

AKITA TEMPERAMENT
BY SHERRY WALLIS

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While everyone who breeds or buys dogs probably agrees she wants 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. Email sherryATsherob.com,(substitute @ for AT) phone: 713 465-9729 (CST, USA, not between 8-10 p.m.)

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.

BITE INHIBITION

Bite inhibition is a concept that, as a dog owner, you know about, but you'll probably pay it little attention unless and until your dog bites. Most

dogs are inhibited from biting. That's what makes them desirable companions. A few people seem not to mind living with an animal that might inflict serious injury on them. They buy lions, tigers, wolves, and dogs that are likely to bite, often and hard. They probably also like bungee jumping and parachuting. While these all have a large element of risk to the individual who likes living on the edge, only the first presents a hazard to others.

Inherited Component

Bite inhibition begins before birth, since it is partly inherited. Unless you are a telepath, you have really no way of knowing how quickly a dog might reach its flash point. It may have a good reason for biting, but, again, unless you're telepathic, you'll also never know when and why it is triggered to bite. When a bite occurs, the family's first impulse is to find a good reason for their dog's behavior. Most people love their dogs deeply and feel hurt, guilty, defensive, and protective when it transgresses. "He was protecting his owner, was abused by the former owner, was startled. . ." The list of reasons is only limited by the owners' imaginations. You will seldom be in a position to judge the accuracy of their reasoning, and if you like the dog, your regard may shade your opinion, too. Because the willingness of the dog to bite a person has a genetic component, the safest option in breeding is to select dogs that have never done so.

Simply stated: Don't use any dog for breeding if it has bitten a human.

Learning Not to Bite

While the height of the threshold at which a dog will bite may be initially determined by inheritance, it can certainly be raised or lowered by training. Puppies begin learning it from each other and from their mother.

Learning the Limits: When puppies play with each other, they engage in biting behavior. The strength with which they bite is tempered by the response of their playmates. The hurt puppy protests with a loud, high pitched scream, and the offending puppy lets go. Likewise, nursing puppies can bite their mother once their teeth come in. Mom reacts by moving away from the puppy, pushing it away, or, in extreme cases, by growling at the biter. She may also intervene in the puppies' play should one puppy prove too aggressive to his siblings. In these ways, puppies learn to set limits on the force they exert when biting.

Time To Grow Up: Social interactions are very important for the developing puppy not just for bite inhibition but for learning proper doggy manners. The lessons they learn here will remain with them all their lives which is why leaving the litter together past the traditional six weeks is vital. At six weeks, puppies are just beginning to play with each other, with toys, and with their mother and other dogs. Taking them away too early can deprive them of valuable lessons in life.

What Does This Mean To You As the Breeder ? You and the rest of your household should jump right in with the rest of the puppies, teaching them that humans are very delicate beings. You will be bitten because that's how puppies test their world. As soon as a puppy mouths you, even if he does not bite hard, you should mimic his littermates and give a high-pitched yell. The puppy should immediately let go and will probably lick a couple of times. Give him a warm "thank you," and wait for the next time. If he doesn't let go scream higher and louder. Very young puppies will continue to bite, but the bites should get progressively softer until they disappear altogether. Extend your indications of discomfort to bites on your clothing as well. If you walk among the puppies in a long night-gown, scream when they bite the edges. This technique is highly effective and will work with young dogs even more quickly than it does with puppies. All children should be taught to deal with nipping puppies and young dogs this way since they rarely have the social standing to correct the dog by indicating their disapproval.

Soft Mouths

Many Akitas have soft mouths, probably from crosses to native dogs that were retrievers. Their bites may be more like nuzzles and may never cause you pain. As adults, soft-mouthed dogs may have the same toys for years. They may never cause problems to your furniture or shoes. Don't be fooled, though. They can still inflict serious damage on people or other dogs, because when they want to bite hard, they can.

Because their bites don't hurt much, soft-mouthed dogs in a mixed litter will be the least likely to truly learn bite inhibition. When you are working with a litter, therefore, it's very important to teach all the puppies not to bite, even the ones that hardly touch you. Otherwise, the dogs when they do bite are likely to bite as hard as they can because they never learned to temper their bites. Hard-mouthed dogs have a slightly different jaw structure, so few Akitas have the same bite strength as a German Shepherd or Rottweiler. If your face is being bitten, however, this distinction will be of little concern to you. All bites hurt.

Is Bite Inhibition Important?

The owner of the dog may be faced with huge legal fees and damage awards to the victim. Most of these suits are covered by homeowners insurance. However, the unfortunate owner may find himself out of a policy and unable to secure a new insurer so long as the dog is present. The impact of a dog bite extends far beyond its effect on the people involved, which can be devastating by itself. Very few people actually die as a result of dog bites, but the physical damage can be horribly disfiguring. Medical treatment can range from simple cleaning to multiple surgeries. Even worse, the bond between dogs and humans is based in part on trust, and part of that is eroded once you are bitten. If the victim is a bystander and not a dog owner, he is likely to be lost forever to any

relationship with dogs and may become hostile to them. Hostility coupled with activism can sound the death knell of a breed. Does this sound extreme to you? If so, you need to learn more about the animal rights activists and their effect on animal welfare.

Strengthening Bite Inhibition

You can strengthen bite inhibition throughout the dog's life. Not letting him bite you or your clothing is the first and most important step in doing this. If you currently roughhouse by offering your arm as a target, switch to a lambs wool or rawhide toy, a towel, or a ball. Throw it or drag it for him and then let him play with it. You can pick it up (few Akitas will actually bring it back, so don't be disappointed when your dog proves to be a "getter" but not a "returner") and throw or drag it along the ground. Any time the dog tries to play-bite at you, switch him over immediately to one of these toys. If your dog has a firmly entrenched habit, yelping may not work. As an alternative, you may firmly take your dog's muzzle off your arm or clothes if he puts his mouth on you. Hold his mouth shut, but don't try to hurt him, and with a very low, growly voice, firmly tell him, "No." Don't strike the dog or shake him. You may also be battling a dominance problem, which is covered in another section of this discussion. Trading aggression for aggression may get you into an escalating spiral that can cause the very problem you're trying to avoid!

Insist that your children and any visitors not play chase, allowing the dog to pursue them. If dogs could talk, they'd probably call this game "Chase the Prey." Given the right set of stimuli--the right movements, the right sounds, the right smells--this can become pursuit in deadly earnest. When you send your charges on to new home, you don't need to scare your buyers to death, but you should make them aware of appropriate behaviors. Give them couple of books. One should be Turid Rugas's, *On Talking With Dogs: Calming Signals*, and the other one like *Alphabetizing Your Dog* or Carol Benjamin's *Mother Knows Best*. Ask that they read these before they pick up their puppy. The expense is negligible when you consider the tragedies it can prevent.

ACCEPT AUTHORITY

Any dog in its relationship with other dogs and with people fits onto a scale of what is most often called "dominance behavior." At the upper end is the dog that does what he wants when he wants and enforces his will if he is thwarted--the alpha, the most dominant dog. At the lower end is the dog that seems to have no ego strength at all--the omega or most submissive one. Perhaps this component of behavior is better viewed as acceptance of authority. Many people want strong, brave Akitas and are afraid that a submissive dog will be everyone's doormat. In fact, the relationships formed between dogs themselves and between dogs and humans are very complex and very fluid, subject to change depending on circumstances.

Also important to understanding the significance of such measures is the character of the breed itself. A dominant Rottweiler is a very different dog from a dominant Papillon. A submissive Akita is not the same thing as a submissive Chihuahua.

The Pack Incorporated

The roots of dominance behavior are found in the dynamics of the pack, the social unit into which canines organize themselves. Observations of naturalists have given us great insight into how the pack functions. These have been done in the wild on wolves and coyotes and in academic settings, on dogs. They show us an organization that in many ways is analogous to one of our corporations. At the top is the pack leader, the CEO. He is responsible for the welfare of the group and charged with its protection. His perks commensurate with his responsibility. He gets first pick of the food and gets as much as he wants. Everyone looks up to him and curries his favor. Unless a corporate takeover is in the works, no one challenges his authority in the slightest way.

At the bottom of the corporate ladder is the fellow who has virtually no status, either personally or as a result of his position. He's the step-n-fetch it for anyone who gives him an order. While the CEO may have a genuine liking for this guy and may even share the table with him once in a while, you can bet the rest of the group will have very little social interaction with such a low-status individual.

In fact, among the lower-status members is an element of contentment. They know their place and keep it. Friction occurs most frequently in the middle and upper management individuals. Always trying to move up the ladder means exchanging places with someone else, so they may well scrap and squabble. Too serious a fight might draw the attention of the CEO, however, so fights are more to intimidate than to damage. If the head honcho does intervene, his discipline is quick, sure, and accepted by the offending parties.

The Pack At Home

When dogs move in with humans, they interact with other animals and with humans in much the same way as with a group of other dogs. Their sense of where they belong in a hierarchy is finely tuned. They have no trouble assessing their proper position in the group and quickly move to occupy it. Problems arise when the position of the dog is at odds with the other members of the group. For instance, suppose the dog lives with a couple. The husband is very strong but the wife is a shy, non-assertive person. When the wife is home alone, the dog is very protective of her. He remains positioned between her and any visitors and maintains a watchful posture. One day, a coworker, who is a more dominant person, comes over. He is leery of the dog, and the wife decides to put the dog in another room. When

she takes his collar and starts leading him out, the dog growls at her. She lets go, makes apologies to the friend, and they both leave the house. Several weeks later, a similar circumstance arises. The wife is thoroughly aggravated with the dog and decides to make her point. She takes his collar and begins leading him out of the room. When he growls at her, she yells at him. He jumps up and bites her in the face.

An alternative scenario, given the same relationships, is that the wife opens the door and admits the friend. The dog stands between them and displays some hostile body language that makes the friend wary. He asks her to leave if she can't put the dog up. She moves around the dog, standing next to the visitor. As they are walking out the door, the dog attacks the stranger.

Is this a vicious dog, turning on its owner or engaging in an unprovoked attack? While it may appear so, in the first case, the dog is carrying out what it perceives as its responsibilities as an assistant pack leader. When the husband is gone, that mantle falls upon the dog, and nothing the people have done makes the dog think otherwise. He does not approve of the wife's decision to take him out of the room, since he will then be unable to protect her from what he considers a threat, so he tells her he does not approve of her actions by growling. Her acceptance of his authority confirms his judgment. When she leaves with the stranger, however, his authority is defied and he is worried about her safety.

The next time she tries to take him out, several factors come into play. He knows she can circumvent him because she did it last time and he is worried about her. She is his responsibility. He growls at her, but she does not let go. This is a challenge to his authority. His subsequent bite is discipline delivered by a higher status individual to a lower-status one who is transgressing. These bites are almost always delivered to the face because that is how a disciplinary bite is delivered between dogs. With another couple, the husband is a mild personality and the wife is more assertive. Both are showing the dog; however, when the husband shows him, the dog often growls at the judge. He never does this with the wife. Again, the dog is acting as a protector of a lower-status member of his pack. His inclination to do so is reinforced by the husband's body language. He leans down next to the dog and frequently puts his head level with the dog's in a gesture of what he thinks is affection, but what the dog perceives as submission. Because he knows the dog is likely to growl the man has become very anxious in the ring. The poor dog senses this anxiety and incorrectly interprets the approach of the stranger as the cause, thus reinforcing his decision to warn this person away. Curing these problems can be relatively simple. In the latter case, the husband developed a more assertive posture with the dog after reading a book about dominance behavior. He quit bending over, never kissed the

dog again, and corrected him firmly when the dog growled. In short, he moved up the social ladder to a position above the dog, so the dog was no longer obliged to protect him.

In the former case, the dog and the wife went through several obedience classes where she firmly established control over the dog. They developed a routine for meeting and dealing with visitors and strangers. Instead of regarding the dog as her husband's major inconvenience, she has developed a deep rapport with him. They love and respect each other. A more serious case involved some particularly peculiar behavior of the family pet around one of the middle children, a nine-year old boy. While the child sat on the floor watching tv, the dog brought his chew-toy over and dropped it near the child. Then, he circled the child and watched sharply. When the child reached for the toy, the dog growled and snatched it up. Correctly alarmed, the mother returned the dog to the breeder. Clearly, like the middle management of the corporation, the dog considered itself only slightly above this particular child in the family hierarchy and perceived the child as a threat to his position in the group. His opinions were probably confirmed by some of the actions of the child, such as sitting on the floor. His actions with the toy were a way for him to enforce his higher status. Had the dog not been removed, the situation would surely have escalated and the child might have been severely bitten.

Evaluative Tools

Fortunately, a fairly reliable method of testing young dogs to determine how willingly they accept authority has come out of all the research on dog behavior. Originally developed for guide dog organizations to aid in selection of promising youngsters, these tests are valid for other applications as well.

Information about the PAT or PET (Puppy Aptitude Test, Puppy Evaluation Tests) is available from many sources. Gail Fisher and Wendy Volhard published a long article in the March, 1979, and in the 1985 AKC Gazette on administering and interpreting the test. Mrs. Volhard also sells a pamphlet and score sheet which you can obtain by writing her at: RD 1, Box 518, Phoenix, NY 13135, (315) 593-6115. It is also available on the internet at the [Golden Retrievers In Cyberspace WebSite \(http://www.golden-retriever.com/pat1.html\)](http://www.golden-retriever.com/pat1.html).

PATs are usually done initially at around seven weeks. Puppies are born with an immature brain which should be fully functional at about this time. The first administration should be indicative of the puppy's natural tendencies before his environment has had much impact. Subsequent tests will show changes because of outside influences. Tests are given in an area new to the puppy and by a stranger.

The first section of the test deals with social attraction and dominance

measures, and you can use these yourself to select a puppy with an appropriate temperament for you even if no testing has been done on the puppies you are looking at.

First, the puppy should be removed from his littermates and observed in a room or area away from them. You want to see how the puppy interacts with people, not with other dogs, and how he interacts with you.

Quick Puppy Evaluation

First, sit on the floor and call him in a friendly voice. If he comes to you, notice whether his tail is up and wagging or tucked. Does he come willingly or slowly and reluctantly? Don't give up if the puppy wanders around exploring first or doesn't immediately respond to you. If he doesn't come to you, go get him and talk gently to him and pet him for a few seconds. Next, get up and walk around slowly, talking cheerfully to the puppy. Watch what he does. If he follows you, see where he positions himself and how he carries his tail.

These measures of social attraction are followed by two measures of dominance and a third test which indicates the puppy's reaction to them. Sit back down on the floor and gently roll the puppy over on his back. Place your hand across his chest, then restrain him and observe his reaction. After about 20 seconds, let the puppy up. Bend your face down to his, gently stroke his back and talk to him. See what he does. Last, pick the puppy up by placing your hands on either side of his chest behind his legs. Interlace your fingers together to provide support for his ribs and let him hang in the air. Again, observe his reactions.

Responses to the Test

Akitas are not usually strongly attracted to strangers, so their behaviors on the social interaction tests have a wide range. Some do not come at all and will not follow the tester. This does not mean they are hopelessly antisocial. Such behavior reflects instead a strongly independent nature.

More typical for the breed in my experience is a puppy that first busies himself exploring the area, looking around and sniffing. This is probably a displacement activity, a face-saving advantage which gives him something to do while he makes up his mind. After a few minutes of this, most will "suddenly" notice your calling them or your walking around and they will come or begin following you. How they come and what they do when they get there tells you something about the puppy. So does how they follow. If the puppy approaches and/or follows with his tail down and the ears held back slightly, you are witnessing a submissive response. The average puppy approaches the tester with his tail up. Confidence in meeting a stranger is indicated by his demeanor and by a wagging tail. The more assertive puppies will paw at your hands or even your face and the most assertive will bite at them also.

When they follow, average puppies walk along beside you. As they move up the scale in assertiveness, they will get between your feet, wandering purposely through them and may even paw at your feet or bite at your shoes. Less social puppies may balk at the come but warm up to the tester by the time he is walking about. Again, tail down and/or ears back are the more submissive indicators.

Most of the Akita puppies I have tested are mildly attracted socially. That is, they go to the tester, either with tail up or down after some exploratory behavior. They may greet the person and immediately wander off. They may follow for a few steps and then drift off to explore. Little holds their interest strongly.

Many of the herding breeds I've tested are put off by the strange surroundings. They seem, however, positively thrilled to see a person, even though they don't know him, and bound over to the tester. In contrast, we've had Akitas who have resolutely refused to participate. None of them grew up to be intransigent monsters, but they were very independent dogs. They were not eager to meet strangers but tolerated them.

Turned on their back, most Akitas lie still, carefully looking away to avoid any hint of eye contact. This is a submissive response and very acceptable. Others lie still for a second, then struggle briefly before calming again. These might glance quickly at your face, but as soon as they see you are looking at them, they deliberately look away. This is a moderate response, indicating a slightly more assertive dog but well within acceptable parameters.

Akita puppies lifted in the air invariably just hang there. Their bodies are usually relaxed, although they might be stiff. More assertive responses on these tests range from flailing and struggling to whining, pawing, and biting. A very assertive puppy may also make eye contact.

The middle test tells you something about the puppy's acceptance of correction and willingness to forgive. As you might expect, many Akitas are less than enthusiastic about undergoing unpleasant experiences and are not apt to easily forgive the responsible agent. With no real attachment to the tester, many Akita puppies just stalk off. Others remain with the tester but stare off into space. A few of the more forgiving will nuzzle the tester's hands. Assertive responses include pawing or biting at the tester's face and hands.

Selecting a Puppy

Choosing the right puppy requires a frank assessment of not only your personality but that of the others in your household, too. Pick a dog that suits the personality of the least dominant person in your family. That too

runs on a scale. The least dominant person in my family is well able to handle a mildly dominant Akita. We are all very assertive. My sister-in-law, however, is just able to hold her own with my brother's old Akita, who is a medium-tough dog. Any harder temperament, and she'd be the loser in a contest of wills.

A medium puppy might be appropriate for the family with three brash youngsters but not for the one with two girls who hide behind their mother through the whole interview. An unforgiving puppy is not a good choice for the former; he may not be tolerant of rough play that accidentally hurts. The latter is probably better off with the most submissive female. Breeders who avail themselves of the PAT have a very useful tool for placing puppies appropriately. If you are fortunate enough to find one, heed her advice. These tests have no pass or fail, good dog or bad. They are helpful in assessing the native character of a puppy and in suggesting where best to place him and how best to work with him.

For instance, all puppies will need some sort of correction and an unforgiving one must learn to accept it in a good spirit. Owners of a less forgiving puppy should be encouraged to find a training class with positive training methods. Force-training is not only ineffective with this type of dog but may well sour him on training altogether.

A very independent puppy makes a poor candidate for a home where no one is at home during the day or where he is left outside most of the time. These dogs are capable of getting along on their own and may not bond well or at all to members of the family. When one of them comes out and finds the dog digging in the flower bed and tries to issue a correction, the result may be aggression on the part of the dog. Even mild Akitas do not take well to corrections from strangers.

Of the Akitas I have observed, the vast majority show medium to extreme submissiveness on the PAT. They also show a strong tendency towards independence and some tendency to resent unpleasantness. I personally tested a litter where all the dogs scored in the medium to upper ranges on the entire temperament test. While this would be great for a German Shepherd, my experiences since have made me very cautious with such dogs. Two of this litter attacked people, the other was with a very active, very assertive family who loved him dearly but kept him well in hand. He was their beloved pet until his death at ten.

If I had an Akita puppy that tested as very assertive (biting hands, etc.), I would have serious reservations about him. I certainly would repeat the test several times and would be ultra careful about his placement, making sure that the new owners were able to handle such a dog. Certainly, I would be less likely to be concerned with a female that showed dominant

tendencies than a male. While some breeds have little difference in temperament between sexes, I don't believe this is true for Akitas. An adult male Akita is just tougher than his female counterpart.

The Dominant Dog

Life with a dominant dog is recounted briefly in the Nov/Dec, 1986, Akita World centerfold by Leslie Bair describing Ch Fukumoto's Ashibaya Kuma, CD, ROM. On his first day at their house as a six-month old puppy, Leslie "awoke to find Kuma's imposing muzzle about two inches from my face and two dark, unfathomable eyes staring at me. We stayed that way for what seemed like an eternity, then he clicked his teeth several times, turned around and trotted out of the room as if dismissing me." She goes on to say that "no one ever really owned him." His place in the family was undisputed, but he wielded his authority with great dignity.

Families can accommodate to such a dog in two ways. The family can respect the dog's decisions or be so much more dominant than he is that the dog recognizes their authority and respects them. In between lies nothing but trouble. On the other hand, this dog is easier to accommodate than the dog that is jumped up to a dominant position when he is truly not an alpha dog, an example of the Peter Principle in action. The dog has reached its level of incompetence. In these households, the dog have moved into a power vacuum which is created by his interpretation of his human family's behavior.

Really alpha dogs, like the CEO, don't have to keep reminding everyone of their position. It's obvious. Beta and delta dogs pushed into the alpha position often lack the appropriate tools for maintaining their position, so they resort to bullying. If recognized soon enough, these dogs can be demoted back to a place in the pack where they are more comfortable with their role. Left too late, they can be so entrenched in their position, they can't give it up easily.

Other Signs

If a PAT is not available, you should try to do your own testing on the puppy to determine how dominant he is. Other clues to his temperament can help you make your assessment. The puppy that runs out first to greet visitors is the most dominant puppy, not necessarily the friendliest. Put a chew toy in the litter box and see which dogs end up with it. Dominant dogs eat first and get their pick. Puppies in a pen will run up for attention. The more dominant puppy will step on the head or push away the less dominant one. When they are very small and sleep in a pile, the more dominant puppies are on the top.

When you were a kid did you play "look-away", where you and a friend stared intensely at each other, and the first to look away lost? With dogs,

this is not a game. Eye-to-eye contact is a challenge. If your puppy or dog locks eyes with you, he is issuing one, and he'd better look away first or you're in trouble. Again, dominance is relative to the social structure in which the dog finds itself. The terror of litter X may be the milquetoast of litter Y. In fact, one of the best ways to deal with a bully puppy is to put him in with an older dog or more assertive litter where he gets a quick lesson in manners and humility.

In your own family, a dog that gets too big for his britches may need to be taken down a peg or two. This can be accomplished with careful attention to dominance body language and dominance behaviors by all the members of the family. Again a little attention to things from a dog's point of view will help you and your family member understand how the dog interprets your behavior. You can read about dog behavior and body language in a number of excellent books such as *Mother Knows Best*, *Alphabetizing Your Dog*, *Culture Clash*, and *The Dog Who Loved To Much*, but the best is Turid Rugas's *On Talking With Dogs: Calming Signals*. These are available at dog shows from vendors, can be ordered through your local bookstore, may be at your library or can be ordered online from [Dogwise](#).

One caution I would add is that I wouldn't use an alpha roll unless you have a very dominant puppy and then only until you get a handle on him. You can provoke a dog into a hostile response doing this, and with an adult Akita, you can both end up in dire straits! Whenever you set out to make a point with a dog, when you decide this is it, you have to make sure you've picked a battle you can win. Otherwise, you have to find another way to deal with the dog. Fortunately many approaches are available to solve problems and the best are usually the ones that are the least confrontational.

LIKES CHILDREN

Akita lore tells us that the dogs acted as babysitters while the mothers worked in the fields, Do you believe this? I didn't until I got the dog I'll call Babe. At eight weeks, she left her breeder who did have small children and spent the next two years in a childless environment. I picked her up at a show. At a rest area on the way home, she was squatting taking care of her business as I looked out at the park, when a toddler seized her from behind. Hugging her, he put his head up against her spine. I was so alarmed, I was frozen to my spot and could only watch as she gently turned her head and gave him a big lick. Lucky me and lucky child!

Later on another trip, I walked by a statue of a man and child sitting on a park bench. The sun was behind them, so they appeared in silhouette to me and were so lifelike, I thought they were real. So did Babe. She trotted right up to the child and stood there wagging her tail. Then she did a double-take and sniffed the child statue, sniffed the adult, then tried

another wag. When this didn't make them move, she gave up and walked off. After these experiences, I started watching Akitas around small children, especially at shows. My observations convinced me that in its finest expression, Akita temperament should include a natural affinity for children. Retrievers like balls and sticks, pointers will freeze when shown a bird wing, and Akitas should be attracted to children.

I've seen many Akitas change their whole demeanor in the presence of a child. They wear an ingratiating, very non-threatening expression and may well try to accompany the child if it wanders away. This attraction is very different from the protectiveness of guarding and herding dogs. It is a genuine liking for our small folk even if they are strangers and can occur with dogs that are none too fond of the large ones. It also seems independent of the dog's exposure to children, although in adult dogs unfamiliar with them it may not appear instantly.

Liking children is very important in our breed because when Akitas do bite, the victim is quite likely to be a child. Also, because of the size of the dog, if a child is bitten, the damage is likely to be severe. Akitas, especially males, are very aware of status and, in addition, are rather independent in nature. Dogs with a special regard for children are less likely to see them as threats and more likely to tolerate from them what they will not tolerate from an adult.

Again, I am reminded of the centerfold on Ashibaya Kuma. Leslie Bair says, "[M]y daughter, Heidi, was four...when she walked across the living room past the slumbering Kuma. His tranquility disturbed, Kuma growled at the source of the irritation. An equally independent and unafraid female toddler walked up ... reached over grabbing this powerful head in her tiny hands and before I could move, lifting the head and slamming it down on the floor, and saying 'shut up.' I was frozen ..Kuma, though not in the least harmed, was stunned, and made a visibly conscious decision. Mutual respect was established and each went their own way."

In the same vein, when my younger daughter was about ten, I asked her to put our three-year old male in his run while I talked with some people interested in Akitas. The wife had just asked me how the breed was with children when I noticed Meredith and Bart were having a "meeting of the minds!" Not wanting to go back to his run, Bart had planted his 120 pounds into a sit and was steadfastly resisting the tugs of his 60-pound mistress. Meredith picked up a metal food pan which happened to be close at hand and whacked him on the side of his head with it. "Come on, Bart," she demanded. He looked at her with an appraising glance, then, literally shrugged his shoulders and followed her off to my complete surprise. While he is a rather easy-going dog, I honestly don't know if he would have tolerated this treatment from my husband, for instance, who has little if

anything to do with the dogs. Like retrieving, I believe this is an inherited component of temperament. I feel so strongly about this that I will not breed any Akita that does not like children. I also try to ensure it is a component of any breeding partners I select. If you don't have children, you may not feel so strongly about this. However, you should at least try to never double up on dogs that do not like them. You may have none, but puppies that you sell may well be around children all of their lives even if your dogs are not.

ACCEPT STRANGERS

If an Akita bites, its next most likely target after a child is a visitor to the house. He may even be someone who has come to your home frequently. To lessen this possibility, a valuable part of the dog's temperament is the ability to accept the presence of a non-threatening stranger whether he is neutral or friendly.

Ian Dunbar makes a particularly cogent observation about Oriental breeds, especially Japanese ones. He says the most stable dogs can be unreliable around strangers because the culture in which they were bred far longer than they have been here does not select for that trait. When asked why, he pointed out that privacy there is at a premium and most homes are small by our standards. So, in Oriental countries little if any entertaining is done at a person's home. Instead, social activities occur at communal baths, restaurants, hotels, clubs, parks, etc. Only intimate friends and family are invited home. As a result, dogs that do not like strangers may never be weeded out of the gene pool. Further, in guard-type breeds, distrust may be encouraged, since any stranger at the house would be a subject for alarm. Just as the herding instinct may or may not be present in city dogs, Oriental dogs such as the Akita may have a profound distrust and dislike of strangers that is never identified because it is never tested.

Changing Temperament

With Akitas, this tendency to be wary of strangers is something that needs to be selected away from in breeding and trained away from throughout the dog's life. Unfortunately, if you don't realize it exists, it's hard to do either. And, yes, doing so will change the character of the breed from its original state. I think it's ironic that those who quibble the most about attempts to make the breed's temperament more socially acceptable see nothing wrong with the drastic changes in structure and type accomplished over the last two decades.

Acceptable Behavior

Please don't think I'm advocating a temperament incompatible with the character of the breed. We are not raising Poodles or Golden Retrievers, and if we wanted that type of dog, we certainly wouldn't be in Akitas! However, when a visitor comes to your house, gets in your car, come up to you when you're in your yard, or is talking to you at a dog show, your Akita

at least should be neutral. He should show no sign of anxiety or hostility toward this person. He should be tolerant of the stranger's presence. Many Akitas totally ignore strangers, and that is a perfectly acceptable response. If the person is particularly "doggy-acceptable," you may find your dog making a few overtures, especially if you're at a show and the stranger has ever had liver in his pocket. This breed, though, likes to make the first move, and you may find the friendliest dogs seem uncomfortable with someone who forces attention on them. That is not a cause for hostility, however, and your dog should accept this attention even if it is not with enthusiasm.

This reserved demeanor is part of the breed's innate dignity. I'm still waiting for a few of my bitches to develop this! At ten, Mikki remains a terrible clown who will do absolutely anything for a cookie. You may find you have a few of these, too, and their temperament is just as much an Akita's as her cousin's. He gazes off into the distance when strangers pet him as if no one is there. If they disappeared into a poof of smoke, he wouldn't notice or care about their absence. He really only cares about his family and a few of our friends, but he tolerates strangers.

Problem Areas

You may see problems with your dogs or puppies you place depending on how they are raised and trained. Certainly, the worst-case scenario is a dog that is left outside all the time in a house with little social activity and that is rarely taken anywhere else. These dogs can be time bombs. The best way to avoid tragedies is to make sure you sell puppies only to homes where they will be kept inside.

I also require contractually that puppies be taken to [training classes](#) . To encourage this, I help buyers locate classes and provide information about them and rebate \$50 when they bring me a certificate that says they graduated from a class. First this gives the owners some handle on the dog when he is still at a size that is easy to work with. Secondly, the dog gets exposure early on to strangers who are friendly and to other dogs. If at all possible, I strongly recommend classes that use clicker training and if they are not available, classes that use positive training methods (usually food).

Stranger Children

Another inclination that is not uncommon in Akitas is a distrust and even dislike of non-family children. The most distressing thing about these dogs is that frequently they are devoted family pets who adore their own children and will tolerate anything from them. They may be tolerant or even friendly to adult strangers, but visiting children are at risk.

Until he does something overt, identifying these dogs may be difficult for

inexperienced owners since the beginning signs of hostility are often very subtle. Even more unfortunate, because the dog is so good with his own children, the owners tend to justify the first obvious signs of trouble by blaming the child or extraneous circumstances.

Therefore, when I sell puppies I tell buyers in written material and reinforce it verbally that no children, especially toddlers, should ever be left unsupervised with any dog. To do so is to bet with a child's life as the stake. Even the most stable dogs can put two and two together and get five. What happens, I ask them, when your son's best friend picks up a toy and bashes your son in the head with it. Don't you think your dog will see this is an attack on his child? What do you think he's going to do? A dog that does not like strange children might not need even this much provocation. My first encounter with this is an excellent example. Since it happened, I've heard the same song, different verse, more times than I can count which is what leads me to believe this is an inherited component of temperament.

This family had two dog-loving boys and an indoor-outdoor Akita they had had from puppyhood. The mother was firm but non-assertive and had had dogs all her life. They did not go to a training class. The dog was wonderful with her children. When he was almost a year old, she called me and told me he was growling at one of her younger son's friends. I asked her if he bothered any other children, and she said, "No, only this boy. He is partially deaf and speaks differently from the other children." Of course, it wasn't the dog!

I told her the dog's behavior posed a significant risk to this child. I asked her to return the dog to me, offering her a replacement from an upcoming litter. She refused because they all loved the dog. He was crate-trained, and at my urging, she agreed to keep the dog crated whenever visiting children were over at the house. I made several follow-up calls about the dog, still asking them to return him, getting a refusal and an assurance that the dog was crated.

Well, children just aren't always able to remember what is vitally important to adults. One day, her son took his friend out in the back yard without telling the mother and without putting up the dog. The visitor bent over to pick up a toy on the patio. Unfortunately, it was next to the dog's food bowl. He attacked. Hearing the screams, the mother rushed out and yelled at the dog, who immediately let go.

Because the dog attacked the back of the child's skull rather than his face and let go when commanded, the physical damage required only stitches in the emergency room. The scars are hidden by the child's hair. He is now terrified of all dogs. The mother, who is not afraid of Akitas herself,

becomes almost phobic when children are around them. She told me she is sure the child would be dead if she had not been right in the next room. They still refused to have the dog euthanized. Instead, they placed it with an out-of-town friend. I talked to this man several times and finally agreed that the dog had a chance with him. Despite my misgivings, the placement has worked out well. At ten years of age, the dog is now nearing the end of his life.

Dealing With Problems

I don't know what I could have done differently once the dog was out of my hands. My mistake was in selling a male to this family in the first place, and I no longer sell them to people who have not had at least Northern dogs before unless they come over and just bowl me over with family assertiveness. The incident sent me to several seminars on aggression and to a number of books.

Now I would insist that the dog go to a training class, and that the less assertive mother be the one to train him. Instead of relying on isolation to protect visitors from the dog, which is doomed to failure in the most compulsive of homes, I should have encouraged a course of desensitization and probably some sort of behavior consultation with a trainer. Intervention with a young dog that has not become so distressed that he attacks might have changed the course of events. Dogs have a threshold of tolerance. Its height is determined first by their inherited temperament, which differs among breeds and within a breed among its individuals, and secondly by their degree of socialization to strangers in and out of the home.

Not only does the dog need to get out and see people, people need to come to the dog's house and see him. Of course, you normally don't invite people over for your dog's benefit, but if you own an Akita you should make a point of it. Your dog may be less than enthusiastic about visitors. Don't worry unless he shows signs, even subtle ones, of hostility. This may include: looking the visitor in the eye; sitting or standing (worse) between the two of you; anxious looks at the visitor accompanied by whines; and/or pacing. I even have a few that make monkey-like noises and blow through their lips like horses. This is their equivalent to a growl and is a warning to me that they are very suspicious and distrustful of the stranger.

Of course, sometimes these actions are justified, and I am not in any way suggesting that you should not heed the warnings of a guard dog doing his job. If the visitor on the porch is pitching magazines and you've never laid eyes on him before, you'd be smart to shut the door and keep your dog around. On the other hand, if it's your next-door neighbor or a friend from work-- someone you know, someone who is safe in your judgment--your dog is out of line.

Desensitization

Adults: A dog that is obviously hostile should be leashed and put on a down stay next to you. If he is so suspicious you cannot get him into a down, then put him in a sit stay. If he breaks the stay, correct him and put him back in it. Otherwise, ignore him and continue your conversation with your friend. Both reinforce your own dominance, although the sit less so, and will eventually show him your friend is no threat. Giving him no attention keeps you from inadvertently reinforcing one of his hostile responses. Just like children, dogs can and will do things for your attention even if the attention they receive is negative.

Never try to reassure a fearful or distrustful dog by petting him and telling him, "It's okay." First, it's not okay and secondly, you're not allaying his anxiety, you're rewarding it and, thus, encouraging it

My veterinarian gave me a great piece of advice about dealing with anxious, fearful, or angry dogs. Physiologically, the dog's activated state is maintained by the release of adrenaline. Since the adrenals can produce only so much of it, eventually, the dog's hyper-attentive state will wear off. The more agitated the dog is, the more quickly this will happen; the calmer, the less so.

While you and your visitor are talking, observe your dog's behavior. He will eventually have to relax, which will be evident from his posture and demeanor. When you see this, you can acknowledge his good behavior with some attention and a treat, so long as he remains on the down or sitstay. If he gets so bored he goes to sleep-great, you've made a giant step forward!

Take all this in small steps and realize you may have some set-backs. When your dog is comfortable with visitors that sit and talk, have them stand up and walk about. Reinforce the dog's down-stay and ignore any signs of suspicion or wariness on the dog's part. Eventually, the visitors can give him treats for good behavior. Perhaps you can teach him to shake hands for a treat to break the ice. All sorts of techniques can defuse the dog's suspicions.

Children: If your problem is with children, you will have to stand or sit with the dog while your child and a visitor play quietly. Over time, the dog will become more comfortable in the children's presence. Then, their play can become more active. The trick here, as with adults, is to let the dog get control of himself, learn that the situation is not dangerous, and develop appropriate responses that get everyone's approval.

Desensitization should be reinforced repeatedly and done with many different children. The dog should still not be left alone with them, but if someone forgets, which will inevitably happen, the children and the dog

won't have to pay for the oversight.

In summary: If you have a dog that has a behavior problem, you not only have to correct the problem, you have to give him a socially acceptable alternative to that behavior. He doesn't like children, he has to learn to leave them alone; he doesn't like visitors in the house; he has to learn to accept them.

You have to learn how to recognize the initial indicators of problems and instead of making excuses for them, you've got to move quickly to stop them. You have to lead your dog on a path that makes him an acceptable companion and pet. Breeders must learn not to accept the owner's comments at face value. Ask specific questions about the dog and his behavior so that you can identify any problems that might be developing. You'll have to listen carefully to the replies and be ready to offer constructive advice about handling problems.

Breeding

When the dog in question is a breeding prospect, you will have to evaluate the strength of the problem and try to identify its source. In the above case, we looked at the behavior of our dogs and decided the problem lay with a common ancestor. Almost all the males and some of the bitches with her behind them had some oddity of behavior, although it was by no means the same from dog to dog. Two dogs, for instance, disliked anything with wheels. No, they had not been run over as puppies. In fact, they had only the one bitch in common in their pedigrees; they just had the same phobia. Some males didn't like children; others didn't like strange adults. We ultimately abandoned this line completely in favor of ones that produced more stable temperament. In fairness, this action wasn't all that difficult since none of these dogs were big winners, and in accordance with Murphy's law, the very best ones in terms of conformation had some of the weirdest behaviors. Breeding is after all a balancing act, so had we been unable or unwilling to sacrifice breeding these dogs, we would have looked at lines very strong in temperament and bred to something line- or inbred on it. Then, to continue, we would have used only the dogs that showed improved temperaments.

CONFIDENC

Some dogs are born with confidence. They accept new surroundings, people, and situations with aplomb and react, if not positively to change, at least without anxiety. Unfortunately, bold and fearless do not describe most Akitas. As puppies, they are very careful and quite cautious. Few I've seen are ever reckless. Akitas generally look before they leap.

I think of this breed as being born forty and then getting older. Except when hunting or fighting where they become relentless and totally focused on their task, they are rarely risk-takers. They seem stodgy and resistant to change, a tendency that can cement itself in the older dog. Anything that

tells them their caution is justified reinforces the reaction. Consequently, unsocialized, unexposed dogs frequently are anxious when put in unfamiliar circumstances. The dog's anxiety level is proportionate to the number of strange things in the environment and their magnitude. In the worst case, the dog may have a panic attack.

Building confidence is very important to those of use who are showing and should be important to pet owners as well. A self-assured dog can go to the veterinarian, stay at the boarding kennel, accompany the family on a cam pout and even pack some of their equipment, go to dog shows, and compete in obedience trials. His poise in the face of new situations is based in part on inherited traits and in part on the ability to handle stress.

Managing Stress

Puppies encounter stress and learn to deal with it from the moment they are born. To enhance this ability, puppies must encounter manageable stress and must deal with it on their own. From the outset, you should pick up each puppy and handle it. At first, this will be when you weigh them after birth. In addition to putting them on the scale, you should hold the puppy, stroke it, and talk to it. They cannot hear you, but they can feel the vibrations from your speech. Individual handling should increase in amount and duration as the puppy grows. Walk about the house with it. Different rooms have different smells, temperatures, and sounds.

This should continue when the puppies' eyes and ears are open. Individually, each can be put on the floor and allowed to walk about and explore outside the litter box and without the security of mom and siblings. You will have to monitor the puppy's reactions. He can easily get into trouble. He can be mildly fearful but should be able to allay those fears in a short time. Any stressful situation he encounters should be mild enough for him to overcome. In so doing, the dog is learning not only to handle the particular situation he encounters, he is learning to learn. That is, he is developing a set of mental tools that allow him to evaluate and react suitably to new situations.

The more successful he is at this, the more confident he will become. To help this process along, the puppy needs to gain experience. He must be taken out into a world larger than his whelping box. As he grows, this world should expand from the back yard to the front, then to the neighborhood, then to training classes, shows, and other areas where large numbers of dogs and/or people gather. Here, he will learn to take cues from you and other humans and dogs. The world is full of many things frightening to youngsters who lack the experience to evaluate whether something strange presents a real threat. To determine whether fear and perhaps flight are justified, the youngster will look to his mother, his siblings, and to you.

Discouraging Fear Responses

So, what do you do when the dog gets into trouble? It can happen anywhere. I've had puppies and young dogs go bananas over a mailbox or garbage sack. One of the worst panic attacks I've ever had was when one of my Shepherds encountered a bronze statue in a neighbor's front yard. She walked up and sniffed it, then freaked out.

Back to my veterinarian's advice, abject terror can only last for so long. An animal has only so much adrenaline, and as the supply decreases, the panic does too. Until this happens, reason is not the animal's strong point, but once adrenaline is depleted, the animal calms considerably. Your best course is to do nothing until the dog's flight response begins to shut down. You can talk to the dog, but make sure you are not sympathetic. The tone to strike is as if someone has told you a mildly amusing joke. If someone else is with you, you can both talk in a normal tone until the dog calms down.

Throughout, keep the dog as close to the problem as possible. In severe panic attacks, you may have to back off, then reproach. Tell the dog in a no-nonsense voice, "This is nothing to be afraid of. Look," then touch the object yourself or walk up to it. Let the dog see you're not afraid. Eventually, the dog will approach it. Then you can praise him and tell him he's very brave. As young dogs and puppies deal successfully with fears, they will become generally less fearful. Each time they conquer a problem, they gain confidence in their abilities and in you.

Obedience Training

Very few Akitas are actually "spooky." Instead, they are cautious and careful. When these characteristics are coupled with a lack of confidence, the dog can become very unhappy when he is in a strange situation. For these dogs, obedience training is a godsend. Confident dogs can reach into their bag of tricks and find a way to deal with the unusual. The structure provided by obedience training gives the less confident dog a prescribed method for handling stressful situations. As he does so, his confidence in his abilities increases, and he becomes less anxious.

TRAINABLE

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 Papillons and Poodles have that background. Poodles were originally retrievers and Papillons 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 Jindo, 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 Bobrow 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 downstay. 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.

NOISE STABLE

A dog that is not afraid of noise is more pleasant to own. To some extent, noise shyness is an inherited characteristic. Steadiness to shot is of primary importance in the temperament of gun and guard dog breeds. If you attend a Schutzhund or field trial, you'll find the dogs impervious to the guns going off all around. They are also fairly staunch in the face of all noise. Historically, I suppose Akitas have little reason to be unaffected by noise, and many seem unsettled to some degree by loud noises. I had a female who hated the sound of generators. Believe me, getting into a show site without passing a generator can be difficult depending on the parking. If we walked by one, I might just as well have turned around and gone home as take her in the ring. Somehow, she seemed to think they were mobile and any minute, one would make an appearance.

Most dogs aren't so neurotic, but you never know what will happen. We've all seen dogs react poorly to loudspeaker announcements, falling chairs, or other unexpected sounds at a show. Years ago, while the groups were going on at the dog show site on one side of a river, the city set off fireworks on the other for some sort of celebration. We spent hours trying to catch a Sheltie that had gotten away from its handler. A multi-group winning dog, it was so traumatized by the experience, it was never shown again.

Noise shyness is a trait you can breed away from, although it is of considerably less importance than many others. If you think you might have a problem, the time to start working with your puppies is while they are in the whelping box. Make sure they are in a noisy environment, although it should not be at such a level it makes them unduly nervous. Play a radio on rap, hard rock, and talk stations. I have a satellite dish and one of the channels we get has nothing but war movies. My last few litters listened to bombardments, machine guns, and bombs every night. I took two of them out to a Schutzhund German Shepherd Specialty when they were six-months old and was very pleased by their response to the guns fired off in the ring right in front of us. The male, who was asleep, looked around, then curled back up and went back to sleep. The female

was unconcerned initially, but after about ten shots, she turned around and looked at me for reassurance. I continued talking to my friend and after a few seconds, my puppy began playing with her toy. Her mother, on the other hand, would have bolted out of there at the first shot, so I think early exposure has helped. Desensitizing puppies to noise is also important if you live in an area with frequent thunderstorms. Since these never go away, the dog's fear tends to escalate. In the worst cases, the dogs engage in escape behavior which means destruction of their confinement area. This may be a crate or your windows and doors.

INDEPENDENCE

Everyone who has Akitas knows that they are independent dogs. This is definitely an inherited component of temperament and very strong in the breed. I don't think this is something anyone breeds for. In some ways, Akita would be more appealing if they were a little less independent, but it is so intrinsic to the breed, it shapes many aspects of their behavior. Without it, we'd have a totally different breed without the reserve and dignity so typical the adult.

I've been around a lot of different dog breeds, but Akitas are one of the only ones I'm sure could be depended on to survive without people, barring encounters with cars about which they seem to have no sense. They are unlikely to do anything reckless or daring; rather, they consider what they are doing and use their experiences to evaluate their actions. In short, the Akita is a survivor, due in large part to his capacity for independent action. Therefore, leaving the dog outside to fend for itself can make him a poor pet. Akitas need to be around the people in the household to bond with them. Left to their own devices, Akitas will make their own world and rules for living in it.

Mutual respect is the key to working with Akitas. You must be the alpha person, but even so, sooner or later, you'll run up against their independent nature. Pick your battles carefully. If it doesn't really matter, let the dog have his way. He'll be easier to deal with later when something needs to be done your way.

INHIBITED

Akitas are typically inhibited as opposed to excitable, a set of inherited characteristics that mark the dog's response to stress. His inhibited nature is responsible for the laid-back attitude that makes the Akita a pleasure to have in the house. It is obvious in puppies as they work through the PAT. They tend to get calmer and less responsive. Sometimes, inhibited puppies get so stressed out, they fall asleep. With excitable breeds, puppies end up running about the room, jumping on the tester, and sometimes, even barking and whining. When you start a new training exercise with your dog, whether it's heeling

in obedience or stacking for conformation, your dog will demonstrate signs of inhibition. He may work slowly, show little animation, and/or seem very tired. He may yawn repeatedly, which is a sign of stress.

In the worst cases, the very inhibited dog demonstrates a sort of waxy catatonia. We had one one a PAT that literally never moved she was so shut down. She grew up to be a wonderful, calm, non-adventurous companion. An excellent example of normal inhibited behavior is the puppy at its first match. You can position him easily and then he stays like a little statue without a lick of training. From one show to the next, it becomes more like the other puppies, moving about and demonstrating a puppy's typical short attention span. As the dog gains confidence through exposure, it is less stressed, so it is less inhibited. The more puppies are exposed to manageable stress, the less inhibited their response will be. So, don't get discouraged initially by your dog's response to new situations. He will become more active and enthusiastic when he gets used to them. If you make them more stressful by being disapproving of his hesitancy, you will only make worse. Just go on positively, and your dog's performance will improve.

PROTECTIVE

Many people depend on their Akitas for personal protection. Until very recently, I had both German Shepherds and Akitas, and I have found many differences in how they respond to strangers in the house and outside the yard. First, the Shepherds (and the other guard-type dogs, such as Rottweilers and Dobermans) are much better area guards, especially if the owner is in a situation where he needs or wants outsiders to be aware that dogs are on the premises. Why? The other breeds bark more. Like the old joke, that's the good and the bad news.

I love being able to have dogs without offending my neighbors. All twelve of my dogs bark less than the one dog that lives next door. For eleven years, two joggers came past our house every morning, and for eleven years, my German Shepherd barked at them while the Akitas just watched, a much more sensible response.

However, now that I have only Akitas, our yardmen have no trouble coming in the backyard so long as my children are not outside. The Shepherds wouldn't let anyone inside the fence, no matter how many times a week they showed up. We have back-door garbage pickup, which means the garbage men have to come inside the gates. Some of my Akitas will allow them in and station themselves in front of the door, watching. Of course, the Shepherds wouldn't let them in at all.

Do I think anyone could harm my daughters with an Akita present? Definitely not! They are less concerned with me and even less with my husband, probably because we are the dominant people. Maybe they figure

we can look out for ourselves most of the time. I'm fairly confident that their attitude would change if they sensed we were frightened or suspicious ourselves.

Guarding is a primary duty of the European guard dogs commonly seen in Schutzhund work--Rottweilers, Belgians, Shepherds, and Bouviers. The Akita's basic temperament, shaped for different purposes, gives it a different approach to life. Protectiveness is definitely there but takes a backseat to other facets of the dog's personality.

If our Akita's bark in the night, we know they have a good reason. They know people don't skulk around after dark. On the other hand, if Akitas were great protection dogs, they'd be working in police departments everywhere, and some of us would be in Schutzhund trials. I remember an interview with a policeman who trained his Akita for K-9 work. He said the dog was a good worker but not a breed he would select again for that particular job because the Akita was harder to train.

TOLERANT OF OTHER DOGS

Low on the list, but still there is tolerance of other dogs. To some extent, all northern dog are scrappy. Akitas have the dubious distinction of being one of the only ones actually used for dog-fighting. Undoubtedly, Japanese breeders selected for the more aggressive dogs throughout the years the breed was used for fighting, but I'm sure their choice to use the Akita in the first place had much to do with their innate desire to scrap with other dogs. This tendency made them a good choice for the sport of dog-fighting. Breeding programs over the year increased this tendency and kept it in the breed.

Historical data tell us that the native dogs of the Dewa area were also crossed with European dogs to increase their size and, therefore, their fighting ability. These were probably Great Danes (also known as Deutsche Dogges) which were brought to the area by German mining engineers. Was this version of the Akita a ferocious pit dog? They certainly were pitted against similar dogs. However, Tatsuo Kimura tells me that one of the reasons the Akita breeders shifted directions early in this century was because of a fight between an Akita fighting champion and a Tosa Fighting Dog, a breed resulting from crosses of the Japanese native Tosa Inu with various European imports. Looking at them today, I would guess the imports must have included at least the English Mastiff and probably some other Molossan-type dogs. Anyway, the Akita barely escaped with its life. Its fanciers realized that continuing to pit them with dogs like the Tosa might be the end of the breed. With the rising tide of nationalism in Japan, they began to value the Akita Inu as a native Japanese breed, for itself rather than for what it could do in a dog fight. Instead of crosses aimed at fighting ability, they began to look for hunting-type dogs to restore the

breed to its original type.

If you can enhance a trait by selective breeding, of course, you can also minimize it. Certainly, Akitas today seem less dog-aggressive generally than they were twenty years ago. This alteration is due in part to selection for less aggressive dogs and in part to better training techniques such as early socialization of puppies, continued exposure of adult dogs to strange dogs, and obedience training of young dogs.

I know several people who keep same-sex Akitas together and others that have several mixed-sex ones that run together with no trouble. Sometimes, a pack works because a dominant dog keeps everyone in line, but maybe these Akitas are just that much less dog-aggressive. I've never been daring enough to put my older bitches together, although I suspect a few of them would get along. One, though, can run with any male but cannot be put loose with a female without fighting. She's been dog-aggressive since puppyhood, and I'm sure had she been put in a pack situation, she'd have inflicted a lot of damage on other bitches.

Fence Fighting

Putting dogs in a situation where they can fence-fight builds up a lot of unresolved aggression. It starts as a game and then escalates to serious dislike. To minimize this, I have board fencing between my runs. It is covered on both sides with chain-link to keep it from being eaten. The dogs really don't see each other, and rarely ever bark at dogs on the other sides. Given a chance, though, they will fence-fight through the gates or the outside chain-link.

Dogs that fence fight can cause significant damage to each other. Worse if you have two together, they can become so enraged that the fight with each other when they can't get to the dog on the other side of the fence.

Aggressive To Other Dogs?

According to the standard, an Akita may be aggressive towards other dogs; however, it doesn't say that they have to be so. In today's litigious society, the consequences of an attack that damages someone else's dog can be severe indeed. Also, many people do not understand that a dog that is aggressive towards another dog is not necessarily aggressive to people. Looking at a snarling, bristling Akita doesn't inspire a lot of confidence about the breed. I've heard from people who bought dogs as pets, listened to all that the breeder told them about this less desirable aspect of Akita temperament and failed utterly to understand what it really meant until their darling scooped up the neighbors peekapoo and put it in the hospital with one bite. Fence fighting with the neighbor's dog can result in an attack should your dog ever get into his yard or his into yours! Hot wires, extra fencing, or just vigilance on your part will help avoid this kind of disaster.

Mostly, your dog has to be socialized to accept strange dogs at class, in the street, or wherever you might go with him. For some dogs with strong tendencies toward dog aggression, one class at 12 weeks won't be enough; you have to keep it up for most of his life. These tendencies also may not appear until the dog goes through puberty. Misbehavior here should be firmly corrected because the hormonal surges your dog is undergoing will make him harder to deal with and can set up bad habits that last a lifetime. Correctly managed, the dog will settle down when his testosterone does. If you want to compete with an Akita, regardless of the venue, you must have a dog that can be trusted around other dogs. A dog that can't be trusted to leave other animals alone on neutral ground is a real liability. In obedience and agility, the dog works off-leash, so he has to be reliable. At a dog show, he must negotiate crowded aisles and stand close together in crowded rings.

The demands of such activities have shaped our selection for less dog Aggression in our Akitas, and I think this is perfectly acceptable and somewhat desirable. Nonetheless, you should remember that the most benign Akita can conceive a sudden and violent dislike for another Akita. In that case, you'll have to avoid that dog like the plague because if your's has a chance, he'll get in a fight. That may be only dog that ever inspires such antipathy, but both dogs will remember each other and renew hostilities any time they can. It's part of what makes an Akita an Akita!

LOYALTY

After I started this series, I realized that I had left loyalty off my list of temperament components. This is a hallmark of Akita character, and the only excuse I can offer for overlooking it is that it so much an intrinsic part of Akita nature that we take it for granted.

I don't think I've ever been around an Akita didn't have it. Is it an inherited trait? Since some breeds do not have a lot of personal loyalty to any one person or group, I suspect it is, and it is vital that we keep it in the breed. I think their sense of loyalty makes Akitas accepting of all the household inhabitants, including cats, kids, other adults, and livestock. It allows them to form firm friendships with other people--your friends, trainers, handlers, neighbors--and to never forget them. Akitas I raised and sold as puppies have greeted me enthusiastically years later. Dogs that belong to friends I travel with greet me enthusiastically every time I see them, even though months or even years may pass between meetings. Akitas never forget a friend. The down side is that they never forget people they don't like either. Once, my brother Steve had a picnic. To keep him from being a pest, Scotty and Amy were in their crates. Rusty, Steve's brother-in-law, set his plate with two hot dogs on top of Scotty's crate and went off to get something to drink. I guess Scotty thought they were his, because when Rusty picked them up and ate them, Scotty barked at him. Since then, Scotty has never

liked Rusty despite Rusty's overtures to redress the wrong. Akitas aren't very forgiving either.

To some extent, their sense of loyalty is the fount from which other traits arise. Without it, Akitas would not be protective of their friends. Given their sense of independence, the Akita's working ability probably finds its roots in loyalty. Can you imagine an Akita that is not loyal to its family and friends? I can't; it is such a pervasive part of the breed that we just accept its presence. Loosing it would make a profoundly different dog.

CONCLUSION

I hope this series on temperament has made everyone breeding Akitas think about what you want in a dog and how to go about getting it through good breeding choices. Those of you who are just owners or who are considering this breed should take note of the areas where problems commonly occur.

This doesn't mean that your dog will manifest these behaviors, but it does mean that if he has problems, they are likely to be in these areas. Please watch for signs that you might be having trouble, because if you catch this at the beginning, you'll probably be able to either change the dog's or your behavior and stop a molehill from becoming a mountain.

I don't mind answering questions when I have time. And I certainly welcome your observations. You can at sherryATsherob.com (replace AT with @) or call (713/465-9729, CST, USA, not between 8-10 p.m., please).

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