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## **TRAINABILITY**

Of course, to accomplish all the foregoing tasks, an Akita must be trainable. Personally, I think trainability is an innate characteristic of all dogs and that all dogs are trainable. Puppy Aptitude Testing helps match people to dogs and dogs to training methods, which is one reason I strongly advocate its use.

Some combinations of people and dogs just do not work well together, such as a dominant dog with a shy, timid person. Likewise, a very dominant person may overwhelm an omega bitch. Occasionally, you may encounter the people who Ian Dunbar describes perfectly as "dog dim." A short conversation will tell you that they haven't got a clue as to why dogs do anything nor do they have a clue about how to get them to do anything!

If they are otherwise suitable, they can learn a lot provided they will read or watch videos. Appropriate material, such as a good training book or video, can provide a basis for understanding their dog. It's a good idea for you to provide this material for their review before they pick up their puppy and for you to question them closely to make sure they understood it. These owners will require a disproportionate share of mentoring to stay on track. Just as some people cannot learn a foreign language, a few of these people will never have a clue about their dog's real personality. Fortunately, dogs are very adaptable and better at understanding people than we are at understanding them.

### **Training Classes**

When we discuss training, I caution new owners that an Akita is not going to sit at your feet with shining eyes that beg you to tell him what to do. Compared to training a Border Collie, training an Akita is an uphill climb. Does that mean they are not trainable? Certainly not!

On the other hand, finding a suitable training class and utilizing it successfully can be difficult for a newcomer. As I mentioned earlier, my sales contract contains a clause requiring the new owners to attend a training class with the dog. I encourage them to attend puppy classes and give them information on trainers who are in their area. To sweeten the pot, I rebate \$50 of their purchase price when they give me a copy of their graduation certificate. Although everyone doesn't graduate, they all do attend class, so at least they have some foundation for working with the dog.

If you have some grounding in obedience training, another approach is to offer classes yourself. For extra incentive, you could rebate part of the class fee for graduation with a puppy you bred. A trainer with whom you are on good terms might discount her rates for your puppies in exchange for referrals. However you manage it, the new owner should leave your house with the clear understanding that his puppy must be trained and the determination to do so.

## **Training Akitas**

Before I send them off, though, I talk to the new buyers about training classes and discuss a few problems they might encounter because they have an Akita and not a Border Collie. After all, back in the days when dogs actually did work for people, they performed different jobs which required very different skills. I wouldn't ask my accountant to wire my house nor would I go to a plumber for brain surgery.

Herding and gun dogs are the telephone operators of the dog world. We think of them as "smart" because they learn behaviors quickly and will repeat them endlessly and eagerly. If you take a retriever duck hunting, you expect him to go after the last duck just like he went after the first. What would a shepherd do if his helper suddenly decided that running back and forth around the sheep was boring?

Although these dogs are capable, indeed must be capable, of independent decisions, they are not particularly "independent" dogs. They must be what shepherds describe as "biddable;" that is, when the master gives a command, the dog should hasten to obey it unless he has a compelling reason not to. In that case, sooner or later, he will communicate it to the owner.

Looking at the way an obedience trial championship is obtained, it's hardly a surprise that most of the dogs achieving it are herders or gun dogs. Even breeds not classed in these groups such as Papillions and Poodles have that background. Poodles were originally retrievers and Papillions were bred down from spaniels.

Akitas are shown in the working group, but where do they fit in the obedience picture in terms of working traits? To determine this, you have to look at function. The forerunners of the breed were used to hunt large game in the mountainous territory of Dewa Province on the Japanese island of Honshu. Accompanied by a hunter, they located, followed, and held or tackled bear, elk, and boar--activities which make them a hound.

Evaluating them in terms of appearance, they obviously derive from "spitz" or "Northern Dog" ancestry. These dogs have certain common traits: short, erect ears; mesocephalic heads with oblique-set eyes; double coats; and tails that curl upwards in some fashion. Representatives are found throughout the Arctic and northern temperate areas and include the Pomeranian, Keeshond, American Eskimo, Samoyed, Alaskan Malamute, Greenland Eskimo Dog, Siberian Husky, Norwegian Elkhound, Norwegian Buhund, the Russian Laika, the Karelian Bear Dog, the Korean Jendo, as well as all the native Japanese dogs. The working representatives of this group have served as sled and pack dogs and hunters, and guards.

Obviously, the Akita fits nicely with this group of dogs. Like the Elkhound and Karelian, he is a hunting or hound/spitz type dog. Characteristics which suit them

for their jobs do not necessarily produce a stellar obedience performer. Hounds must be flexible in their responses. After all, the prey sets the pace and determines the course, and the hunter must be adaptable, ready to abandon one strategy in favor of another.

In common with the northern/hound types, he is physically tough with a high pain threshold which was probably increased through selective breeding when he was used as a fighting dog. From both his function as a hound and his heritage as a northern dog, he has a core of independence that makes him unable to always do what you want. This doesn't mean he won't do it, just that he might not.

**Boredom:** How do these idiosyncrasies translate to training? Akitas, like many hounds, have a very low tolerance for repetition. Once boredom sets in, and it does so quickly, the dog loses interest, which means repetition is not the key to successful training. The problem is that dogs learn by repetition, so as a trainer, you have to balance the two by mixing a variety of exercises, using short training times, and by keeping training a manageable challenge.

Therefore, in class, when your Akita has done two great figure eights, instead of doing three more, praise him and go on a couple of other exercises regardless of what the rest of the class is doing. Of course, you need to discuss this with your trainer first so she doesn't think you're being uncooperative.

Even as early as seven weeks on the PAT, Akita puppies show little persistence. They often attack the mop but abandon the attack after a few seconds, while Rottweiler puppies in the same situation may have to be pulled off of it. The Akitas will chase a ball that rolls in front of them but quickly lose interest in favor of some other activity.

**Variable behavior :** They also tend to vary their behavior rather than stereotyping it quickly. When we test puppies, one of the things we do is put them on a box, stand in front of them, and call them. In most herding and sporting breeds, done a second time, the puppy tends to repeat what he did the first, even if it is falling off the box backwards! Akita puppies may jump off towards the tester once and to the side the second time. They might jump off once and refuse a second time; jump off to the side and explore their surroundings the first time, and go right to the tester the second.

One of the characteristics we consider "smart" in a breed is the ability to consistently repeat a learned behavior. Dogs that stereotype quickly are easy to train. A resistance to stereotypical behavior does not make a dog dumb; it makes it more flexible. Akitas tend to try more than one approach to any problem; just because they did it one way first does not mean they will do it the same way next time.

For the obedience trainer, these traits present a real challenge. You have to work harder to reinforce correct responses and learn to shrug off those times when your dog adds a new wrinkle.

**Generalization:** Another problem is the Akita's slowness in generalizing from a specific learned behavior. For instance, when you begin teaching the sit, your dog may be beside you in the heel position. Then you teach him sit in front, then sit when he is away from you. A German Shepherd will quickly learn to sit anywhere because he generalizes well. He is able to make the connection that the same action is called

for regardless of where he is spatially. He will seem to understand the concept of "sit," so to speak.

Akitas, on the other hand, take much longer to go from the specific to the general. Instead of expecting the dog to grasp the concept, you may have to break the exercise into many component parts and teach each as a separate step and then, chain them together. Some Akitas seem to have an "Aha!" experience and suddenly get the point, while others never have a clue.

They may have more trouble with some exercises than others. In discussing this subject with a friend who is training an Akita in Open, she said she thought it applied to the problem she had with teaching the quarter turn. In this exercise, the dog and handler stand in a heel position with the dog sitting. The handler then shifts her position, in place, a quarter turn to the left. The dog must get up and reseat itself in the proper heel position.

All the class Golden retrievers learned to scoot into position without ever really getting up, while Teresa was still trying to teach her dog that when Teresa moved, the dog had to move too. Obviously, they need to try a different training method that takes into account a slower ability to generalize.

**Independence:** Sooner or later, everyone runs up against the Akita's independent streak. Hound independence is expressed in passive resistance. The dog won't openly defy you, he just won't cooperate. He may lag while heeling or move a foot on the stand. If you're in the conformation ring, maybe he continually moves while you are trying to set him up even though he's not unbalanced or swings his rear out away from you when you stop. You can put a stop to this by introducing some variety and perhaps some levity into your training routine. Sometimes, passive resistance is the end result of boredom, so shorter training sessions will help.

Northern-dog independence, however, runs more to outright defiance if the dog is determined enough. Again, all of us have seen this with Akitas. Has your dog ever slipped out the door and headed off? He'll come home when he is ready or when he's enticed by something more fun than cruising the neighborhood.

I had one Akita who liked certain crates. He didn't just escape from crates he didn't like, he demolished them, just to make his point. I never could discern what characteristics made an acceptable crate, so I have a varied collection of broken ones, courtesy of Max. However, if he liked a crate, he never made any attempt to leave it. One was so flimsy, if he'd inhaled it would have broken apart, but he stayed in it peaceful and content. This is Northern-dog independence--my way or the highway!

## **Training Methods**

The next question that arises is "what kind of training should I do?" When I first started, mumble, mumble, years ago, everyone used the same basic methods for training. Over the ensuing years, learning research has supplied additional tools for working with dogs. Plenty of books on dog training are available, and most areas have more than one type of training classes available. To a certain extent, how you train will depend on the methodology of your trainer.

The method I first learned has now garnered the rather unappealing name

**"force training or jerk and pull (j/p)." Here, you put the dog on a lead and choke collar (we didn't even have pinch collars when I started) and gave a command. If he did it, you gave him lots of praise. If he didn't, you gave him a quick jerk with the leash to get him to do whatever you were working on and as soon as he did it or was in position, gave him lots of praise.**

**Back in the dark ages, no one even considered training a dog until it was six months old. This, of course, made the dog harder to train, both because he'd been learning on his own all along and because he was that much bigger than a puppy. So, maybe part of the "force" was because the dog was just harder to work with.**

**Finally, some enlightened people, Dr. Ian Dunbar among them, advocated working with puppies. The age to start formal training then halved to three months. This type of training goes by the more attractive terms of "lure" or "food training." It is grounded in the surety that puppies will do almost anything for a food treat or a favorite toy.**

**Using natural actions, the puppy is persuaded through use of the lure to perform. For instance, if the lure is held slightly behind and above his head, he will have to look up and sit to get it. Likewise, held between his feet, he will tend to go down to get it. The lure, coupled with a command and praise teach the dog. When the command and action are firmly associated, food rewards are decreased and eventually ceased.**

**Bill Boborow one of our most successful obedience trainers cautions that older dogs may not work all that well for food rewards unless they are encouraged to do so as puppies. This applies also to baiting dogs in the conformation ring. He also points out that food rewards may not be enough with Akitas and that sooner or later you will have to resort to some type of physical correction.**

**His comments reminded me of a young male I was working on the down-stay. As his hormones have kicked in, he's become increasingly reluctant to down in the presence of adult males. A few nights before at class, I had given him a down command along with one of his favorite goodies. He started to go down, taking the treat in his mouth. Then he stopped, pointedly looked at the adult male next to us, looked right at me, spit out the food, and sat up. I got his message. There and then, I decided it was time for a different training technique.**

**Much to my surprise, I found an even newer technique which uses food too but couples it with what psychologists call an event marker. The first people to introduce this training method to the world of dogs came from dolphin training at marine exhibitions. While they use whistles with the sea mammals, with dogs most use a clicker (those toys we used to call "crickets").**

**The seminal book for this training method is Don't Shoot the Dog by Karen Pryor. In it, she discusses the basic principles governing what is now commonly referred to as "click training (c/t)." While it shares many aspects of lure training, it relies on the dog's figuring out what you want him to do rather than your forcing him to do them. Thus, he becomes an active participant in his own training. One of the reasons I think this method is so successful with Akitas is that it challenges them--no boredom here! Because of this participation on his part, the dog isn't resentful or sullen because you are making him do something. Instead, he's figuring out what to do which is made easier for him because correct behaviors are marked**

with a click at the instant it occurs. He keeps working because he is given a reward which can be food, play, or verbal praise and a pat.

Almost everything you'd like to know about this training method can be found on the internet. I've got several excellent sites linked on my web page. Vendors at most shows carry video tapes and other equipment, and seminars are held all over the country by Karen Pryor, Gary Wilkes and other excellent trainers.

Akita trainers I've consulted and my own experiences lead me to think that while clickers, food rewards and lure training are effective tools when they work, expecting them alone to carry you through a complete obedience course may be unrealistic. Therefore, when you pick a trainer, look for someone who is willing to combine methods. Above all, try to find someone who understands that not all dogs have the same temperaments, abilities, or tendencies, someone who recognizes that one training technique may not work all the time with every dog and who has more than one to offer.

Unfortunately, not every area has enough trainers for you to pick and choose, in which case, you will have to get additional help. Through the dog training books at your local library, you have access to some of the finest trainers in the world and a plethora of training methods. The internet offers information on web pages as well as many e-mail lists dealing with training. Don't ignore these resources. Don't forget to talk to other Akita people who have trained their dogs in obedience. They've already been down this road and can offer you constructive advice.

### **Untrainable Akitas?**

With humor, understanding, and persistence, you can train almost any Akita in basic obedience. For every person who thinks that Akitas are not trainable, I'd point to my house dog. She has never had an obedience lesson, came to us at the age of three from life in a kennel run, and moved seamlessly into our household. My kids and I talked about this today and we can think of three unacceptable things she's done in all that time. She stole a steak off the counter--once and she's run out the door twice.

Like scores of other Akitas, her training has been so effortless, that we can easily say, she's had none. She's trained herself by observing our responses to her actions and carefully fitting her behavior into an acceptable mode with little or no formal instruction from us. Even though she has no CD, she is a very trainable and well trained dog! I think this is very typical of Akitas and one reason they are so easy to live with in a house.

## **Fearful Akitas**

**Although Akitas are naturally careful and cautious, few fall into the fearful category which may be the one exception to trainability. Fearfulness may be the result of an inherited temperament and/or severe and early abuse.**

**Very fearful adults are very hard to deal with. To train them, you must first gain their trust. They become dependent on your judgment and rely on you for cues about their environment. While they may be confident with you, with someone else they may revert to their previous behavior until that person also establishes a bond with the dog. A few dogs may extend their trust to people generally, but most will not.**