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Myths About Protection Dogs by Gerald Smith

Despite the fact that thousands of protection trained dogs are in use by the Armed Forces, police departments, security services and private citizens, and despite a good deal of written material on this kind of training, certain myths and misconceptions persist among the general public and, oddly enough, among dog fanciers. Part of the problem may well be that some of these myths contain that grain of truth, no matter how small, from which incorrect or exaggerated conclusions are drawn and the myth therefore lives on. I suspect, however, that in the case of trainers, clinging to these myths provides a comfortable way of avoiding serious consideration of a type of training with which they are not familiar. If "all protection dogs are vicious" or training of this kind is "cruel" then, at a stroke, one is relieved of having to think further about the subjects. Perhaps, even more serious, trainers themselves help to perpetuate many of these myths. In an attempt to convince the public of the merits of protection training, exaggerated claims are sometimes made by those who are active in the field. Trainers who fear, disapprove of, or misunderstand this work often disseminate the unfavorable myths. In either case, the average dog fancier all too rarely questions either viewpoint; their trainer is, after all an expert - isn't he.

"The times they are a changin" though. Not only is the Schutzhund training movement becoming more and more popular, but we also see in the Gazette that the AKC is at least considering the subject. Mr. Dearinger has confirmed to me that the AKC might, in the foreseeable future, institute some sort of working dog trials that include man-work. It is becoming increasingly clear that larger and larger numbers of people are going to be training and exhibiting protection-trained dogs. So whether our personal breed is Miniature Poodles or Great Danes, we will be in contact, either in our classes or at the shows, with a growing number of these dogs. It behooves all trainers to have at least an objective, workable understanding of this kind of training.

No Training Required

One of the myths I hear repeated most often is "My dog doesn't need to be trained - he'd protect me when the chips are down". To me this statement is quite similar to the one we hear from "breed ring only" types who tell us their dog would be a 200 scoring dog if only they had time to train him. To the experienced person, either statement usually shows such abominable ignorance that it's hard to know how to answer. Of course, one's first thought is "That may be true, but how the hell do you know"? But, being a typically diplomatic dog trainer, I wouldn't ask that question right away. However, let me offer this analogy; just because a person has an aggressive outlook, would you necessarily expect him or her to win a fistfight - particularly if they'd never been in one before? Of course not! And the same thing applies to your dog. (Yes, I know that's an



anthropomorphism and no, I don't approve of that sort of thing - except in this instance, it happens to be true.) For the dog to bite and fight a human being efficiently takes training and practice. Most dogs have to develop a hard,, efficient bite.

Assuming that the dog will respond at all in a real situation is taking a lot for granted. One of the problems most often encountered in training dogs and their owners, for instance, is that the dog won't "turn on" at first because of concern that his handler will react unfavorably to any show of aggression. This is especially true with dogs that have an extensive training in some obedience classes that resemble nothing so much as Sunday School classes taught by a little old lady. "Now children, you must display proper deportment at all times. Sit up straight and don't bark. Any aggressive behavior will be dealt with harshly". May I point out that dogs of "guarding" breeds are supposed to be aggressive under certain circumstances. I don't advocate letting dogs terrorize either the handlers or other dogs, but if he is put down too hard every time he shows aggressiveness, that dog may well not respond quickly when he's needed. Another possible pitfall to consider - did you ever take the advice of the idiots who advocate disciplining puppies with a rolled-up newspaper? If so, your grown dog may still be extremely wary of acting aggressively toward a person with a stick, whip, club, etc. in hand. Has your dog ever been exposed to gunfire at close range? If not, and amazingly few "working dogs" have been, he may be put off the first few times, but with practice and training learn either to ignore it or overcome his fears of it while doing man-work.

So far, we've taken it for granted that the dog in question has the necessary courage, if not the training, to protect his owner "when the chips are down." This is assuming far too much. I'm sorry to say that a very large percentage of dogs haven't the necessary courage at all. (I've seen too few attempts to train members of all breeds to be able to make such a generalization. I suspect, however, that it is true in any breed where, over a long period of time selection has been based solely on the ability to win in the breed ring.) Perhaps the worst part is this: it is extremely difficult, if not downright impossible to ascertain the true level of a dog's courage by observing him in ordinary situations. (The very shy dog being an obvious exception.) This is particularly true in light of the fact that most of us aren't very objective observers of our own dogs. Even trainers with years and years of experience find that predictions about how a given dog will do at man-work are often incorrect. Without valid testing techniques, one simply does not usually know if his dog will really protect him or not. All of the popular indicators cited by owners mean practically nothing. The mere fact, for instance, that the dog barks at the door or growls at the neighbor through the fence says absolutely nothing except that the dog puts on a good show when well-protected himself. Even such stuff as "He once bit the meter-reader" doesn't provide any information - unless, of course, your mugger happens to be sent out by the power company. The plain truth is that however the dog acts in other



situations has little bearing on how he would act if confronted by a determined aggressor. In addition, the instinctive desire of "good old Shep" to protect his owner is vastly over-rated in popular folklore. While you may own the exceptional dog who actually has what it takes, don't be too sure unless there is some hard evidence on which to base such a conclusion.

If one does own this exceptional dog, training him is still very worthwhile not only to develop his expertise but also to gain competence in handling him. Don't depend on the dog's sense of discrimination - this is probably his most over-rated quality. Folklore has it that "faithful Fido" will immediately recognize the dangerous situation and the "bad guy." Baloney! No two people even perceive a situation the same way, much less a human and a dog. It is entirely possible for the dog to ignore completely a potentially dangerous situation. The greater problem however, is that the untrained dog will perceive many innocent situations as ones which call for his intervention.

Protection training will not, in all probability, lessen the number of these times when the dog alerts unnecessarily, but it does accustom him to obeying your directions in these situations quickly and without question. Most important, participating in training teaches the handler to be aware of the dog's aggression and familiarizes him with the proper way to cope with it. I don't agree with those who view protection training primarily as a method of increasing the dog's discrimination; that is only a small and rather incidental side effect. On the contrary, the primary purpose of protection training as I see it, is to channel the dog's aggression to work for the handler on command, which is actually quite the opposite of depending on the dog's sense of discrimination, and to train the handler to work efficiently with the dog,

At the other extreme from the person who's certain his dog would come through in a real situation is the person who believes his dog is too easy going to be of any use and because of this, couldn't be trained. I repeat that the behavior of the dog in ordinary times is a poor indicator of his real potentials. Many times I've seen people absolutely amazed when their "lambchop" turns on beautifully when confronted in a training setting in which the dog realizes that the owner approves of his aggressive actions. Often the very friendly tail-wagger or the dog in which the natural instincts have been repressed comes up very strongly when that certain chord is touched in agitation.

All this doesn't mean that I think every dog should be protection trained or that every person should participate in this work. What I do advocate is seeing our dogs for what they really are - let's don't suppose he's something he isn't. Unless the dog is placed under pressure, one cannot know what that dog is made of.

Part II

Another frequently voiced concern about protection training is that it may "change



the dog's personality." This is one of those myths with the tiny grain of truth at its center that is magnified into something totally erroneous. When used in this context, "change the dog's personality" has an undesirable connotation. The real meaning is "it makes them vicious." Nothing could be further from the truth.

First, let us define some terms. Webster's Dictionary defines "vicious" as wicked, depraved, faulty, malicious, spiteful, etc. None of these (except faulty, perhaps) really applies to canine temperament. However, I think we can agree that as it generally is used, a vicious dog is one that bites without provocation. Now, for a dog to literally bite without provocation, that is, outside stimulus, he must be insane or the canine equivalent thereof. Protection training certainly does not affect a dog's sanity - an insane dog is of no use to anybody.

Sufficient Provocation

Most problems occur when a given dog - with or without protection training and his owner don't see eye to eye on what constitutes sufficient provocation. The canine sense of situation discrimination is vastly over-estimated, so an aggressive dog may well have a quite different idea of what constitutes sufficient provocation from the people around him. This, then, is where the proper training can make the difference between a useful dog and a dangerous dog. Protection training teaches him that, except in case of a physical attack upon him or his handler, the attack command is the only "provocation" to which he may respond by biting. Some people, it must be admitted, simply don't have the necessary physical or emotional strength (usually emotional) to "tell" their dog this and make it stick. They then look for a trainer who will sympathize with them and advise that the dog be "put to sleep" because of his "viciousness". Although that dog may not suit them, it most often isn't vicious at all and it's the owner who's at fault – not the dog. Properly trained and handled, many of these dogs become useful companions.

That Grain of Truth

For the average, somewhat "softer" dog, protection training can, indeed, change his personality to a small extent – for the better. The very essence of this training, especially for these dogs, is to build and maintain in them an absolute confidence in their ability to deal with any human being.

Particularly in the case of a dog whose aggressiveness has been repressed to a great extent, man-work can bring changes that are, to me, very pleasant and desirable. It may become more confident, and therefore more outgoing, with everyone with whom it comes in contact. I have seen visible improvement in obedience exercises such as the Stand for Examination and in retrieving the dumbbell from against a crowded ringside as a direct result of this new-found confidence. He may show more interest in guarding his property by barking at the door or in the car; he may even, for the first time in his life, stand tall and actually growl at somebody he doesn't like. His whole bearing may become a bit more



regal – in short, more confident. I do, however, want to emphasize that these are minor changes of behavior, not changes in basic personality. Whatever the dog is at the beginning, he remains basically the same – just more sure of himself and more willing to express his real personality.

Many Breeds Benefit

It may be interesting to note in this connection that some of the dogs I've seen benefit the most from beginning training were not even dogs of "guarding breeds". In one instance, a man whose wife was starting her Dobe in training complained that, although his German Shorthaired Pointer had a CD, the dog behaved in a shy, introverted manner and often shrank away from strangers to the extent that he wouldn't accompany his owner to answer the door. After a few sessions of "dry agitation" during which the dog is encouraged to "turn on" and bark at, but not bite, an agitator, that dog thought he was "master of all he surveyed". Although he will never actually bite anybody, probably not even with the mose dire provocation, his behavior improved markedly. One is now greeted at their door by a master and his very protective looking dog sitting confidently at his side

Cruelty in Training

Closely connected with the myth of changed personality is the mistaken belief that protection training involves cruelty to the dog. Once again, let us begin by defining our terms. Most dog people regard cruelty as the use of excessive and/or unnecessary force in training. Any discussion along these lines is difficult because every one of us has a slightly different idea about what is excessive or unnecessary, but it seems to me that the use of force in training really becomes objectionable only when it has a detrimental effect on the dog's attitude and behavior. As I mentioned earlier, building and maintaining confidence is the most basic technique in man-work. This cannot be accomplished if excessive force is used. It is often said that one cannot make a dog track; the same thing applies in spades to protection training. The dog must enjoy his man-work to do it at all, and the more he enjoys it, the better he is likely to be at it. Any trainer who uses excessive force would be defeating his purpose very quickly and irretrievably. Anyone who considers basic agitation to be cruel has only to see it done by a competent trainer and watch the dog's tail wagging and his pride in his ability to scare off the "bad guy" to change his mind. The dogs must, of course, become accustomed in their training to meeting and overcoming some resistance from the agitators. In Schutzhund Examinations, for instance, the agitator strikes the dog twice on the withers (only) with a switch. This is certainly reasonable - he wouldn't be much help to his owner if he doesn't take this much punishment. Let me emphasize that the dog always wins - he is never subjected to more resistance than he can overcome - and come back for more.

The most continually refreshing and delightful part of protection work for the trainer and the owner is in seeing the dogs do something they are bred for and



enjoy doing to the utmost. Unlike obedience, where most dogs must be constantly motivated to do work which they have no natural desire to do, protection training involves channeling his natural desires and abilities into useful patterns of behavior.

Ah, Sweet Mystery

Many protection trainers promote the notion in books, articles and personal conversation that man-work requires vary mysterious processes about which only a chosen few have (or should have) knowledge. In an effort to magnify their own importance, they would have people believe that they alone are capable of this kind of training. What nonsense! Man-work is much like any other dog training - it involves some talent, of course, along with experience, but mostly it requires plain old common sense. I'm certainly not proposing that all of you grab a dog and a friend and proceed to train your dog in the back yard, but don't be discouraged in seeking a trainer or a group with which to work by all the hokum you'll get from some of the BS artists. One of the favorite refrains of these trainers is that one must have a "reason" for wanting to own or train a protection dog. What is usually meant by a reason is that one must have in mind some specific situation in which to use the dog. These "reasons" are often the worst possible motivation to participate in this kind of training. The simple desire to work with your dog as another phase of training is in my opinion, the very best reason of all.

Part III

The notion is being espoused by many trainers these days that dogs perform their function as obedience or protection dogs out of a deep love and affection for their owners. I would guess that this is an effort to make either kind of training more palatable to the public. While that is certainly a laudable goal, this "love and devotion" bit is not only a demonstrably shaky base on which to build a training "philosophy", but can also have a really pernicious effect on novices. After all, if dogs work for their owners out of love and devotion, than the opposite must also be true (says the novice): if the dog doesn't work well it must be because he doesn't love me. I think we've all heard exhibitors leaving the ring grumbling in a hurt voice, "How could my dog do that to me?" Sounds particularly silly from that standpoint, doesn't it?

Obedience and True Love

With regard to obedience, let's remember that even though a dog may have a great affection for his master, its primary motivation is pleasing itself. Obedience training is basically a matter of making it more pleasant for the dog to perform certain exercises than it is not to perform certain exercises. It seems to me that affection, devotion, and, at least as important, respect are products of obedience training, not vise versa. Let us look at one example. My wife seldom actually trains one of our dogs. She does tend them when they're sick, takes them places with her, plays with them, atc., and they all love her very much. But, they are



only minimally obedient towards her because she has not established her dominance and they don't show the same respect towards her that they do me. I'm their pack leader and the one they work for. They've learned that the correct response brings them pleasure (praise) and the incorrect response brings them displeasure (correction) - their affection for me is strictly secondary to their desire to please themselves.

They Enjoy Their Work

An attempt to "sell" the public is especially apparent in the efforts of trainers to convince us that the personal protection dog bites the "bad guy" only because of a deep devotion to his master. It is in part, it seems to me, a response to the fact that most people, in this country at least, are unwilling to accept the fact that aggressiveness towards humans is a legitimate and desirable trait in certain breeds. In that context the dog must be supplied with some overwhelming, and people-oriented, reason for being aggressive. The simple fact is that the good personal protection dog enjoys his work. He enjoys the body contact, the chance to "let off steam", and especially the winnings. It seems to me that his motivations are roughly similar to those of the person who enjoys boxing, wrestling, or football. The dog's drives are primarily from within and are the result of a desire to please himself, not his owner. It is also interesting to note that nobody claims that sporting breeds or hounds hunt primarily out of a desire to please their owner. It is considered perfectly acceptable for dogs to have an instinctive desire to hunt as long as the prey isn't human.

Protect Who?

Although it is rather difficult to "prove" anything about what goes on in a dog's mind, consider these facts for starters. Beginning agitation is directed almost entirely against the dog. (Some trainers do not even want the owner present - the dog is "staked out"; i.e. tied securely to a fence or agitation board.) He is confronted and then insulted or threatened by the agitator. Only very rarely is an attempt made to agitate the beginner by "attacking" his owner - and even rarer when this technique works. In short, the dog is primarily motivated by the desire to "protect" himself. A trainer can test this thesis for himself - stake the dog out (one that has never been agitated), have the owner stand twenty-five or thirty feet away, and "attack" the owner. Many dogs who later become quite good protection dogs will simply watch with interest while you "beat up" their master, and will offer no attempt to interfere. Next, approach the dog in the same threatening manner and watch him come up with a fury. Now tell us he's primarily driven by affection to his master.

A second fact to be considered is that, generally speaking, the better a dog is at man-work, the easier he adapts to multiple handlers. Most really capable protection dogs will work for any handler who uses the proper commands and techniques. I have even, on rare occasions, had one of my fully trained dogs handled by a virtual stranger to the dog and taken the dog on the sleeve myself.



I'm not recommending this arrangement and it may horrify some, but it is interesting that the dog shows no hesitation whatever to bite the "bad guy" - me.

Protection Dogs as Guard Dogs

Another popular misconception is that protection trained dogs are automatically good guardians of home and property. In reality, there seems to be only a moderate relationship between the two. Different dogs have widely varying degrees of "territorial sovereignty". At one extreme is the dog who will only protect his food dish or a favorite toy; at the other end of the spectrum is the one who could be tied to a cactus in the middle of the desert and would bark at anything within the range of his senses. In either case protection training seems to have little affect beyond a slight tendency to increase the size of the dog's personal territory. Those dogs with some sense of sovereignty can be trained to protect the car or house, but they need to be worked in that specific situation for best results. Moreover, unless a dog has a natural tendency to protect a specific territory, such as the car in which he's left, he'll require constant refresher courses to maintain even minimal efficiency at it.

Miss, Mr., or Ms.

Many believe that only males are capable of accepting serious training as personal protection dogs. While I have to admit that if I were a police officer, for instance, I would prefer the larger, harder to hurt male, to accompany me in dealing with very dangerous situations, there is also no question that bitches can be very capable, effective protection dogs. They are often the ideal choice for the less experienced handler or the handler of small or medium stature because they are usually somewhat easier to control and require a bit less "muscle" to work. I would also have to say that bitches generally are less likely to go looking for trouble and have somewhat less of a tendency to "turn on" at an inappropriate time. On the other hand, bitches tend to be more serious about their training and don't usually regard it as a game as males occasionally do. The biggest problem with bitches is that the trainer must use a certain amount of finesse in working them on the sleeve. Remember that in training, the agitator is protected so that, unless he's careless, the dog cannot hurt him, whereas he can hurt the dog with rough agitation or injudicious use of a stick, etc. And it is obviously easier to be too rough on a fifty or sixty pound bitch than it is on a hundred pound male. In a real situation, however, the fifty pound bitch can still inflict such excruciating pain on the bad guy that he isn't capable of doing much of anything; so the difference in size between bitches and males becomes a good deal less important.

Part IV

Responsibilities of Owning a protection Trained Dog

One must always remember that the dog has been taught to respond not only to outright agitation, but also to gunfire, loud voices, suspicious movements, etc. While the ideal is that the dog should "turn on" only on command, one must admit that no dog is ever 100% reliable on any command - either in obedience or



in man-work. In addition, the really good protection dog loves his work with a passion and is always on the lookout for a chance to indulge in this passion. So the foremost responsibility of the owner is to be fully aware of exactly what his dog is doing and thinking at all times, particularly in public. One cannot, in good conscience, allow the dog to get into a situation where a mistake on the dog's part could lead to tragedy. No longer can the dog be left with an inexperienced person at a show while the owner goes to the restroom. No longer can he be left unattended in an exercise pen. In any of these situations he might see, for instance, two people begin to argue or people playfully slapping one another. Either might resemble agitation and could appear to the dog as a chance for him to do his stuff. Without a competent and watchful handler present he could get himself in serious trouble.

If you're one of those people who stand around talking at shows while your dog roams freely at the end of a six foot lead, either change your habits or forego the ownership of a protection dog. He can indeed be dangerous and must be under control at all times. Perhaps a couple of personal experiences will help to illustrate my point.

On one occasion several years ago, I took my first trained Dobe bitch with me to the camera shop to pick up some photos. On the way back to the car, three boys about 11 or 12 years old stopped me to admire her. Now this bitch is an absolute sweetheart who loves everyone including children, so while they admired her she was getting lots of petting and enjoying every minute of it. Suddenly, with no warning of any kind, one of the boys yelled, smacked her hard on the nose, and jumped back with his hands in the air. He caught me totally by surprise and had the bitch been on anything except a short walking lead, her lunge forward could have netted her one playful, but foolish youngster. I still suspect that had she really meant to bite the boy, rather than only warn him, she could have done just that.

On another occasion, I had a trained dog on a down beside my lawn chair while I watched the obedience ring at a specialty fun match. As a young man walked briskly by, the dog jumped up and snarled. As I was giving the dog what I thought were his just rewards for such "unprovoked" aggression, another exhibitor came over and explained the reason. The guy had been standing behind me (where I could not see him) staring and "stalking" the dog in a deliberate attempt to arouse him.

You may feel that these are odd unlikely events, but believe me, people do some incredibly stupid things around dogs. Of course, in either one of these instances, an untrained dog might have responded in much the same way, but the experienced dog is that instant quicker and if he does bite he'll do so in a much more efficient manner. And if someone is bitten, the dog, especially one trained for man-work, is immediately blamed. The moral, of course, is that one has to be



alert and in control at all times.

Children and protection-trained dogs can also be a problem area. This is a particularly touchy subject and whatever one says about it, there is certain to be some disagreement. None the less, I'll "give it a go". Of utmost importance is the attitude of the children toward the dog. Parents have an obligation to teach their children a certain amount of respect for dogs. This respect must, of necessity, be greater for large, "guarding" breeds. If the dog is trained for man-work then the respect must be greater still. It is quite unrealistic to expect that a dog with the intelligence, courage, and strength necessary for this work to submit to disrespectful or abusive treatment from either children or adults. One must remember also that dogs are basically pack animals and generally submit only to those humans who have established themselves as dominant. This dominance is nearly impossible for a child to establish toward the type of dog in question. It is more likely, therefore, that the dog will regard the child as no more than an equal within the "pack".

This is not meant to say that protection-trained dogs are unreliable with children. On the contrary, nearly every trained dog with which I'm personally acquainted is a family dog. They all co-exist quite nicely with children of all ages. But, I repeat, they are treated with respect.

In most cases, however, it is particularly unwise to allow children to "roughhouse" in the presence of these dogs. Not only does this resemble training agitation, it also brings the dog's protective instincts to the surface. Running, shouting, wrestling children and protection-trained dogs is definitely a dangerous combination. Each dog is an individual, of course, so one should proceed with caution and common sense until a particular dog-family relationship is understood; with all concerned well aware of the limitations involved in that particular situation. A protection dog is definitely not suitable for those parents who subscribe to the notion that a child should be able to do anything whatever to a dog without fear of retaliation.

The owner of a protection dog also has the responsibility to use him only in the most dire circumstances. I don't believe, for instance, that one is justified in inflicting injury upon someone, be it with a dog, a gun, or whatever, simply for trespassing on one's property. A dog should be used only as a last resort to protect oneself or one's family from personal harm. The braggart or the person looking for an excuse to hurt somebody has no business with a dog of this type. Needless to say, the dog should be "turned on" only in a real situation or during actual training; never for the benefit of friends and neighbors who ask, "would he really bite me if you told him to?" This type of dog is a serious weapon; fun and games have no place around him.

Trainers of personal protection dogs certainly have an obligation to see to it,



insofar as possible, that the dog's owner is a competent handler. A great deal of a trainer's time should be spent instructing the handler to make sure he knows how to control his dog. This is particularly important (and often neglected) in those instances where the dog is boarded and trained or where trained dogs are sold to the public.