

THE TRAGIC FANTASY THAT A PROTECTION DOG CAN MAKE A RELIABLE FAMILY PET

On Friday, October 24, 2014, a seven year old boy was mauled to death by a Rottweiler. The Rottweiler, imported from the Netherlands, had undergone attack training as a 'personal protection dog' and gained titles up to level 2 IPO. The trainers of this Rottweiler were sure they could install a 'switch' in their attack trained dogs, one that could be flipped at will to make the dog function as a safe and docile family pet, then flipped back again if the dog's attack skills were needed. The boy's family apparently bought this Rottweiler as a family pet. They felt comfortable leaving the boy alone with the dog after all the assurances they'd had from the trainers. They were confident that when the 'switch' was set to 'family pet', the attack trained Rottweiler would be safe around children. On the fatal day, they allowed their son to take the Rottweiler into their yard to go to the bathroom. While the two were outside, the Rottweiler attacked the boy and killed him. No one witnessed the attack.

This case reveals a whole range of problems and illusions that we would do well to address regarding dogs trained for 'personal protection' or police and military work.

Bite threshold and bite inhibition

Perhaps the most urgent reality we need to recognize is this one: any dog that has been either bred or trained (or both) to abandon bite inhibition and to attack other living creatures with a hard, gripping bite will never be a safe household pet.

The domestic dog is normally a conflict avoider and normally has a high bite threshold. This means it is reluctant to bite and would rather resort to signaling (barking, shows of teeth, air-snapping) to deflect a conflict or a threat. If for some reason this doesn't work, and the dog is forced over its bite threshold, then bite inhibition comes into play. This is the extremely accurate and *reflexive* control dogs normally exercises over how hard they bite if they bite at all. If you corner a dog without an escape route, or if he lashes out in fear or in a pain reflex, a normal dog will still, reflexively, inhibit its bite so as to do zero or minimal real damage.

This desire for non-harmful conflict resolution and threat deflection is what makes the domestic dog safe as a companion who lives closely with us. If you train or breed dogs to lack or abandon their reticence about using serious aggression against the species it lives with, you're creating a creature who is dangerous to have around. The attack-trained dog won't necessarily use the canine warning system to avoid having to hurt someone – after all, it's been taught that attacking humans is a good thing to do. When it does bite, the attack-trained dog won't be careful, but will grip and hold, as it's been trained to do. This eliminates the safety mechanism that normally makes us so sure our household dogs won't badly hurt us, even if we make some mistake as we interact with them.

IPO bite work

Besides the willingness to attack a human, and the lesson that bite inhibition must be abandoned when doing so, there's another problem. Some of the exercises a dog has to execute to get the IPO titles require the dog to wait for a command to attack the 'helper' (the person in the padded bite-suit), but others require the dog to decide independently to attack, ie without a command from its handler. The rules of the game demand that the dog bite the padded sleeve only, but it's quite common for dogs to bite elsewhere. This is why the 'helper' is clothed in full body protection rather

than only the padded bite sleeve. Once the dog has decided to attack and grip, it mustn't let go until its handler gives the 'out' command, otherwise points are deducted.

The exercises that require the dog to attack without a command involve both a retreating target and a target that is approaching in an aggressive way. The dog is learning both not to let the other avoid a conflict by bowing out and not to avoid the conflict itself even when there's a route of retreat open to it. Again, the dog is taught that conflict resolution with humans has to consist of not hesitating to bite hard, grip, and not let go.

[For a demonstration of what an IPO trial looks like, click the below link. Note how much trouble the dog is having restraining itself from attacking the target 'helper': 2014 IPO 3, Kingston Martin vom Bullenfeld <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSzpE4VmROk>]

The cues and stimuli that are supposed to trigger the dog's independent decision to attack are ones that commonly occur in the course of family life: a person suddenly appearing from around a corner, trying to move away while the dog is barking at them, coming at the dog with a raised arm holding an object (during the trials, this is a stick), raising a fist towards or shouting at the dog's handler, running away from the dog. Now imagine your living room full of children or other relatives, or a barbecue party in the yard, or a family argument. Consider for a moment how often the trained cues will be shown to the dog in completely normal and innocent situations, both between humans and between humans and the attack-trained dog.

Dogs with a 'switch'

It's unrealistic and dangerous to expect that a dog will respond to these signals only on the training field or only if the target is wearing the padded bite-suit. The whole point of the training is to create dogs who will do the work for real on the streets, in war situations, and in the home of anyone who's bought the dog for 'personal protection'.

So where did this expression come from? During police and military work, a dog is expected to be able to switch between attacking and tracking, the two tasks IPO trains it for. One of Vohne Liche's NatGeo videos illustrates this. **[View: Life and Death: Meespelen: <http://www.natgeotv.com/nl/alpha-dogs/videos/meespelen>]**

Notice first of all the difficulty they have getting the dog to 'out' (release its target), after which the dog is 'still targeting everything that's moving'. But suppose instead they were breeding and training dogs that easily let go on the first command, then easily calmed and were ready to track. The problem even then is that switching from one task to another under guidance of a handler (whose commands the dog is taught to fear ignoring) is not the same as flipping a switch that makes the trained responses go away altogether until you want them again.

This is impossible, first of all because the laws of behavior don't allow it. The dogs are trained – often using prong collars, electric shock collars, and other harsh methods – to fear not giving the 'correct' response to the trained cues to attack. Aside from whether the dogs enjoy attacking, the fear reduction they experience by doing so will act as a strong reward. Even if they've been trained with non-harsh methods and only by rewards of some kind, the laws of behavior still dictate that rewarding behavior increases the likelihood that it will occur in future.

Add to this the fact that the training requires the dog to attack upon certain cues without a command from its handler. A dog trained to decide this independently in the presence of its handler will certainly not hesitate to make the decision when its handler is nowhere to be seen – ie, in your household, where it will frequently be alone with your children or guests in the course of a day.

Incompetent trainers, inadequate understanding of how animals learn

Despite a statement by the Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI – the organization that writes the rule for IPO), the techniques these trainers use can hardly be called scientific. A crucial scientific fact here is that training with punishment can produce serious side-effects, the most dangerous of which is uncontrolled aggression.

Sadly, closer investigation shows that these protection work trainers are clumsy and lack skill even in the techniques they do use, and no matter what it is they're trying to teach the dog. A great many beginner's mistakes are visible in a video demonstrating the first phase of scent training (see text box).

Training a scent dog. At about 0:40, the handler brings the dog to the box then has to push on its back end to get a sit – sign of trainer incompetence – and after that again and again. Same with the next dog they show. Then the third dog, Kirby. At 2:10 he pushes on the dog's back end, says sit-sit-stay while the dog is occupied with the box. Then as the dog is in the act of jumping up again, he says sit!-sit!-sit!, which the dog doesn't even hear, let alone obey. **This is such clumsy training, it's painful to watch.** The trainer blames it on the dog – "He's highly distracted". A good trainer knows how to get a dog to concentrate voluntarily and without coercion, including no pushing on its butt end. Apparently none of these dogs were first even taught to sit reliably on command. These trainers are just talking to dogs who aren't paying attention, have no idea what the trainer wants, but are just being pushed and shoved into position...and they're calling that 'training'.
<http://www.natgeotv.com/nl/alpha-dogs/videos/gekke-kirby>

An even more serious problem is shown in two more videos – namely, the dogs' frequent failure during bite work to 'out' (let go) on command:

This video. Notice how they have to go in every time and physically get the dog to release. At 2:10 they even have to [insert a stick into the dog's mouth](#) and pry it open.

<http://www.natgeotv.com/nl/alpha-dogs/videos/kruis>

Watch towards the end of this one (about 1:30), when the trainer tries to get the dog to release – she has to physically pull it off...[and it bites her in the leg](#):

<http://www.natgeotv.com/nl/alpha-dogs/videos/grote-hap>

This failure to 'out' problem is a result of incompetently training the behavior chain grab > hold > release. A skilled trainer knows that in training a behavioral sequence, you must train the last part first, then move backwards. If you want a dog that will reliably release on command, you first train it to drop anything and everything it has in its mouth instantly when you give the command. The dog has to understand that 'drop it' is a great thing to do – always safe, always rewarded in some way. Only then do you start playing tug games with the dog, or other 'games' (such as attack training) that involving grabbing and holding.

The frequent failure of attack-trained dogs to out is no surprise. The dogs are first taught to grab hard and hold on for dear life, at risk of getting an electric shock if they let go. Only later are they asked to learn the release command. Since they've already learned that releasing means a small disaster happens, it's difficult for the dogs to learn to let go. Even if they do learn it, it'll be difficult for them to do it in a highly excited situation.

Instead of wondering what they're doing wrong, these trainers again use shocks, this time to punish the dog for *not* letting go. Now the dog is in a situation where both not gripping and continuing to grip are punished behaviors. It's not surprising that these dogs often show re-directed aggression – biting their handler – when their handler has to come in to physically remove them from the attack target.

Nor should you be surprised when you've taken one of these dogs into your family home as a pet, and it fails to 'out' on command, then turns that re-directed aggression on you (or your child) when you physically interfere in an ongoing attack.

Breeding

The official IPO temperament test is given only to determine a dog's fitness for breeding purposes. To get a high score, dogs must be high on 'drive' (ie, edginess, quick arousal), self-confidence (ie, willingness to engage rather than avoid confrontation), and 'stress tolerance' (ie, refusal to back down when someone resists an attack). The best dogs show 'clear instinctive behavior', an expression of the appalling belief among these people that 'dogs bite, it's what dogs do', and that a dog who doesn't want to bite, grip and hold isn't really fully a dog.

The 'protection dog' industry is an international one. Dogs with IPO or other attack training titles can command prices of up to \$15,000 or more. As a result, there are quite a few breeders who specialize in selecting dogs according to the IPO temperament standard. These kennels are in fact breeding their dogs for edginess, poor impulse control, a lowered bite threshold, and in some cases an inborn 'jump in high > bite' motor pattern. Many of these dogs display what we could best describe as ADHD-like behavior – difficulty with focusing and easily distracted, easily wound up, unable to self-dampen once excited. These are abnormal and sometimes dangerous traits in any dog, but they are certainly dangerous in dogs who are going to be trained for attack purposes. Worse yet if these impulsive, trained dogs are placed in family homes.

The Dutch Rottweiler

When the Netherlands banned the pit bull, it put the Rottweiler at the top of the list of dog breeds that were on probation, to be banned in future if their share of serious attack incidents increased. The Dutch Rottweiler club responded by asking breeders to voluntarily subject dogs to a test before breeding them: the Socially Acceptable Behavior test (SAB test).

Sounds good, right? Not if you know the inside story. The people who administered the test were not trained by a university or by an impartial government body. Rather, they were trained in testing by the Dutch Kennel Club Association, whose main objective is protecting the financial interests of pedigree dog breeders. To become a tester, the person had to be elected and proposed by a breed club. Again we can expect the objective to lie less with public safety, and more with preserving the financial interests of dog breeders. This may (or of course may not) be the reason why testers allowed the Rottweilers to bite five times during administration of the test. Only if the dog bit a sixth time did it fail the test.

Owners and breeders of Rottweilers knew the contents of the test, and they often trained their dogs in advance, in hopes of having the dogs pass the test. Nevertheless, and despite the lax standard applied, many Dutch Rottweilers failed the SAB test (percentage unknown, as this is a closely guarded breed club secret). Owners of failed dogs were still free to breed them, pedigrees were still

dispensed for the pups – the only disadvantage was that the pups couldn't be advertised as products of SAB approved parents.

When the Dutch pit bull ban was repealed, so was the attached list of breeds on probation. There is now no reason at all to subject a Dutch Rottweiler to any test before breeding it, not even the flimsy SAB test. Of note is also the fact that Rottweilers are not used by the Dutch police; the Dutch police stick to the various shepherd types as assistants in their work.

A problematic breed before, a flimsy test that has now been abandoned, a breed Dutch police aren't interested in – would you want one of these dogs in your home with your children, even if it hadn't been attack-trained? Given the facts, it seems all the more irresponsible and unrealistic to promote a Dutch Rottweiler as a family pet when it has been attack trained.

Dangerous dogs vs reliable family pets

Vohne Liche Kennels made a big point of showing a video in which Ozzy, the Rottweiler with the IPO-2 title who later killed seven-year-old Logan Meyer, is proudly shown being friendly with strangers. Apparently Vohne Liche Kennels feels this is an achievement worth touting in one of their trained attack dogs. Striking in this video (which has now been taken down) is how nervous the handler is as he introduces Ozzy to various people. The handler is constantly talking to the dog, saying 'Good boy' over and over in a soothing voice – evidence to me that the handler isn't really entirely sure the dog is reliable with strangers.

[A copy of the video was preserved here: <http://www.dogsbite.org/media/video/ozzy-meeting-people.mp4>]

This brings to mind an IPO trial rule that I haven't mentioned yet. In exercises where the dog is supposed to wait for the attack command, the rules explicitly state that the 'helper' in the bite-suit must stand still, hide the stick he is holding, and not do anything that might trigger the dog to bite and grip before the command is given. It seems that even the FCI is worried that small things might trigger the attack sequence and lead to failure at the title trial. The video of Ozzy miraculously interacting well with strangers suggest that the handlers know they haven't installed a 'switch' in the dog so much as a hair trigger.

In any case, a video or photograph showing an interval of friendly behavior by a dog is no proof of whether the dog is dangerous. Few dangerous dogs are frothing at the mouth all the time, trying or threatening all the day long to bite or attack someone. The rare dogs that do this are in fact less dangerous, because they're letting us know what we can expect from them.

So this is not what a dangerous dog will usually look like. A dangerous dog will look normal most of the time, but will be a dog who is willing to engage instead of avoid a conflict, willing to bite for real, worse yet to keep gripping or biting once it starts, and that won't back down towards a human even if a flight route is open to disengage. This is all the more dangerous in a dog who has been trained and/or bred to have a hair trigger, and to initiate an attack without warning and without a command.

Children often run around a house screaming or shouting with laughter or tears. They appear suddenly from behind the couch or around a corner in the home or yard. They play games in which they run, often with objects held high in their hands. A child (or for that matter an adult) approaching the dog to throw a stick might not know that raising the stick is a trained signal for the dog to attack. All of this is worsened by the fact that the dog seems fine most of the time, because we won't be aware we have to avoid the hair trigger. The attack will come unexpectedly, and all too often we

won't know how to stop it. If you add to all this the breeding that's going on, and the difficulty these dogs have learning and obeying the command to stop the attack, and the commonly re-directed aggression when physically made to stop, you have a total disaster scenario.

What we want in a family pet are the normal qualities that have made the dog such a success among us: a preference for conflict avoidance, extreme reticence in the use of real aggression, and excellent and reflexive bite inhibition. We want dogs who are laid back and docile, who calmly consider events before reacting, not easily over-the-top excited, whose first impulse if they are excited is a friendly one, and who are even then able to self-calm and offer socially appropriate responses. We want a dog who, if it somehow feels forced to deliver a controlled bite, will choose fleeing as the next tactic the instant it sees that an escape route has opened up.

The IPO temperament standard uses code language, but in that code language it specifically states that a dog with these qualities isn't fit for breeding purpose: the dog who isn't edgy and quickly aroused, who is shy about initiating in a conflict, who is hesitant about biting and gripping, and who would rather avoid a threatening human than attack is considered poor breeding material.

The Dutch SAB test – if it's given at all nowadays – still allows the Rottweiler to bite five times during the test and yet be certified as showing socially acceptable behavior.

Our readers can draw their own conclusions about the wisdom of advertising any of these dogs as a family pet, and more yet of advertising an attack-trained Dutch Rottweiler that way.

Alexandra Semyonova

Baltimore

November, 2014

<http://nonlineardogs.com/>