

They Are NOT Out To Take Over The World:

Dispelling general myths of the dominant dog.

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"Dominance Theory" is a big topic in dog training. When you hear some trainers talk you would think it explains every aspect of life with a domestic dog. "Why did my dog do that?" "Well, he is just being dominant and you have to stop that!" Let us roll the dog, shake it down, grab its muzzle, and let us stop that DOMINANT behavior. But wait! How correct is this theory?

How did the current domestic canine dominance theory come about? A number of short-term wolf behavior studies. These studies were then extrapolated to the domestic dog. The wolf studies focused on a very small and structured part of wolf interaction. One example is the so-called "Alpha Roll". The Alpha Roll is based on the assumption that in order to enforce relative position in the pack, a dominant, or Alpha wolf would roll a subordinate wolf onto its back and then hold it there until it submits. Sadly, the erroneous data found its way into our domestic dog owning culture as gospel and the myth still abounds in the dog training, breeding and owning world even to this day.

To take the behavior from one species and apply it to the other simply because they share a common background on the evolutionary tree is inaccurate. Chickens and hawks share a similar evolutionary background. Iguanas and Komodo Dragons share a similar evolutionary background. Would it be accurate to study chickens and state this is how hawks interact? What about studying Iguanas and applying the information to Komodo Dragons? They are very different animals. Why do we do this to the wolf and domestic dog? Another issue is because humans are a completely different species and do not speak dog, we can only guess at what is going on inside that fuzzy head leaning on our knee. Dogs are as different from humans as a Komodo Dragon is from a duck! Trying to extend the social interactions from one species to another is as ludicrous as asking a duck to kill a mouse.

One researcher, Dr. Frank Beach actually studied dog packs for a thirty-year study. During this research, many important behaviors were noted including:

- * Males have a less variable hierarchy amongst themselves than female dogs (very basically, males are more predictable when in a single sex group than females)
- * But when the genders are mixed, the rules are mixed as well. There is very little actual physical domination in mixed gender groups of dogs. The others will rapidly quash the few dogs that may try to physically bully. Lower ranked dogs do not try and "move up the ladder" - they accept their position.

* Lastly, "alpha" does NOT mean the most physically dominant dog. In fact, "alpha" does not even equate directly to our notions of "dominance". Rather, the "alpha" dog is the one in control of the resources.

When we use force, rolling, etc on our dogs, what are we telling them? We are implying that we are insecure in our position in the family unit. For a dog that needs someone to be in charge of ensuring needed resources will always be provided, seeing that provider act in a manner that indicates he (or she) is not secure can be very confusing to a dog.

In order to alleviate that perceived gap in leadership, the domestic dog will often react in way totally unacceptable in human society but TOTALLY acceptable in canine society. That dog is now assumed to be a problem animal. In actuality, who is the problem?

The answer is not to act with equally inappropriate harshness or force intended to show the dog that is in charge. Instead we have to take measures to alleviate confusion. Be clear, concise, benevolent, firm when needed but never cruel or harshly physical. A dog that is secure in his position in the house regardless of if he is a self confident, middle ranking or lower confident will not be a challenge. If we can get past the old school of having to physically dominate our dogs to force them into submission, then they and we will be all the better for it. Confused dogs are more likely to react. They want to alleviate that confusion. Why should we worsen it by acting as though we are confused ourselves and squabble with our dogs?

I have butted heads with many a trainer, breeder and owner regarding my growing views on dominance. I was trained in the "old ways." I have been told and taught certain breeds MUST be managed a certain way or with certain aids like prong collars. In the years I have worked with dogs, I am shocked I have not been killed when I reflect on how I was originally taught to "take control." How many times in the past have I unknowingly shown a dog that I was confused and challenging him? I have since grown and expanded my understanding of canine dominance. Oh how wrong my first mentors were!

These days, I work successfully with everything from herding breeds, working breeds, "bull" breeds, mastiff/molosser breeds, common breeds, rare breeds, terriers, toys, and more by employing methods that are fun but clear - concise, and firm when needed. Though each dog is an individual and various breed drives must be understood in order to effectively work with him or her, more often than not I find that that the dog assumed "dominant" is not trying to take over the world - he is just confused. Rolling, pinning, leash correcting, yelling, etc just makes his confusion worse. Some dogs may even interpret it as a challenge and decide to return more of the same. Then what?

Dispel the myths; stop believing your dog is out to take over your world. Chances are he is confused. We need to stop acting as an immature, insecure, middle ranked beasts. We have to start acting like the benevolent leaders our dogs need.

For more on this topic and resources I have referred to with my own growth in dogs:

The History and Misconceptions of Dominance Theory, Melissa Alexander, 2001.

The Macho Myth, Ian Dunbar Ph.D., BVetMed, MRCVS, 1989,

'Privileges Of Status' For Wannabe Pack Leaders, Marilyn Bergeman, 1999,

On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals, Turid Rugaas, Hanalei Pets, 1997

The Other End Of The Leash, Dr. Patricia McConnell, Ballantine Books, 2002

Dogs: A Startling New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior, and Evolution, by Raymond and Lorna Coppinger, Scribner, New York, 2001.

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