

Obedience Is...Trial or Tribulation?

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(Illustrations by Kati Ball)

How many of you exhibitors out there have ever been in a situation at a show or trial where you had to be next to an unruly or aggressive dog for the group exercises? It happens, right?

Several years ago I was showing my Alaskan Malamute male, Niki, at an obedience trial. I was chatting with some friends outside the ring and noticed a gentleman approaching us who was obviously trying to maintain control of his Great Dane. My first thought was more of amusement since it was an obedience trial, but in the back of my mind, I felt I should watch my dog. Before I had a chance to think more about what could happen, the Dane lunged at my dog, but connected with my thigh instead. The man went along his way, never apologizing to me or reprimanding his dog! I was in a state of shock, more about the Dane owner's attitude (or lack of it) and relieved that my 95-pound Malamute had not engaged in the episode. The bite did not break the skin, nor did it tear my pant suit. It merely resulted in a swollen, bruised area and some discomfort. Unusual incident, you might say, especially at an obedience trial?

A similar incident happened at a German Shephard Specialty. I attended the specialty to observe friends and students compete in obedience. As I was walking by the ring, I noticed my left leg was no longer with me. It is funny how you notice things like that. Luckily, this time, I was not bitten. A German Shephard had been sleeping behind its owner's chair and had left its position to attack my pant leg which was moving approximately five feet in front of the owner's chair. The German Shephard's owner detached her dog from my pant leg and proceeded to make excuses for her dog's actions. Until my friend, who was a German Shephard breeder, made quips, and insults about temperament and training, the woman had not even bothered to apologize. Later, she came up to me and begrudgingly offered to pay for a new pair of pants if I sent her a receipt.

Why should incidents like this happen, especially at an obedience trial? The people's attitudes bothered me more than anything else. The lack of apologies from both, and the excuses from the woman were astonishing. The fact that one cannot correct a dog at AKC functions was not even the issue ... they both obviously felt there was not a need for disciplinary or corrective actions. Or, maybe they thought it was cute or possibly that the dog was protecting them. Not many people feel threatened at a dog show to the point that their dog would have to protect them. The nervous jitters of an obedience exhibitor should not be misread by a "trained" dog as a cue to attack. Why would anyone condone the actions of their dog in a situation like that? I have seen similar episodes where

a handler commiserates the dog with, "There, there, don't let him frighten you." They appear proud of their indiscriminate biter who goes after anything and everything, hoping the odds are in his favor. Pity the vet, groomer, or kennel who has to treat, bathe, or care for that "obedience trained" dog.

So is there any excuse for a dog owner whose dog is not trained to enter in obedience? None, as far as I am concerned. Excuses do not help a given situation. The untrained dog who is unruly or aggressive due to inexperience or lack of training jeopardizes the fellow exhibitors and dogs, not to mention the judge and stewards. None of us want our dog injured or scared by another dog.



Although the aggressive dog does not happen that frequently, I have seen dogs try to start romantic encounters on the group sit or down, as well as male dogs trying to "mark" the dog next to them. Quick responses are commendable on the part of judges and stewards alike who remedy such misbehavior by removing them from the line.

As I have stated before, there is a difference between a dog who has been "taught" to do something versus a dog that has been "trained" to do something. Normally, the dog who has been "taught" will perform when he wants to, which is not usually when there is anyone around or something more interesting going on. A "trained" dog should perform no matter what. Reread the Purpose Section of the AKC Obedience Regulations where it says, "...the basic objective of Obedience Trials is to produce dogs that have been trained and conditioned always to behave in the home, in public places, and in the presence of other dogs..." "Training," in my opinion, means that the dog has had an abundance of repetition to not only learn from his mistakes, but to learn from his successes. It takes work, but it beats blowing your entry fee, or someone else's! The dog should perform when the handler gives the command (note it is not worded "request"), just as the handler must respond to the judge's command.

As an exhibitor, you cannot tell the judge, "I do not want to be next to that dog because he has been attacking dogs all morning" or "That dog is not under control, can I be next to another dog?" Besides, the dog might very well have done a more than

adequate job on the individual exercises. Maybe he only behaves inside the ropes (check the Purpose Section of the Obedience Regulations on that one!). Unless the judge has seen such activity, the uncontrolled dog (outside the ring) is still judged like all the other dogs.

If you were to question someone with an unruly dog as to why they are showing in obedience, you might get answers like: "I just wanted to see what he would do" or "I just do this for fun, it really does not matter if he qualifies or not." If asked about the dog's behavior, the owner might even say, "Gee, he is so excited" or "He has never done that before!" or "Maybe I should get him out more." One would think that it would be obvious to get the dog around other dogs since most obedience trials have an entry of around 100 dogs and most dog shows are over 1,000 dogs!

If you asked almost any obedience competitor why they were showing, they might say, "I am doing it for fun." There may be other reasons, too, but "fun" would certainly be mentioned somewhere in the conversation. The exhibitor going for a Dog World Award, or a class placement, or High Score of the Day is doing it for fun, but he does not want to hear that the rowdy dog will be next to his dog for sits and downs. Nor does the exhibitor who hired a babysitter for the weekend, driven five hours, rented a hotel room,

and hopes to get the last leg in novice so she can compete in Open in the next season's shows. Their only chance is to make sure that their dogs are really "trained" in the event chaos erupts. Obedience exhibitors in novice are often amazed that they can hold their breath for 3 minutes on an uneventful long down let alone that they did not suffer a major coronary when a loose dog confronted their dog to join in a merry chase. One can not help but think, "Are we having fun yet?" When the magic words "exercise finished" are heard, we hope that it has been a tribute to our dog's ability instead of a trial indicative of "the agony of defeat." (Perhaps that is why AKC selected the word "TRIAL.")

We as exhibitors have an obligation and responsibility to train our dogs, socialize our dogs, and have them learn through mistakes and successes with a wide variety of experiences. And, we certainly should not short change the dog on praise when he makes progress during the process of correcting the problem. Our goal should be consistent with the AKC Obedience Regulations Purpose "to demonstrate the usefulness of the purebred dog as a companion of man, not merely the dog's ability to follow specified routines in the obedience ring." When we accomplish this, we will deserve "atta boys" and "atta girls" and it will be fun for all exhibitors whether they score 170 or 199 or flunk an exercise. No dog is perfect, but that does not mean he has to be out of control.

Happy Heeling &
Terrific Training!