

AKITA TEMPERAMENT

by Sherry E. Wallis

While everyone who breeds or buys dogs probably agrees they want dogs with "good" temperaments, exactly what that means is left to the imagination more often than not. Each party assumes that he is talking about the same thing. Unfortunately, huge discrepancies may lie between their concepts of what constitutes good temperament,

For instance, many years ago, a group of us attended a party given by the owner of a champion male. He was outside when we arrived and remained there despite inquiries about him. Finally, a few of the guests prevailed on our host and were taken out to see the dog,

Several told me that later that they wished they hadn't been so insistent, Initially, the dog growled and snarled at them, quieting down after a few minutes but remaining very alert and wary. One visitor said, "One wrong move and you'd have been fair game!"

The owners later told me that they felt the dog's temperament was very correct for the breed and were quite proud of what they considered a properly protective nature. If he growled at a few judges in the ring and couldn't be petted by spectators, that was okay with them. They hadn't bought a poodle.

Is this good temperament? I don't think so, but it is certainly an "eye-of-the-beholder" question. This discussion of temperament was originally published in *Akita Dog*, the newsletter of the Akita Club of America, and later in *Akita World* magazine. It contains what I consider the essential components of good temperament for an Akita, why I think they are important, how to tell if you have problems, and how to strengthen weaknesses.

This material is garnered from my own experience, education, and opinion, and I welcome input from you. Your suggestions, comments, or (perish the thought!) criticisms should be directed to me.

The priority of this list is rather loose. Some components are equally important; others depend on an individual's preferences. For instance, many people would rank protectiveness much higher than I have, but almost everyone would agree on the first few. However, I know from experiences like the one just related that even they are open to challenge.

RECIPE FOR GOOD TEMPERAMENT

BITE INHIBITION

First and foremost, every dog, not just an Akita, should be bite-inhibited. He should be so reluctant to bite, that he does so only under the direst of circumstances. Even then, he should bite only once, and damage from the bite should be very minimal.

ACCEPT AUTHORITY

Second, they should be accepting of authority, that is they should be submissive. Between and within breeds, the degree of submissiveness varies. The Akita's independent nature may well modify its willingness to cooperate.

LIKE CHILDREN

Third, an Akita should like children. Just as retrievers like sticks and balls, this breed should have an affinity for children.

ACCEPT STRANGERS

Fourth, dogs should be accepting of non-threatening strangers, regardless of whether the stranger is friendly or neutral.

CONFIDENCE

Fifth, the dog should have enough confidence to be at ease in an unfamiliar setting.

TRAINABLE

Sixth, he should be trainable. He should be willing and able to learn behaviors that he repeats reliably.

NOISE STABLE

Seventh, he should be stable around strange noises.

INDEPENDENT

Eighth, to some degree, Akitas should have an independent nature.

INHIBITED

Ninth, Akitas should have an inhibited nature. They should not respond to stressful situations by becoming increasingly excited or agitated.

PROTECTIVE

Tenth, faced with a threat, they should be protective of their family.

ACCEPT OTHER DOGS

Eleventh, they should be accepting of other dogs.

LOYALTY

Did I actually put loyalty last? I don't believe it either because it is the essence of Akita character.

INHERITANCE OF BEHAVIOR

Research on all sorts of animals, including humans, tells us that the basic composition of our temperament is inherited. It is constructed of building blocks we receive from both parents. Although we have elements in common with each, the material we receive is unique to us. The exception to this, of course, is identical twins. Studies of twins separated at birth have confirmed the inheritability of temperament, just as studies of identical twins living together show the powerful influence of environment on these elements.

Similarities between the former are eerie in their consistency. For instance, one set of twins separated at birth were phobic about water but wanted to swim. Independently, they arrived at the same solution to their fear; they backed into the water! Another pair lived in neighboring towns and were both firemen. They both did woodworking in their spare time and had built identical benches around trees in their back yards.

On the other hand, most of us have met identical twins living together who work at differentiating themselves from each other. Often, these pairs are like two sides of the same coin with complementary personalities--one is extroverted, the other shy; one likes science, the other arts; one is bold, the other cautious.

Inheritance gives each of us a set of building blocks that represent our basic nature. Our experiences, interactions with others, and environment determine how those blocks are arranged. With almost the same components, one structure may have a good foundation and great stability, while another is likely to topple into disarray.

The foundation of a dog's temperament is laid early and will influence his behavior throughout his life. The structure is dynamic and reacts to outside influences so long as the animal is alive. We can reinforce strengths and shore up weaknesses in the dog's nature. We must be careful not to undermine strengths and encourage problems.

CONCLUSION

I hope this series on temperament has made you think about what you want in a dog and how to go about getting it. I'm sure you can think of things I've left out or with which you disagree, and I'd like to hear from you in that regard. E-mail me at sherry@sherob.com. You can also call (713/465-9729) or write by snail mail (726 E. Creekside, Houston, Tx. 77024)