

THE BEHAVIORAL BENDS

Like most other animal loving American kids, I used to look forward to watching the nature programs and episodes of National Geographic on TV. I much preferred to get my kicks from Wild Kingdom rather than the usual slew of cartoons and prime time shows. Within the entire genre, I had a special weakness for shark documentaries. There was something about these programs that struck a chord in me; they were somewhere between a science lecture and a monster movie, and I would sit transfixed, horrified and ultimately educated by the “shark-u-drama” playing out before me. But as scary as the creatures themselves appeared, there was an invisible villain that always made its appearance when the subject turned to the human scientists involved: The Bends.

All I knew about The Bends was that if a deep sea diver was brought to the surface too quickly, he could die. And it wasn't a pleasant way to go, either. I could imagine the diver, cold and exhausted, wanting nothing more than to rejoin his friends in the relative safety of the boat, but instead having to remain suspended and alone in a watery purgatory until some mysterious change happened in his body which would render a safe ascent. The thought of The Bends really creeped me out.

Years later, I'm a dog trainer whose major occupation is the behavioral rehab of dogs at DRU. Over the past four years in that position, I've had the privilege of handling and training hundreds of Dobermans from every corner of the behavioral map. While I make it a point to learn something new from every dog I handle, there are also some very reliable predictions I can make based on the sheer amount of real life data I've accumulated as Training Director. Among these typical scenarios (which include soiling or “marking” in the house, “not listening” to the owner and roughing it up with the resident dog) is the “sudden development” of aggressive or defensive behavior in a dog who has seemingly been settled for a couple of weeks. These episodes are usually characterized by their apparently random nature, are often directed at the victim who is relatively well known to the dog, and are accompanied by the owner's total shock and disappointment at what seems to be a newly uncovered “mean streak” in his adopted companion. These regressions seem to occur in a fairly uniform time frames: between 3 to 6 weeks in the new home, well after what most pet owners would consider an ample readjustment period. Over time, I've heard this phenomenon described as the “end of the honeymoon”, “the test period” and one friend refers to it as “Heeere's Johnny!” after Jack Nicholson's metamorphosis in *The Shining*. I call it “The Behavioral Bends”.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PAST

A common diagnosis of any adopted dog with an attitude problem is one of an abusive past. Indeed, from the appearance of “Black Beauty” onward any thought on the nature of a “slightly used” animal from a shelter, rescue or dog pound is informed by the assumption that the animal in question was somehow abused by his prior owners. While this is certainly a tragedy wherever it *does* occur, the fact is that only a small percentage of the dogs being adopted out from our organization have any such history. Much more common is the dog who has been benignly neglected by owners unprepared for a large,

active animal in need of exercise. Even more troublesome is the over-indulged, totally uncontrollable pet whose owners were too permissive and emotionally weak to enforce any rules. What does this matter? I submit that it matters a lot.

If we “rescue” a dog, we want to believe we are saving him from a terrible, sometimes violent past. We wish to make up for any wrong done to our new friend, and are likely to make excuses for any early indiscretions in his behavior, and for any indulgences we give him against the advice of his keepers at the shelter. Our natural and honorable sense of compassion and empathy causes us to give the new dog too much latitude, too much attention, and too many excuses. By the time behavior becomes aberrant enough to warrant intervention, it is well into the dog’s stay. And whereas the adopter uses phrases like “out of the blue” to describe what he is seeing, a person more familiar with canine behavior will see it as a natural, though unacceptable, result of too many expectations and not enough training investment on the part of the new family.

The interim period when the dog lives at the shelter is a much more relevant influence on his behavior in the home. Many rescue organizations do not believe in “long term kenneling” (with the definition of “long term” being between two weeks to several months, in most cases) as they believe that it results in the behavioral deterioration of the dog. Indeed, many big shelters and dog pounds are centers of barely controlled chaos and the dogs within their walls are over-stimulated and under-handled due to their number and need. However, in a state of the art facility with the highly trained staff sensitive to the dogs’ needs as individuals and also to the breed’s requirements, the waiting time in the shelter can be a much more benign and even beneficial experience for the dogs.

Adopters and friends of DRU are often unaware of the lifestyle the dogs lead, and its disparity to the more normal life of a pet dog. Here are some examples of the differences:

STIMULATION: The dogs at DRU are kept as quiet as possible by controlling the level of undesirable stimulation they receive while kenneled. This is one reason that we do not allow visitors or adopters to walk through the wings. The relocation of a dog from a kennel to another is influenced by his propensity to fence fight, howl, or become dirty in his run. Proper, desirable stimulation that occupies the dog’s mind and body is highly sought. Safe, long lasting chews and toys; supervised play and exercise in the yards; and quiet, individual attention from the regular kennel staff are all valuable components.

SCHEDULING: A dog kenneled at DRU is on a religious schedule. He is fed, watered, exercised, and bedded down at specific times every day without exception. You can set a clock by the “nap times” in the kennel, when every dog is quiet or asleep, based on his natural habits and reinforced by the DRU staff. This quiet time for the dogs is as necessary to their psychological and physical health as good food and water.

INTERACTION/SOCIALIZATION: New members of the kennel staff are only gradually introduced to the full population. No one is forced to meet every dog in the first day at work. Likewise, a new dog in the population is not coddled, prodded and analyzed on arrival. In most cases, he is benevolently ignored: fed, cleaned and exercised without too much extra attention so that he may learn his new schedule and the “house rules” without

transferring any fear, defensiveness or dependence on one keeper over another. As the new employee or the new dog settle in to their schedule, it is then that their individual personality is considered. This allows us to match certain dogs with certain staff members for special care, training and upkeep. Although all of the dogs can be cared for by all of the kennel staff due to the uniformity of the rules, there are definite relationships between certain employees and their favorite dogs.

Dog/dog interaction is not pursued vigorously; by definition, Dobermans may possess a higher level of dog aggression than many other breeds. However, if a pair of dogs tends to get along well, they will be exercised together whenever possible; and in some cases they may be housed together in the larger kennels.

TRAINING: The dogs lucky enough to be in the "DRU U" Training Program are worked as frequently as possible. The training itself is generally geared toward the real world, and the student dogs are often worked in the shelter's kitchen and office, as well as in the surrounding neighborhood. They are eventually exposed to traffic, pedestrians, kids, other dogs, cats, livestock, and the rest of the cast of characters that may populate their next life in their adoptive home. Notice that I used the term "exposed", not "socialized". People and dogs encountered on walks are NOT encouraged to approach and interact with the DRU dog, based on the likelihood of an inappropriate action on *their* part (not the DRU dog's part).

Instead, the student dog is taught to quietly deal with both two and four footed passersby. His desire to chase, jump on, bark at or fight with is overridden by his desire to obey a higher authority: his handler. When asked how the locals feel about so many Dobermans walking through their streets, I'm always pleased to answer that DRU dogs are considered to be the best behaved dogs in the neighborhood!

Now, with all of this in mind, compare the quiet, predictable and slow moving life of the dog in the DRU shelter with the life he walks into in the new home: it is like traveling up from the peace of the ocean's bottom and surfacing at a Jimmy Buffet concert.

THE NEW KID IN TOWN:

The newly adopted dog arrives to a place you call home but which he calls Disneyland: instead of the confines of his kennel and the never-changing view of the training field or exercise yard, there is a huge landscape of sights and smells and textures. The scent of your house, the furniture, the carpeted floor, the staircase is all terra incognita to your new pal. Even a dog who has lived in a house before has never lived in YOUR house before: the novelty is as profound for the surrendered estate dog moving into your humble apartment as it is to the stray moving in the spacious colonial. Instead of a modest donated blanket and the climate-controlled floor, there is a dog bed, sometimes one in every room. Instead of the universal "safe" dog toys like Kongs, solid rubber balls, and sterilized bones, there are squeakers and stuffed toys and pigs' ears. Instead of the strict, predictable institutional schedule there are days off, vacation time, sleep-in-late days, midnight walks, Sunday drives, jogging at dawn, etc; the variations are endless. Here's where the trouble starts. Instead of the same ten faces performing the same daily activities, there are a few main characters and sometimes a supporting cast of

dozens in the new chapter of your dog's life, each one with his own views on how to interact with a dog. Instead of being introduced systematically through predictable activities like feeding and cleaning, these are outsiders who met at the door, on walks, at parties, in vet's offices, while delivering mail, repairing a sink, surprising a long-lost friend, reading the meter and just dropping by. Instead of ignoring the dog and only interacting with him in a non-threatening way, they stare at him, hug him, get on the floor with him, ask him to jump up, pet him incessantly, give him commands and otherwise overwhelm him. Do you see a difference? None of this is a treatise advocating the hiding away of your dog or twenty-four hour kenneling. As many self-proclaimed dog experts prescribe the "pup in a plastic bubble" approach as do the wishful thinkers who believe that your *adult, adopted guarding* breed dog should thoroughly enjoy the attention of everything on two legs or four. However, there *is* a happy medium which will result in your adopted dog's successful adaptation in his new home. Consider it a program of decompression: the safest way to avoid The Behavioral Bends.

1. A LITTLE AT A TIME

Rather than allowing your new dog free reign of his new home, restrict his physical territory to a smaller area. Utilizing a crate overnight and for unsupervised periods is highly recommended.

Start out by allowing the dog in the room where you spend most of your time; for most families this is the living or family room. He is to remain in this room with you; if necessary, leash him to yourself with a six foot or longer line. He is *not* to be allowed on furniture at this point. At night, allow him to sleep in your room (*NOT* on your bed).

As he learns your daily routines, start allowing him a bit more (supervised) leeway, gradually increasing his territory until it includes all of the house you wish him to have available. At the first sign on any backsliding, especially that which involved marking, soiling or destruction, take back some of the real estate. Waiting for time to cure these problems will only result in their becoming long-standing habits rather than momentary mistakes.

A word on the sharing of furniture: this is a *privilege* which a dog must earn, not a right that you must honor. No dog should have free access to furniture until he can SIT, LIE DOWN, STAY and GET OFF of the furniture on ONE command from you. Sound harsh? This is one of the most common scenarios for a dog bite. It has also sounded harsh to every person who has called me after ignoring this advice and being bitten, sometimes severely, by their dog as they sat with him on the couch or the bed. However harsh the concept of responsibility sounds, the "correction" by the dog to the face of his owners is harsher. Remember, your "harshness" only results in your dog having to suffer with reclining on a poly-cedar LL Bean dog bed or a stretch of plush carpet. *His* harshness results in an injury, a loss of trust, and sometimes the loss of the dog's life. Think before you feel sorry for him.

2. KEEP HIM TO YOURSELF

The pride and joy one feels when bringing home a new pet is hard to keep quiet. Many adopters want to celebrate the new arrival by introducing him to everyone in their social circle, taking him for an inaugural spin through the neighborhood, crashing the

local puppy play group... unfortunately this romantic notion is a disaster waiting to happen if it is undertaken too lightly.

You may feel that you and your new dog share an undeniable bond; brought together by Fate, your devotion and love may be new, but it is lasting and mutual. Be careful: this may feel good to you, but your dog doesn't necessarily feel the same way. You have adopted a member of a breed that may be suspicious of strangers. YOU are a stranger to this dog, probably will be for longer than you think. It is a smart Dobe owner who spends lots of quality one-on-one time with his new friend before bringing him around to meet the neighbors. Let your dog get to learn *you* and your immediate household members. Likewise, get to know *him*, too. What are his habits, his likes and dislikes? What is his threshold for handling, for pressure, for activity? When does he seem to run out of gas? Where does he go when he wants to rest? How does he let you know when he'd rather be left alone?

When you can read your dog, you can predict your dog. When you can predict him, you can control him. When you can control him, you can meet the responsibility of letting him meet other people.

It goes both ways. When your new dog gets to know you, to learn your voice and body language; to understand your limits, he will trust in your judgment and better defer to your direction.

3. BE HUMBLE

This is the hardest part. But it is at least as important as any other component of your new relationship with your adopted Dobe.

Some of the most disappointing experiences involving a dog's failure in either his original home or his adopted home are those which occur due to the owner's belief that he knows better than anyone else what he needs to do with his dog. Any suggestions which are offered are countered with claims of experience, the number of dogs owned, or the history with the last dog he or she owned. Older owners won't be instructed by someone their junior. Younger owners "don't believe in" the advice from an elder. The end result is uniform: pride, stubbornness or just plain old ego get in the way and a dog is put into a situation which he can't handle. Think of the people who give up a dog for chewing things in their house, but who "don't believe in" crates. The people who have owned four Labrador Retrievers and refuse to believe that their adult adopted stray male Doberman is going to be a wonderful playmate for their neighbor's male German Shepherd. The people who think it's "cruel" to train a dog using anything but cookies but who have no problem bringing the dog back to the shelter when the cookies lose their appeal in the face of a more tempting reward (like the kid on the bicycle or the in-laws' Lhasa Apso). These are not dog problems, but human problems. Unfortunately, it's the dog who ultimately pays the price.

No matter how many dogs you have known in your life, you are a beginner with *this* dog and should not assume that your past experience has conferred instant control and expertise in this handling of the new dog. This is a belief subscribed to by the most successful professional trainers who have handled many thousands of dogs. Each one is a new experience and is as much a teacher as a student. We trainers have been humbled many times by dogs who tested and found fault with our opinions about the generalities

of behavior. Sometimes these are hard lessons, but learning them makes it possible to help more dogs than ever succeed. If you want to have the best chances for success with your new friend, try to open your mind as well as your heart when it comes to understanding and addressing any problems that arise during his adaptation period.

The Behavioral Bends don't have to be a disaster. Being prepared to understand them and to deal with them appropriately will get you through it. Your new Dobe has probably gone through much in his life before getting to the happy day you choose him to be yours. With your patience and understanding, perhaps the "Bends" will be the last crisis he experiences.

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