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BONUS ARTICLE

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ANTI-PREDATION GAMES -

Everyday Activity For Predatory Dogs

Translation: Simone Mueller and Charlotte Garner

Many owners of gun dog breeds can relate to this scenario: A nice walk through the woods and meadows and suddenly a hare jumps out of the bushes. The dog spots it, and rushes after it. Even if they're on a leash, they can get into such a state of ecstasy that continuing to have a relaxed walk seems almost impossible.

In this case, it would be advisable to keep the dog occupied elsewhere so that they can act out all the elements of their hunting passion (locating, stalking, creeping, chasing, grabbing, killing and dissecting) without endangering other living creatures.

In this article, we will look at how gun dog training can potentially help here, whether agility, mantrailing, or other dog sports can be integrated into anti-predation training, and what the word "enrichment" means when we are living together with dogs.

In conversation with dog owners, the question of occupation possibilities for their dog appears again and again. Owners are often looking for things to keep their dog busy and give them a job to do. So they turn to sports like agility, mantrailing, heelwork to music, or other kinds of dog sports. These dog sports all have their own justification, but a predatory-motivated dog will not be entirely deterred from hunting by this type of activity for very long.

Many dogs – some breeds more than others - feel the need to act out their hunting behaviours (locating, stalking, creeping, chasing, grabbing, killing and dissecting). So how do you manage to satisfy your dog's needs without harming wildlife, or even joggers or cyclists in the process?

Enrichment

This term appears mainly in relation to animals in captivity. It simply means something that is a need-satisfying occupation of your dog's body and mind, because boredom is often not only "boring", but it can actually make your dog ill. Although our pet dogs do not live in captivity, nevertheless they need suitable enrichment opportunities. Not only is this essential in order to prevent behaviour problems, it is also necessary to find a substitute for predatory-motivated dogs that comes close to a real hunt.

Gun dog training is particularly well suited as a substitute here. Not only for retrievers, but also for eye-oriented dogs, such as herding dog or greyhounds. This is an occupation in which they can act out real passions, namely the behaviour patterns such as observing fast-moving objects, running after them, and grabbing them. It is true that gun dog training is an occupation that can be practiced as a real competitive sport. However, you don't necessarily have to strictly follow the rules of gun dog training. If you like, you can also get creative yourself, and come up with different retrieving exercises. I personally like to combine dummy work with ground targets.

This means that before the dog is sent to the dummies, they should touch the targets with their paw. This increases impulse control, frustration tolerance, and concentration. After the dummies are laid out, you can also walk a few feet away from the dog and then call them off and send them to the dummies as a reward. In this case, retrieval with distraction would be practiced at the same time.

For dogs that are more nose-oriented, backtracking is an excellent hunting substitute. To do this, you lay out a dummy or something similar on the trail and send your dog back a few metres later with the search task. With professionals, this can be over a hundred metres! This stops you from always forbidding the dog from hunting and instead gives them an outlet for their hunting behaviour. This not only keeps them mentally and physically busy, but also encourages them to cooperate with their human.

Also, for dogs who cannot retrieve yet, there are simple occupation possibilities, which do not need a lot of training. For example, you can scatter food in the undergrowth or under leaves and let the dog sniff extensively. Or you can stick small chunks of food in the bark of a tree and let the dog search. The wild ancestors of our domestic dogs also spent most of the day foraging for food. So, playful foraging games like these are usually welcomed by our dogs. Many owners of "fussy" dogs often find that acquired food is often consumed with much greater enthusiasm than "given" food.

Another need, especially with strongly eye-oriented dogs, is watching wildlife. If you have already trained indicating wildlife rather than chasing it, it is useful to put this indication on cue so that you can then use it as a need-satisfying reward. For example, when my Lucy shows me her beloved crows, she gets a click and is allowed to continue watching as a reward. Sometimes she comes running after the click and wants to chase her dummy, which she is allowed to do.

Breaks Are Important

Despite the various suggested activities, this does not mean that you should constantly keep your dog busy during the walk. Every now and then, a small exercise done for two to three minutes is quite sufficient. Regular, short relaxation phases are very much recommended. Try sitting down on a park bench, for example, together with your dog and observe the environment with them in peace. And, in addition to the balanced activity program, your dog must also be able to enjoy their free run in between, and have the opportunity to dive into their own world, explore the environment, and simply be a dog!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Ebeling is a veterinary nurse and dog behaviour consultant/therapist. She especially enjoys working with people and their dogs motivated by predatory behaviour. In addition, the force-free training of gun dogs is close to her heart.