

Treatment and training of nervous, excitable and timid greyhounds.

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The above topic, when successful, can be one of the most rewarding experiences for a trainer. The elation, excitement and joy of winning a race are enough to make any trainer become addicted for life. However, not all problems are solutions in disguise. Medications and herbal treatments often only mask the underlying problem and usually cannot be used on race day as they will swab positive. Consequently, remedies will involve hours of thought to find a possible solution, which then needs to evolve into a devious plan to outsmart the dog in question. This behavior/training plan must be based on logic and common sense and must be able to adapt to changes of circumstance. Most times it consists of implementing or altering a condition reflex and finding a top quality reward.

Timidity or avoidance behaviour or fearfulness has a hereditary predisposition, but is certainly influenced by the environment. A dominant owner and a submissive dog can result in a different outcome for another more passive owner. It has been extensively documented how puppies are best socialized with humans (and other events) between 6-8 weeks and that, gradually, up to the age of 12 weeks, the "approach behaviour" becomes replaced by "avoidance behaviour". Thus, we find that puppies left unaccustomed to humans at 14 weeks, are nearly impossible to socialize and will remain shy and timid for the rest of their life.

Krushinjskii (1962), described how puppies, when first born, have a passive defense reflex (PDR), but are keen to investigate new objects. This then overcomes their fears and allows the development of their active defense reflex (ADR). So we see that PDR becomes gradually displaced by a more active ADR.

There are also breed differences in the levels of PDR and ADR and it is also known that PDR is stronger in bitches and ADR is stronger in dogs. Androgens can increase the ADR, this is certainly seen when dogs mature sexually. "Fear biting" is the extreme instance of PDR.

There appears to be no relation between timidity of humans and timidity of other dogs and animals.

Human timidity in a race dog, in most cases, can be traced back to the puppy socialization issue. These dogs respond well to having only one or two handlers and bonding with them. Women are usually better than men. The fastest way to develop bonding is to take them walking on a lead on a regular basis and this results in the walker becoming their Alpha dog "hero". Bonding also seems to

improve performance. At the track, allow them to “lean” on you to get moral support. Especially behind the boxes they seem to panic, when within close proximity to other handlers, but fortunately, after this moment, they race as well as the other dogs. Most importantly, use a catcher they really know well so the dog responds to their voice after the race. There is no need to get a greyhound used to large groups of people within close proximity, even though some trainers recommend walking around shopping centers.

Dog timidity or “field shy”, is usually the situation where, during the race, the dog “eases off” chasing when another dog starts to invade its space. This is where the dog trades its own welfare and safety against the desire to chase. It is most commonly seen in younger dogs, as they are still developing their ADR and they have a shorter concentration time span. Often, the cause is having been reared in a group with one or two larger ‘bullying’ pups and the affected pup remembering the pain inflicted at the time. Also, it is more commonly seen in smaller bitches. Always make allowances for dogs younger than two years as most improve when they mature.

In older dogs it may have been caused as a result of a fall or other painful experiences in a previous race- these dogs are better raced at another track for a while. The other remedy is to try and improve the chasing desire for the lure by stimulating all five senses i.e., sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. Drag lures are good to emphasize sight, sound has usually been well provided for with cable lures and squeakers used extensively. Use rabbit skins for touch and taste. (Not permitted in Australia) We have found that many Australian dogs, when they first come to NZ, are lacking on the drag lure, but after a few weeks improve greatly. A “drag on the arm” at the track is also helpful as it allows the dog to catch the lure at several different places on the track, and this reminds them that they need to focus for the entire journey, not just at the end of the race, where they catch the lure. This retraining must be done on a solo basis to redirect and emphasize their focus away from other dogs, to the joys of catching the lure. Do not give them a run, unless it ends with a reward in the form of a lure (sheepskin). Even with all these efforts it is usually a difficult problem to solve and we accept a small improvement as being successful. Above all, always nominate for the easiest race.

Excitable dogs are definitely born that way and are unlikely to have become excitable as a result of environmental influences. They invariably are only suited to short course racing as they waste much of their energy before the race. This condition appears to be strongly inherited in all breeds of dogs. Association with calmer dogs helps reduce excitability. Separation –anxiety syndrome and “me first” syndrome puts these dogs in this excitable category also. It is disputable whether less dietary red meat helps to calm these dogs down. (Conversely, it is accepted that red meat helps to make better beginners). I am not aware of any herbal products that could be useful.

Bad travelers are a problem, not only for nervous GHs but also for some excitable dogs. The cause is undoubtedly the dog’s perception that he/she are not in control of the motion they are experiencing. It is common in the younger dogs until they get used to travel. In extreme cases they will drool saliva, vomit, urinate or defecate. Generally they travel better when restricted to a smaller area when compared to allowing a lot of movement in a larger compartment. The main method of training is to persevere with shorter trips, always trying to reward the dog with a run at the end of the journey to mimic the reason for travel later in life. Some trainers routinely give these dogs one slow K, one Magnesium tablet and a multiple B complex capsule before travelling. Medication with tranquilizers (cannot be used on race days) must be in smaller doses, so that they do not induce a

loss of balance. These work well for trialing and training. Port wine has been recommended by some, as alcohol is not excreted in urine!!

Bad kennel dogs can ruin a dogs' performance if engaged in a later race. They may pant, drool, bark or whine, claw at the door, rip up their bed, lick the walls, urinate and defecate. Some appear to be sitting quietly but are stressing internally as their pulse rate and dilated pupils will indicate. Barking muzzles are only useful if it is not too hot, as they must be able to pant. Salivation causes a severe loss of Potassium and a resultant loss of stamina and sometimes cramp. I have seen some of these dogs' performance improve when they were given a short hand slip before they left home, "to take the edge of them". This seems to indicate that, for some dogs at least, the cause may be the anticipation of the race and that is really a good thing! Hopefully, someone in the audience may have remedy for dribbling /drooling dogs which does not swab.

In reality, we are expecting the impossible from our greyhounds. On the one hand we want them to be super alert and fly out of the boxes at the start of the race and on the other hand they have to remain cool, calm and collected immediately before the event so they conserve all their energy!! And the starting boxes, in their mind, represent the final and ultimate enigma in their quest for greatness!

Turning in the boxes is frequently the result in younger dogs when they start their career. Methods used to try to remedy this problem are: Lock them in the boxes and let the lure go round (bad), or hold them with your hand with the back door open before the lids open, or give them a short hand slip before you leave home. Most times the problem solves itself in a short time.

Dysuria or "tying up" can be an annoying problem,..... even for top dogs! Undoubtedly, if this occurs before the race as in excitable dogs all efforts must be made to get the dog to urinate. Manual expression often gets a better flow going. Juniper/celery herbal tablets usually work surprisingly well. (No swab) UROCARB (a human product for use in dysuria for prostate patients) helps to relieve the spasm and does not swab. Similarly URAL is a urinary alkalinizer available in NZ. Post-race tying up:- buscopam is good but swabs positive for ... days. The above products may also be used.

Fighters mostly do not fall into the excitable category but deserve a mention. This is not so much a matter of what they do wrong (fighting), but more about what they are failing to do right (chasing). It is normal for young pups to "play fight" as they grow up, this does not make fighters. But when one puppy attacks their litter mates over any food, sheepskin, ball etc., then we have a potential problem. These dogs must be separated from the rest of the litter, trained to chase and rewarded individually at an early age. They learn to become very possessive about the reward and this tends to minimize "jealousy fighting". Certainly, testosterone plays a large part in this behavior pattern but this energy must be contained, controlled and directed towards chasing. Use of anabolic and androgenic hormones used to be a common cause. A thorough physical check should rule out any injury causes which can distract a dog from chasing. Treatment with progestagens has success but usually at a cost of reduced chasing and slowing the dog down severely. Injection of 50-100mg of Medroxyprogesterone Acetate (MPA) reduces aggression. Repeat the injection 4 weeks after the initial dose if needed. Alternatively Micrognon tabs daily for 4-6 weeks.

Medications

The following drugs are mentioned in the literature.

Tranquil Paste(Nature Vet): a mixture of tryptophan , B-complex, other vitamins and minerals and may have a beneficial calming effect for some greyhounds, no swab worries. I had only limited success here.

Clomipramine (Clomicalm) : is used in small very active dogs. Swabs positive

Amitriptyline (Endep 25 mg tabs) is good to calm show dogs. Swabs positive

Valium, Dilantin, Phenergan all swab positive but can be used in re-training

Vitamin E (up to 300-400 IU on race day) I have had no experience here.

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