

## Passive Dominance

### Mary Mazzeri

Dogs are wonderful people trainers. I enjoy watching them as they manipulate people without uttering a word. In the canine world a pack leader is the pack's focal point. The 'Alpha' often ignores solicitations from other pack members, yet expect compliance for its own demands. It does not view this as 'unfair' nor does it consider it 'calculating' from their candid perspective. So, is it any mystery that a dog might feel they *are* the pack leader when they successfully ignore human directives and yet garner all the attention and responses they want from their humans?

Most pet dogs do not have all that much to do on a given day. What they do have is time to observe their humans' behavior and habits, learning how use them to obtain what they want. Their efforts are not necessarily malevolent or even overt, usually they are subtle. They merely learn to do what works for them. The owner doesn't see this as a problem (and often time it is not a problematic behavior) but it does give the dominant dog some sense of higher status in the household.

For dogs this is very benign and even necessary, as in letting their people know that they need to go outside to eliminate. But for some dogs it can escalate into sometimes irritating and even demanding behavior. Let's take Gina's Golden Retriever Buster. Here was a student with a truly beautiful and intelligent Golden Retriever. She took him through a puppy class, basic obedience and even an advanced class. He performed brilliantly in all of these. Gina was a dedicated dog owner. At home, however, as he matured, he had become increasingly demanding, making his wants known with nudging, then pawing then sharp barking for attention as time went by. The trouble is, Gina was always trying to be an attentive, responsible owner. She unwittingly indulged these demands, working hard to figure out what he wanted/needed. Because the demanding behavior was annoying and steadily escalating, she then made some efforts to ignore his pushy demands but was not consistent. The demands progressed to nipping her in the derriere when she ignored his barking and pawing for attention. When she did attempt to correct his behavior with scolding and collar corrections, she was finally giving him exactly what he was demanding – *attention* at any price. He was still calling the shots and controlling her life. "Dominance" is not a bad thing. It does not connote a dangerous dog, merely an assertive one. The dictionary definition of dominance includes "Control or command exerted/wielded over others; of prime importance, effectiveness, or prominence". Dogs which develop subtle dominant status do so over time. This kind of control can be passive and develops in areas where the dog gains some control over 'pack' decisions. This doesn't usually present as a problem until the behavior(s) is/are exasperating or upsetting to the humans in the pack.

As the pack leader, humans should be the ones to whom the dog directs its attention. We should be the ones employing Passive Dominance. Often dog owners 'try too hard', and put themselves in a solicitous (follower's) role just trying to be kind or demonstrate their love and care to their dear dogs. It's interesting to see that usually, the harder they try, the more they speak, beg or cajole the dog that's in charge, the more aloof the dog becomes, ignoring the owners commands. We are very verbal beings and some dog owners talk to their dogs incessantly. These are the people who generally get the least attention, especially from their dominant dogs. In the pack it is the lesser members that solicit (not demand) attention from the leader. The coaxing and sweet talk offered to the dominant dog often result in indifference in some cases, disdain in others.

What can help to turn the unbalanced relationship around is a role reversal, where the owner speaks very little to the 'in charge' dog and minimizes attention and affection. Instead of petting the nose that is thrust under their elbow, ignore the request. After a few days of this, dogs 'notice' that there is

something different about their humans. Instead of constant pleas and attempts at enticement, there is quietness. Basic needs are met wordlessly. Giving a dog the 'silent treatment' has an amazing effect on most dogs, including increasing attention. Not catering to every mandate which the demanding dog makes is not always easy. Some dogs have already learned to employ strategies of escalating behaviors and persist until the human caves in. Begging, whining, and pawing for food (and don't forget the 'I'm starving' pleading sad eyes), for example, has evolved into an art form for some dogs. Their humans should be the ones to determine meal times, the food given to the dog that is sitting politely - not diving into its bowl. Begging should result in the dog being ignored or moved further and further away from the food source with each escalation: i.e. Crating or tethering can be used, until the dog calms itself down. Then the calm behavior can be rewarded by releasing the dog quietly to the food. Wait for it. No lecture needed.

The dog that demands food, or play, or a walk, or affection needs all of these things, but those needs must be met in response to respectful requests. The dog owner needs to be aware of the needs but must not reward the dog by meeting those needs in response to demanding or excessive attention-seeking behaviors. And the 'deaf' indifferent, non-responsive dominant dog that has seemingly forgotten everything it was taught, can be aided by a collar with a tab (short leash) attached. Calm, quiet 'follow through' on given commands can be enforced calmly. Being quietly and calmly proactive instead of reactive; recognizing passive dominant behaviors; being patient and composed; looking for and rewarding desired behaviors and giving a dog attention in its calm, respectful moments, can start to reward the deferential attitudes and behaviors we want to develop in a pushy dog. It can turn passive dominance around into contented, willing submission to a fair pack leader who grasps and utilizes the natural order found in the canine world.

#### About the Author

Mary Mazzeri is a 40+ yr dog training veteran. She is a teachers' teacher having mentored dozens of dog trainers over the years. She owns/operates CareDogTraining.com in Carpentersville, Illinois. She is a founding member of the IACP, past board member; serves on the Educational Committee as an evaluator, was recently awarded the IACP Member of the Year 2010; IACP Ambassador 2012; and was inducted into the IACO HOF in 2011. She will be presenting a workshop at the 2013 IACP conference in Texas.