

# Elements of Temperament

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## 1. What Is Temperament?

"My dog has a wonderful temperament! . . ." Except she really hates strangers." "I just got the perfect stud male! His temperament is the best, it's absolutely perfect: he has no defense drive in him at all!" "Oh, I would never breed a dog that had prey drive, they're vicious!"

Yes, all of these statements were actually made by real people. All of them German Shepherd (GSD) fanciers and breeders. We talk all the time about the importance of temperament. What are we all talking about? Are any of us even talking about the same thing?

When we talk about temperament, we are referring to a collection of drives, thresholds, traits and instincts that are inherited and innate. Yes, it's true. Temperament is a function of genetics. It is inherited, not developed. A dog's core temperament never changes. Some behaviors can be modified through training, but the temperament itself never changes. For example, a high energy dervish of a dog isn't going to learn to be a laid back, low energy dog. But, the dog can be taught to control his energy, to an extent.

Most dog owners absolutely refuse to believe this. If I only had a dollar for every time someone has told me "It's all in how they're raised!" . . . No, it's not. It's all in how their DNA came together. A dog with foul temperament will always be a dog with foul temperament, no matter how wonderful the environment. A dog with sound, stable temperament will always be a sound, stable dog, even in a lousy environment.

Good early handling, training and socialization will help develop desirable traits in the dog, but those traits have to be there. Ball drive is a good example, since it forms the foundation for so many types of work. Some dogs aren't interested in chasing a ball. If the dog does enjoy ball games, a good trainer can build that up and bring it out to its highest possible level, but the drive itself is innate. One cannot install a drive.

Real GSD people are always seeking to produce sound working dogs. An understanding of temperament is crucial to developing a breeding program that makes sense and will preserve working abilities rather than dump more pets into an already overcrowded world.

### 1.1. Temperament Testing

In the struggle to find good working prospects, the question of utilizing various temperament tests comes up. In general, the standardized tests can be of some value, but don't put too much faith in them. Some are truly dreadful, like the Volhard Puppy Temperament Test. This one is bad news, not only because the Volhards so completely mislabel various elements of temperament, but because the test items themselves are too stressful for many puppies.

For instance, on the restraint tests, if the pup freezes in place, this is labeled as "independence". Hardly. The dog is showing avoidance behavior. Some of their test items are innocuous enough, such as tests of social attraction in which you kneel and call the pup to come to you. But, other items, designed to identify alleged future dominant terrorists are traumatic for a weak nerved pup. Don't be rolling over and pinning other people's puppies, please. At best this test is misleading, at worst it subjects puppies to needless stress for no good reason.

The Volhards also developed the Puppy Aptitude Test which is something of an improvement. The test is designed to identify those pups who have a special talent for obedience. They don't realize it, of course but they're actually testing a bit of prey drive. The Volhard stuff has really hung on. To this day, you'll hear local park obedience instructors diagnosing all aggression as "dominance".

A far more useful test is the P.A.W.S. Working Dog Evaluation, by Jona Decker which unabashedly tests prey drive. There is no perfect test, some are more horrendous than others. Experienced trainers of working dogs eventually come up with their own system for evaluating pups and young adult prospects. The best predictor of temperament is history. What are the pup's parents like? Their parents? Grandparents? Keeping in mind that temperament is inherited, look to the ancestors as your best source of information.

Also, keep in mind that puppies are not manufactured in a factory. Just because a dog is a GSD does not mean that by definition, the dog will be able to work. I get calls from dog owners all the time who can't understand why their dogs aren't good watch dogs, protection dogs, obedience dogs, whatever. One typical call was from a man who had a six month old GSD puppy. He had purchased the pup specifically to train in Personal Protection. He needed some help with this because the pup is scared of strangers. Whenever he has a visitor, the pup runs and hides.

Out on a walk, if approached by a stranger, the pup cowers and hides behind his owner. He still honestly believes that all he needs is the right trainer. I asked a few questions and discovered that the pup was bred from AKC American showlines. The AKC imposes no requirement of any type of working title being earned prior to breeding. The pup's parents had never had protection training. Nor had the pup's grandparents. There was nothing in this pup's pedigree to suggest he would have what it takes for protection training. Yet, the unscrupulous breeder was more than happy to take this guy's money and tell him that his pups would make great protection dogs.

## 1.2. Early Handling

What then, is the impact of early handling, training and socializing, if temperament is genetic? Why bother? To use a human analogy, why can't all humans become Olympic athletes? Because not all humans have the right genetic equipment. But, if you are blessed with the right stuff, the right training can develop those innate abilities to their highest level.

It's similar with dogs. For instance, a trainer purchased an 8 week old GSD puppy who was completely kennel raised. She had minimal human contact at the kennel, her only interactions being feeding and cleaning times. Yet, at 8 weeks, this bitch pup was very interested in and drawn toward humans. The trainer was hoping to train this pup for Therapy work, so he chose to develop this aspect of the dog's personality. Each time the pup approached a stranger in a friendly manner, the trainer rewarded her lavishly. Not surprisingly, the pup grew into an exceptionally outgoing, social dog. The raw genetic material was there all along, what the trainer did was simply build on what was already there.

Each dog has a personality, which is different than temperament. Personality is developed through interaction with other living creatures, primarily humans. Pups who are raised in enriched environments tend to have well developed personalities, with maximum emotional range and depth. Dogs who have been kenneled too much often have a flatness to them, they lack the animation and expression we like to see.

Thus, socialization and early handling really do count, not because they can change temperament, but because a good handler can build on the innate traits that are already there. And, socialization is part of personality development. Good early handling will make a strong dog even better and bring the weaker dog up to the extent to which the dog is capable.

## 2. Drives

An obedience instructor who was getting interested in working dogs went to evaluate two puppies from nice working lines. After looking at the male and female pups, each separately, she declared the female the better Schutzhund prospect because she had the right drive. I went out and saw the same two pups, and came away with the opposite opinion. The little female was a dear pup, unusually attentive to the human but only moderately interested in chasing a ball. She was somewhat more interested in grabbing a rag. The male, on the other hand, was a maniac for the ball or anything else that moved. When the ball rolled out of sight, he hunted for it relentlessly. He was everywhere, into everything.

The obedience instructor had mistaken the female pup's energy and attentiveness for working drives. The male, however showed plenty of prey drive as well as confidence in new situations. He would be worth a second look as a possible Schutzhund prospect. A local breeder proclaimed proudly that she just had to

take back one of her male pups, because he "has too much drive!" What did she mean by that? The pup had been destructive in the house. Her interpretation of the pup's shredding of the owners' belongings was that it was a sign he had excellent drive.

A vet described her male GSD as being "very drivey". Did that mean he loves to chase a ball? Well, no. Not really. She meant that he has a great deal of energy. Once again, we have to wonder if any of us are actually talking about the same thing. Among working dog people, you will hear a lot of talk about drives. But, what are they? What do they look like? Too often, the term is applied to describe dogs who have high activity levels, but the activity is scattered and unfocused. When we're looking for working dogs, we're looking for high energy, of course, but also drives that can be channelled and focused.

A drive is an internal mechanism that pushes the dog into taking action. All dogs have certain basic drives. The only real difference among dogs is a matter of degree. Think of each drive being on a continuum. As a Real GSD enthusiast, the drives you will be primarily concerned with are: rank, prey, defense and pack. Keep in mind that each drive is tied to the survival of the animal. For example, to survive in the wild, a dog must have the willingness and ability to capture and kill prey. Drives are badly misunderstood, too often with tragic results.

## 2.1. Rank Drive

This one should be familiar, it's the dominance vs submissive question. Rank drive has to do with the dog's desire to improve his social standing. A dog who is high in rank drive will attempt to grab the highest position in the hierarchy. Again, you will see wide variation among dogs. Some dogs will fight to the death to assume the Alpha position as to the other dogs in the household, but be completely respectful of humans and accept human leadership without a fuss.

Some dogs will, however attempt to dominate humans. But, remember it's always a matter of degree. There is a wide range here, from a mildly rank driven dog who has a cocky attitude to a dog who won't hesitate to come up leash and nail his handler. High rank drive dogs can actually be fun to train because they are so self confident. But, in it's extreme form, it's not a good trait for novice handlers to seek out. When trained motivationally, sane high rank drive dogs can be real stars in many types of work. They're smart and they like showing off. Use that.

If you're struggling to live happily with a dominant pet dog, you'll find lots of help in my book, *I Love My Dog, But . . .* (1999 Avon Books).

Another term you'll hear bandied about and often misused is hardness. Breeders will advertise pups from parents with "super hardness". The correct definition for the term hardness is resilience. A hard dog is one who doesn't fall apart under stress. Extreme handler hardness, while revered by many in the working dog community makes for a difficult dog to handle safely.

An overly soft dog is one who will wilt at the slightest correction. Novices are generally better off with a dog who has some degree of hardness and won't be adversely affected by a poorly timed or overly harsh correction. A soft dog will show avoidance behavior in response to stress. Or, to confuse you, there are dogs who will display defensive aggression in response to an over-correction.

## 2.2. Defense Drive

By far, this drive causes more confusion than any other. Defense drive refers to the dog's instinct to defend himself. It is part of the self preservation instinct. Thus, a complete absence of any defense drive in the GSD would be faulty temperament. Though we would expect to see very little defense drive in a Lab. That breed isn't supposed to have a great deal of suspicion toward humans. Whether this drive is problematic depends both on the strength of the drive and the threshold at which the drive kicks in. We will talk in depth about thresholds in the next section.

When a dog is in defense drive, he is displaying aggressive behaviors. Barking, lunging, snapping, snarling and growling are part of the constellation. The dog's hackles may be up. Understand that the dog feels that he must fight for his life. A dog in defense drive is under extreme stress. He may be feeling extremely ambivalent, and you'll see ears swiveling back and forth, the dog may bark and back up, then move forward again. This is why good trainers never, ever introduce elements of defense into protection training until the dog has sufficient emotional maturity and self confidence to be able to manage his stress. Defensive behavior is not fun for the dog. Unfortunately, it seems to be really fun for far too many owners.

It's easy to understand why so many people mistake a defensive display with genuine protection. Remember, the dog who is in defense feels threatened. All of the lunging, snarling and other displays have one common goal: to drive the threat back. That's why a defensive display has such forwardness to it, the dog wants to push the threat away. The best analogy I've heard so far was to compare the dog in defense drive to a solitary wolf being confronted by a grizzly bear (I believe this analogy was written by Donn Yarnell). The lone wolf knows he cannot win this fight and feels that he is not free to flee. So, he puts on a big show, hoping to drive the bear off.

In fact, if the dog felt that flight was an option, he absolutely would flee. It's very important that owners of defensive dogs understand this. Too often, people incorrectly assume that the dog won't bite unless he is cornered. That's not true. All that matters is the dog's perception of the situation. If he feels that he cannot escape because he is on lead or even because he could lose face, the dog could very well bite. Is there anything positive about defense drive? Yes!! It's essential for a good protection dog. Why? Because defense drive is always accessible. It's not subject to exhaustion or boredom. Defense is what puts the seriousness into protection work. Again, it's all a matter of degree and threshold.

Assuming the dog has good, strong nerves and a reasonably high threshold, a dog with strong defense drive can be a good working dog. Keep in mind the next time someone tells you that his growling, lunging dog is "protective", that protection, by it's very definition requires the presence of a legitimate, identifiable threat. If the dog is carrying on defensively toward a non threatening person or object, that's not protection, that's a spook dog.

### **2.3. Prey Drive**

This is another misunderstood, yet essential drive. A GSD with low prey drive is a crime against nature. Prey drive refers to the dog's natural desire to chase, capture and kill prey. It is completely natural and forms the foundation for a wide variety of dog jobs, including Schutzhund, police K9, SAR, and many others.

Tragically, innumerable dogs are euthanized every year because no one around understood the nature of prey drive. Humans often insist that if the dog killed a cat or rabbit, he will move on to bigger prey and start killing toddlers next, which is of course, nuts. High prey drive dogs will not attack and kill humans unless there is some other pathological dynamic at work or the dog lacks sound discrimination abilities. That is, the dog must be able to tell the difference between a gopher and a child. Most dogs can do this quite easily, if given proper socialization in puppy hood.

A dog will not consider as a prey object any living creature to which he is exposed in early puppy hood, ideally around the age of 3-5 weeks. This is why the job of the breeder is so important! Breeders absolutely must have their pups exposed to babies and small children. An under socialized, high prey drive dog can easily mistake a crying baby for wounded prey. If you have a small animal killing dog, you may wish to read Sadie's story in I Love My Dog, But . . .

What's so great about prey drive, other than it's utility is that it is such great fun for a dog. Prey and play are very closely related. In other words, when a dog is in prey drive, he's having a pretty good time. A high prey dog will chase balls forever and love it. When you throw a ball, does your dog tear after it with great enthusiasm? Good! If it rolls out of sight, does he continue to hunt for it, relentlessly or does he give up and

walk away? Those dogs who will continue to hunt for their beloved tennis balls are showing hunting instincts, which can often be channeled into work, such as SAR.

Prey drive is also the foundation for good protection training. Remember, unlike defense, prey work is fun. Prey driven dogs are not growling and snarling. They may bark, but you'll hear a higher pitched, playful kind of bark. What you're hearing is actually a prey flushing bark. The dog is trying to stimulate the prey to get moving so he can chase it. Look at the dog's body language. A dog ready to bite the sleeve in prey mode is bouncy, not stressed. Their ears are up, tails are up, they're excited about the game.

In Schutzhund, the bite sleeve ultimately becomes the prized prey object. It's not until the dog is full of confidence and mentally mature that the helper will begin to behave in a threatening manner toward the dog, which is when defense is introduced. Prey drive remains important, however because it provides a mechanism for relieving the stress of defensive work. If the dog is getting too stressed, the helper can switch gears and give the dog some fun "prey bites" by changing his body language and movements.

Prey drive, as wonderful and useful as it is, however will not, in and of itself make a true protection dog. A dog working only in prey lacks seriousness. They also focus on equipment, rather than on the agitator. The other problem with prey is that it is subject to exhaustion and boredom. The dog may simply quit working if he's being worked exclusively in prey. Defense drive, however is always accessible. No dog is too tired to defend himself. It's defense that adds the serious edge to the protection work.

There are many, many types of work in which prey is the foundation. If the dog has good prey, you've got a built in means of motivating and rewarding him in obedience and other activities. Just remember that prey drive is a comfortable place for the dog to be. And, if you encounter a trainer who wants to start a young or green dog in defense drive, rather than prey, run!!!

## **2.4. Pack Drive**

We know that dogs are highly social animals, just like their wolf ancestors. They naturally want to be part of a group or pack. As with all drives, dogs vary greatly as to degree of pack drive. A dog who is independent and aloof even with his own family would be considered to be low in pack drive. A more social dog who can't stand to be left out of anything the humans are doing would be higher in pack drive.

Extremes on either end do not make good working prospects. A dog with very low pack drive isn't going to bond well with his human partner and will be more difficult to motivate in training. Some breeds are supposed to be independent and aloof. Most GSDs bond very deeply to their handlers.

At the other extreme would be the dog who manifests separation anxiety. This is a dog who, literally cannot be left alone. The poor dog will fall apart and show vocalizations and destructive behavior if the owner goes into another room and closes the door. Dogs with this condition are not good prospects for any type of work. True separation anxiety needs to be treated medically.

To some extent, degree of pack drive is a personal preference. Do you like a dog who is especially attentive to you or one who is able to amuse himself on his own? Until you get to the outer extreme, the higher pack drive dog is easier to train in obedience than the more aloof dog. Too much pack drive can be a handicap in other types of work, however. Consider the dog sent to do an area search. This dog must be willing to leave his handler, and stay in drive. The overly dependent dog is going to become preoccupied with "where is my mom (or dad)?" and fall out of drive. This is also a function of nerves, which we'll get to later.

A good amount of pack drive makes for a more trainable dog because the dog's worst nightmare is displeasing you and getting kicked out of the pack. More independent dogs tend to also be higher in rank drive. The dog figures we're all here to please him, rather than the other way around.

There are actually a number of other drives that all dogs have in common. We've looked at those drives most crucial to success in work. And those drives that separate the Real GSD from those other dogs. And

be aware that drives alone do not a Real GSD make. Good drives are only useful when combined with the right thresholds and strong nerves.

### 3. Thresholds

Thunder is my now five year old neutered male GSD. He is byb, half West German show lines and half who-knows-what. He is a gorgeous black and red with (wouldn't you know it) good hips and elbows. He is healthy, athletic and agile. Thunder gets along exceptionally well with other dogs, likes to clown around and greets humans with friendly enthusiasm unless he's on his own territory. However, Thunder's defense drive is off the charts, and he is something of a nervebag, but luckily for me, he's got a pretty high threshold.

Since his earliest days in Schutzhund, Thunder has demonstrated all defense, all the time, despite the fact that he has excellent prey drive, it is not accessible to him under the stress of bitework. Watching Thunder do bitework is a lot like observing primal scream therapy. It's stressful and exhausting for him (which is why he is now retired from Schutzhund and doing only scent work these days, at which he excels). He puts on a heck of a show.

A dog with that degree of defense drive could be a menace to all society, if not for the threshold. By drive threshold, we mean how quickly the dog perceives a threat and responds to it. In Thunder's case, we are talking about defense drive and the point at which it kicks in. On the protection field, the sight of the helper in a sleeve is enough to stimulate a strong reaction. That is the result of his prior experiences, or training. It's also reality based behavior, he has learned that the appearance of the guy with the sleeve means he can start the action now.

Genetically, his overall stimulation threshold is fairly high. He showed us this early in life. I got Thunder when he was seven weeks old and promptly took him to his first vet visit. After being poked and prodded by the tech, we set him down on a metal table to wait for the vet. Thunder reacted by stretching out and falling asleep. Thunder has been known to conk out in other stimulating situations. On more than one occasion, he has taken a nap while on a long platz during one of my group obedience classes. There are those who would argue that going to sleep is a show of avoidance behavior, but I don't think that fits this dog. He has overall, a very calm temperament.

Some time ago, we were outside of our local Pet Smart, talking to a lady who used to breed GSDs. Thunder was on lead, doing a long platz. A toddler appeared suddenly, came screaming up behind Thunder and grabbed him hard on both flanks. Thunder turned his head to see what had attacked him, then looked up at me and went on doing his assigned task while I reamed out the toddler's parents. The former GSD breeder commented about what an interesting temperament test Thunder had just taken. Thunder has had minimal exposure to toddlers, so his reaction was a function not of good socialization to kids, but his threshold for stimulation. Even that obnoxious conduct by the child was not sufficient to spark a defensive reaction.

#### 3.1. Callie

Callie is a three year old, also black and red GSD owned by a client. She is from West German showlines and came from a breeder with a track record of producing spooks. Callie, like Thunder has high defense drive. If a stranger gets within ten feet of Callie, she barks, backs up, lunges and raises her hackles. She has no reservations about trying to bite neutral strangers. Callie reacts to non threatening events as if her life were at stake. For example, each and every time Callie's owner goes into or out of the house, she closes the sliding glass door behind her. And, every time, it makes a "thud". And every time, Callie barks at it. If someone drops a book on the floor, Callie goes into a barking frenzy.

Callie and Thunder both have roughly the same degree of defense drive. Yet, Callie cannot be approached by strangers at all, whereas Thunder approaches strangers willingly and allows strangers to pet him. Both Callie and Thunder are weak nerved dogs. The difference is that they vary greatly in stimulation thresholds (and Thunder has had more socialization). It takes little more than a leaf blowing by to send Callie into a

defensive panic. Conversely, it requires very specific learned cues to throw Thunder into defense mode. Thunder can stretch out and relax in a crowded store. Callie can't relax on her own front lawn.

You can see that a highly defensive dog with a low threshold for stimulation is a very dangerous dog! This is a dog who is very quick to perceive a threat where none exists and react aggressively. Threshold is not another word for nerves, rather it is a function of nerve strength. The stronger the dog's nerves, the less likely he is to go off in a panic over nothing and the more stimulation is required to get the dog to react.

Some dogs react to absolutely everything in the environment. This is not uncommon among some of the terrier breeds. The sound of the washing machine changing cycles or a phone ringing sets them off into a barking, out of control frenzy. The low threshold dog reacts to nearly everything and often overreacts. It is very easy to over stimulate these dogs. It's almost as if the dog is missing some sort of filter that screens incoming stimuli. You may have seen the calm, laid back dog snoozing in the living room, who barely lifts his head when a car door slams. That would be the high threshold dog.

We had a one year old Mastiff in a large group obedience class who had quite a high threshold. The dog next to her was a crazy rescued GSD with horrible nerves and a low threshold. The poor GSD growled, lunged, barked and attempted to bite any human or canine that got too close to his personal space. The Mastiff pup responded by flopping down on the grass and taking a nap.

The GSD in the group also was prone to, when sufficiently agitated biting his own handler when he couldn't get to the object of his loathing. Along with his other considerable problems, that dog was not clear headed.

### 3.2. Clear In The Head

You will hear the term clear headed bounced around a lot in working dog circles. Clear headedness is closely related to both thresholds and nerves. A clear headed dog is a dog who doesn't panic easily because he is in good contact with reality. He may have tons of drive, but has a built in ability to cap his drive when the need arises. If we had my Thunder out on the field being agitated, and he was in full drive for a bite and you were to come up behind him and pull his tail, Thunder wouldn't bite you. That's clear in the head. He is under maximum pressure, but still able to recognize that you are not the threat, the guy with the sleeve is the one to worry about.

Compare this to the dog who goes into a frenzy when a stranger walks down the street, or another dog goes by his window. His owner approaches him and he bites her. What happened? The dog lost contact with reality. He got agitated too much for his own tolerance level. Unfortunately, this sort of thing is very common. (See Rudy's story in *I Love My Dog, But . . .*). Some trainers will tell you this is perfectly normal for a high drive dog. No it is not. The dog got too stressed and lost contact with reality. That's one definition of insanity. The dog is telling you loud and clear that his tolerance for stress is inadequate. Biting the handler rather than the desired object is called displacement aggression. A well balanced dog doesn't lose his grip on reality that easily. This is not about drives, it's about a threshold that is dangerously low.

## 4. Nerves

*"Such shy animals are in all circumstances an encumbrance to their owner, who must be ashamed of such a dog, and a disgrace to their race. Under no circumstances whatever must they be used for breeding, however noble and striking they may appear outwardly." Max von Stephanitz, The German Shepherd Dog in Word and Picture (1925)*

The essence of the German Shepherd Dog (GSD) is character. By far, the worst possible temperament fault in the GSD is weak nerves. Unfortunately, this problem is rampant. Von Stephanitz himself warned us about this long ago. In fact, he told us that the production of weak nerved dogs would be nothing less than the degeneration or destruction of the breed.

Captain von Stephanitz believed that the cause of weak nerves is kenneling, but not in the sense of kenneling an individual dog so as to create kennel shyness, but rather the process of ". . . *keeping animals that have been torn away from their vocation and their natural conditions of life have been going on for some generations . . .*". In other words, the net effect of breeding and keeping dogs, without regard to preserving temperament and working abilities yields weak nerves and the inevitable destruction of the GSD. Which is, basically where we find ourselves today.

Nobody said it would be easy. Von Stephanitz recognized that the GSD should be exceptionally tuned in to the environment if he is to fulfill his obligations as guardian and protector. The tricky part would be maintaining this heightened alertness and sensitivity without crossing the line into over-reactiveness. Which is why there is a system in place to help screen dogs with faulty nerves out of breeding programs.

As with everything else, look at nerves on a continuum. The degree of nerve strength will vary across individual dogs. But, there is a minimum that must be set. The breeding requirements under the German system are set up to help ensure that dogs who fall below that minimum standard are not used for breeding. Is it a perfect system? Not at all, but it's the best one we've got.

What is a weak nerved dog? Simply put, a weak nerved dog shows avoidance or aggressive behaviors in response to non-threatening people, situations or objects. This includes the shy dogs and the fear biters. Nothing is more difficult for a breeder or dog owner to hear than that her dog has a nerve problem. People will go to great lengths to bend reality around and deny the problem.

All the alarms should go off in your head when you hear a breeder attempting to blame the environment for a dog's behavior. For instance, the shy pup who cringes and skitters away from you when you crouch down to pet her. I'll bet the breeder told you not to worry, she's just a little shy and needs time to get to know you. And I'll bet the breeder told you that is perfectly normal for a puppy. Or the young adult dog who lunges and snaps at a neutral stranger you see walking down the street and you decide it's because the stranger was wearing a funny hat or that your dog is just incredibly perceptive and recognized some evil trait in the stranger from which she was bravely protecting you. (Actually, if your dog did this only once or twice in a lifetime, I'd be inclined to buy it).

A dog's reaction to neutral strangers is always significant. By neutral, we mean the stranger walking down the street who pays no attention to you or your dog. Does the dog ignore the stranger? Fine. Some curiosity is well within normal range as well. Avoidance or aggression are signals of a serious nerve problem.

Understand that nerve problems are not fixable. Skittering away from a scary object or noise is not a training problem, it is a temperament problem. With enough training, you could teach a dog to inhibit his response to a particular stimulus, but you will not fix the nerve problem. For example, you could teach a weak dog not to run away from a moving wheelchair. But suppose the wheel chair user dropped a book on the floor. You can be certain the dog would panic all over again.

Training can, to an extent modify specific behaviors, but it cannot change the dog's genetics. Weakness in temperament will always resurface under stress. And it requires stress tests to weed weak nerved dogs out of the gene pool. That is why Schutzhund remains the breed suitability test of choice. The training itself provides numerous opportunities to evaluate the dog's overall nerve strength. Not only during the gunfire test or protection phase will the dog's nerves be tested. How well does the dog focus and concentrate on the track with a bunch of strangers around, in an unfamiliar location? How does he handle his obedience routine in front of a large crowd on a strange field with someone in the parking lot honking his horn? There are plenty of opportunities for the dog to get rattled.

Not that Schutzhund is the perfect test, there are far too many weak dogs being dragged through a title by talented trainers. But, it's better than nothing! Too often, dogs are being used for breeding without being tested for anything. In the US, breeding has become entirely subjective, as in "I know what I like, so I'll breed it!" It's astonishing how many GSD breeders there are who have no understanding of nerves. They see their

dogs, on their own turf looking confident and assume that the dogs are just great. And puppy buyers fall for this, too.

The typical scenario is, puppy buyer goes to breeder's home to see a litter of pups. The buyer is presented with six adorable puppies, all happily playing together. They look great. Unfortunately, this is the worst possible scenario in which to choose a pup. All puppies look more confident than they are on familiar territory, surrounded by littermates and familiar humans! It's not until you've isolated the pup from the littermates and human friends and preferably, taken the pup to a yet unexplored area that you can even begin to see what you've really got.

#### **4.1. Sound Sensitivity**

Sound sensitivity, that is a fearful reaction to loud noises is not a synonym for weak nerves, but is generally a symptom of a lack of overall nerve strength. Which is why the gunfire test remains a part of Schutzhund. The ideal response to a sudden, loud noise is indifference. However, it is possible to find cases of sound sensitivity that are learned rather than genetic. For example, the novice trainer who issues a harsh correction just as the gun is being fired could induce a phobic response in a sensitive dog. You'll be able to tell the difference, however, because if it is learned behavior, it will be specific. As in the case of the dog who had a bad experience in training which he came to associate with the gunshot, if the dog shows a fear reaction only to that specific noise, in that specific setting, the chances are that the behavior was learned, rather than genetic. It will take a lot of work to train this out, but it can be done, if the dog is generally sound and stable. Dogs who are exposed to large amounts of live gunfire, such as police dogs can develop phobic reactions which are genuinely learned, not inherited. Again, you will know by the narrowness of the reaction, the avoidance behavior will occur only in certain circumstances. The dog who can easily ignore a car backfire or firecrackers on the Fourth of July, but panics on the training field may have learned a negative association.

#### **4.2. Life With a Weak Nerved Dog**

It's no picnic. Weak dogs are unpredictable. Combine weak nerves with a high defense drive and low threshold and you have a genuinely dangerous dog. Who knows what is going to set the dog off? Owners are always stunned when their dogs show fear aggression. They find all sorts of excuses for it, they especially like to define it as "protection". The owner of a seven month old pup from who-knows-what breeding contacted me about training for her pup. She had no prior dog experience and was bent on breeding this male as soon as possible. Nothing I said could talk her out of it. She believed she had the world's best natural protection dog. Why? Because when invited guests come to her home, the pup plasters himself next to her, leans up against her and growls at them.

The reality is, the dog is a nervebag and should never be used for breeding. It's easy to understand how this owner mistook her dog's behavior for protection because she didn't understand what was happening, from the dog's point of view. The dog is scared silly of welcomed visitors. So, he glues himself to the owner. Her close proximity gives him just enough confidence to vocalize his anxiety by growling. I absolutely guarantee you, that if she wasn't there to protect the pup, he'd be hiding under the furniture when guests arrived. Nobody wants to hear this about their own beloved pet. But, we all need to hear it, in hopes that these dogs will not be used for breeding. This seven month old pup is exactly the kind of dog we worry about most as he is likely to mature into an unpredictable fear biter.

#### **4.3. We Just Felt So Sorry For the Poor Thing**

If I had a dollar for every time I heard that! Puppy buyers fall for the shy, timid puppies. We feel sorry for them. The breeder feeds right into our delusion that we can offer them a wonderful home and then they will be just fine. Baby puppies often demonstrate their weak nerves by acting shy. They show avoidance to anything unfamiliar. Some pups will remain avoiders, others will mature into fear aggression. Either way,

they are risky business. Imagine a weak nerved, low threshold dog being confronted by his first toddler tantrum?

It's a little different for adults. Shyness in a pup is always cause for alarm. Puppies should be into everything, curious about everyone and pretty much a royal pain. As the pup matures, it's perfectly normal for him to stop jumping all over everyone. Aloofness is not the same as shyness. It is entirely correct for a mature GSD to be reserved with strangers, showing neither avoidance nor aggression. A certain suspicion of new people is also acceptable in the GSD. Far too many breeders want their GSDs to welcome any and all onto their property with tails wagging. They actually don't want GSDs, they want Golden Retrievers wearing GSD uniforms.

My first GSD was a two year old rescued former police K9 named Jet. Jet was in a foster home when I went to meet her, accompanied by a friend. Her foster owner brought her out and gave me her Frisbee. Jet grabbed the Frisbee and flopped down on the grass, making believe I wasn't there. At no time did she take her eyes off of her foster owner. I petted and talked to her. She ignored me. I asked if I could have her and was thrilled when the foster owner said yes. My friend was disappointed. She acknowledged that Jet was exceptionally pretty, but she didn't like her temperament at all. (My friend is heavily into Golden Retrievers). I thought Jet's temperament was great. She surmised quickly enough that neither my friend nor I were threats, and proceeded to ignore us and focus on the foster owner to whom she had begun to bond. Jet had plenty of faults, but her initial aloofness toward me was totally correct for a GSD. She showed neither aggression, nor avoidance to us, just a complete lack of interest. (Of course, I eventually turned her into a social butterfly and messed the whole thing up).

Jet gave us another impromptu seminar on GSD suspicion of strangers shortly thereafter. My then boyfriend was out of town when I got Jet and he was eager to come over and meet her. She woofed at the gate, but allowed me to let him in without a complaint. She then placed her self on an extended "watch him". When he was in the kitchen, she laid down and kept her eyes on him. He went outside to install some new lights, she went along, laid down and watched every move he made. Eventually, she decided he was ok and relaxed. They became good buddies. Again, she showed no untoward aggression and certainly no avoidance. She didn't instantly pounce on him to make friends. She conducted herself like a GSD. (For more about my adventures with Jet, visit my web site <http://www.dogbehave.com/>).

Thus, we expect puppies to let their curiosity get the better of them and investigate all strangers with enthusiasm. With maturity comes suspicion, and some aloofness toward strangers is perfectly acceptable and not a symptom of bad nerves.

#### **4.4. Symptoms**

What does signal bad nerves is avoidance of a non threatening human or object or inappropriate aggression. Remember what a dog in defense drive looks like? When you observe that behavior in the absence of a legitimate, identifiable threat, you're looking at a nervebag. Nervous dogs are often very vocal, you'll hear a machine gun bark or growling. By avoidance, we mean the dog will attempt to get away from the imagined threat by physically moving away or freezing in place. Rolling over is avoidance behavior you will observe in extremely submissive dogs. Again, remember that there is a range here. Some nerve problems are worse than others.

One of the worst cases I've seen so far was a 12 week old Siberian Husky pup. I went to her home, crouched down and turned sideways to meet her (crouching and turning sideways is, in canine language a universal signal of friendliness). The pup raised her hackles, growled, barked and backed up, releasing a huge trail of urine as she escaped. She stayed about twenty feet from me for a full twenty five minutes before she was willing to approach me. (I completely ignored her). Recovery time is always important. When a pup skitters away from you or an object, take note of the amount of time it takes for the pup to recover and decide to approach and investigate. Some pups will startle at an unfamiliar object, but almost immediately regroup and check it out. I'm a lot less worried about those pups. Twenty five minutes is a very long recovery time. Fortunately, the owners of the pup aren't going to breed her!

Watch out for growling! That is never good news. Confident dogs don't growl at people or objects. Hackles up is another giveaway that the dog is frightened. People are always telling me they've got good watchdogs because every time the dog hears a noise, the dog growls at puts his hackles up. They're dreaming. No matter how impressive the display, you can never rely on a weak nerved dog for protection. The only reason they haven't run and hid is because you're right there. They can talk much tougher when mom or dad is holding onto the leash.

Dogs are so much more confident on their own turf that a lot of nerve problems get covered up. Imagine the purchaser of an adult dog going to see the dog. The seller may even put on a sleeve and give the dog a few bites, to really impress the purchaser. Be forewarned: playing sleeve tag with his owner on his own property is not a stress test! It tells you nothing. Get that same dog out on a strange field, with his owner out of sight and see what happens.

#### **4.5. But We Only Wanted A Nice Pet!**

To paraphrase Max von Stephanitz, GSD breeding is working dog breeding or ceases to be GSD breeding. There are already far more pet dogs being born than there can ever be homes for them. There is no excuse for intentionally producing pets. Prospective puppy purchasers must understand that if they go to a breeder who breeds "pets", the odds are astronomically high that they will find themselves stuck with a weak nerved, unstable, untrustworthy pet. Breeders who breed out of sentiment, ego or greed do not concern themselves with the complexities of temperament. Nerves seem to be especially sensitive to sloppy breeding. A truly strong dog with good nerves is getting harder and harder to find. You're not likely to stumble upon it by way of pet breeders.

The best pets come from breeders who breed strictly to the SV standard. In the best of breedings, not every pup is going to have the same amount of drive and some will be placed in pet homes. Your chances of getting a sound dog are far better by seeking out a real GSD breeder. Even if your only goal is to have a companion dog, you still need good nerves! A nervous, high strung spook dog makes a lousy companion. Imagine having to lock up your dog every time company comes over? Or a dog you can't trust with children? How about a dog you can't even obedience train reliably because the dog is too busy freaking out every time you leave your own property? Do not fall for big promises from pet breeders. If their dogs truly are stable, sound, trainable and protective, let them prove it on the field.

#### **4.6. But, My Dogs Do Work!**

A few notches up from the breed-for-pets crowd, there are breeders who resist the standard and argue that since their dogs do some other type of work, they are suitable for breeding. SAR, detection, K9, agility, obedience, assistance and other dog jobs are wonderful and we would expect GSDs to excel in these areas. But, they do not sufficiently stress test the dogs. Herding, under the German system is the only exception, as herding dogs are expected to demonstrate protection abilities and courage. Thus, the HGH can be used in place of a Schutzhund title. Do not confuse German style herding with AKC herding. The other problem with relying on some other type of work is that the plan lacks consistency. For example, suppose the breeder has a working SAR dog who has demonstrated courage and confidence in training situations. That's good. But, what evidence do we have that the dog can reproduce those traits in his offspring? How would we test that dog's courage, hardness and fighting instinct?

It gets really ridiculous when breeders decide it's okay to substitute an AKC obedience title for a Schutzhund title, breed survey, conformation rating and endurance test.

Also, keep in mind that not all nerve problems manifest as plainly as the dog who shies away from a strange object or puts his hackles up and barks at it. Nerve weaknesses can be very subtle, which supports the value of a balanced breed suitability test. Consider the drug detection dog who falls out of a search when

her handler gets too far away from her. A lack of drive? Could be. But it could also be a nerve problem if the dog is falling out of drive due to her anxiety when her handler isn't close.

This is why so many dogs are washed out of law enforcement, not only for patrol work, but even for detection. Think a drug detection dog doesn't need strong nerves? Oh yeah? A weak nerved dog is not about to go away from his handler into a strange warehouse with noisy machines to look for drugs. This is the wrong time to find out that the dog's nerves aren't as great as the breeder claimed.

#### **4.7. Finding the Good Ones**

The puppy buyer can avoid a lot of heartache by only considering pups from Real GSD breeders. The ones who breed to the SV standard and understand what nerve strength looks like. The breeders who are willing to stress test their breeding stock and accept an objective evaluation, even when it hurts.

A dog with good nerve strength is a joy. He can be trusted with children. He is never a bully, he's got nothing to prove because he knows he can handle any situation that should arise. And only a well bred dog with solid nerves is the dog you can rely upon to keep you safe.