the temperament and character of our breed has significantly improved over the past 20 years. A much higher percentage of show dogs show not only sound temperament but also excellent character.

Dan Smith is a licensed AKC German Shepherd judge, past president of the GSDCA and has been a breeding and exhibitor of GSDs for more than 40 years. He and his wife, Marilyn, exhibit under the kennel name Darby-Dan. The pair have very successfully exhibited and bred multiple Select Champions, Futurity and Maturity Victors and Victrices, Register of Merit sires and dams, and performance animals. Dan can be reached at darbdan@aol.com.