

Elements of Temperament, Drives, Thresholds and Nerves

By Joy Tiz MS, JD

Part One: 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 it's 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.

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 (R). 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 (R) 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.

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.

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.

Part Two: 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 channeled 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

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 puppyhood. 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!!!

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.

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.

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 its 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.

Part Three: 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. 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. 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.