



Breeding for Temperament

By Shirley Nilsson

Temperament is the inherited predisposition for a dog to react socially and to the environment in a given manner. It is determined by a combination of inherited behavioral traits and early life experiences. Temperament is firmly established by the age of 3 months and remains relatively constant throughout the life of the dog. Some indicators of a pup's final temperament can be tested for at 7 weeks of age by a puppy aptitude test (PAT) along with observation of other personality and working ability tests.

The predispositions that a pup inherits will determine what its aptitudes will be - which types of work and activities it is likely to succeed at and to enjoy doing, and how sociable and trainable it is likely to be. Of course, appropriate socialization, exposure and training will be required to bring these natural abilities to fruition.

In order for a dog to be able to cohabit and thrive in the company of people and dogs, all dogs must have a 'sound', also referred to as 'stable', temperament, meaning a nature that allows the dog to behave safely and predictably in the company of people and other dogs. In addition, in order for a Weimaraner to be useful and trainable for its working purpose, it must also have a 'correct' temperament, that is displaying all of the breed-specific temperament traits. The Weimaraner was developed to be a multi-purpose gun dog for hunting small furred game and upland birds, pointing upland birds,

retrieving upland birds, waterfowl and small furred game, trailing live running or wounded birds or game and protecting the owner. Producing dogs that are capable of handling this varied workload required selective breeding to produce dogs with strong hunting, pointing, retrieving, trailing and protective instincts. A tall order to fill!

OPTIMAL WEIMARANER TEMPERAMENT

Some of the inherited traits that make up canine temperament are common to all breeds.

1. Excitability vs Inhibibility
This refers to the inherited tendency to make a dog more or less responsive to environmental stimuli such as novel sounds, sights, smells, and touch. A dog that reacts actively, with gusto and limited self-control, to touch or novel sights, smells, and sounds is very excitable. A dog that ignores such stimuli is inhibited and a dog that responds with fear and withdrawal from such stimuli is very inhibited. This type of dog may be referred to as 'touch-sensitive', 'sight-sensitive' or 'sound-sensitive'. A balance midway between the two extremes produces a poised, calm, assured dog and that's what a Weimaraner should be; alert and confident in its environment without being shy or skittish.
2. Active Defense Reflexes vs Passive Defense Reflexes

This refers to the inherited tendency to make a dog react when personally threatened by fighting back, freezing, or fleeing. A dog that readily fights back when threatened by biting has very active defense reflexes. A dog that flees or freezes and will only bite when cornered or in other instances of extreme duress has very passive defense reflexes. In the inherited tendency to display more active or more passive defense reflexes a Weimaraner should have relatively passive defense reflexes - it should handle game with a soft mouth and should require strong provocation in order to overcome its inhibition to bite.

3. Dominance vs Submissiveness

This refers to the inherited tendency of a dog to attempt to have authority over members of its 'pack' or to willingly submit to the leadership of others. A dog that displays a lot of mounting, mouthing, marking, and posturing behaviours to people or other dogs is strongly dominant. A dog that willingly cedes authority to other dogs and people by nudging, pawing, rolling over or other pacifying behaviours is strongly submissive. In the inherited tendency to be more dominant or more submissive, a Weimaraner should be midway between; it should not constantly challenge the authority of people or dogs senior in age to it.

4. Independence vs Social Attraction

This refers to the tendency of a dog to keep a greater social distance from people or dogs, or to desire a closer contact and more frequent interaction with them. This is often also referred to as 'pack drive' and in the extremes is seen as a "Velcro

dog" or even outright separation anxiety. In the inherited tendency to be more independent or more sociable, a Weimaraner should be midway in between the two, it should not be so sociable that it is unable to work away from people or other dogs yet it should desire its masters approval and guidance.

A Weimaraner with the correct temperament for its breed is useful for the purposes for which this breed was developed and will show strong evidence of all of the following unique characteristics common to the versatile pointing breeds:

Hunting instinct - the inborn tendency for a dog to range out away from their owner to explore their environment. In any new or natural environment a Weimaraner's curiosity and nose should lead them into the unknown without requiring birds or other game, toys, or another dog to draw it out.

Pointing instinct - the inborn tendency for a dog to 'freeze' on the scent and/or sight of game. Expression of this trait does not necessarily require exposure to birds or other game - puppies will often point plastic bags fluttering by, songbirds, or cats.

Retrieving instinct - the inborn tendency for a dog to pick up and bring tossed or found objects and game back to their owner, including objects or game thrown into water.

Trailing instinct - the inborn tendency to follow a human or animal track with nose to the ground. In Weimaraners, trailing of furred game is often accompanied by 'giving voice' when on the trail.

Protective instinct - the inborn tendency to protect their owner, his or her family and their possessions. This trait is generally not apparent until later puppyhood, and Weimaraners, while never aggressive without cause, should show good judgment to bark or bite in those situations which warrant protection.

BREEDING TO THE STANDARD FOR WEIMARANER TEMPERAMENT

Just as a Weimaraner ideally has the 'look' which conforms to the breed conformation standard, so too should it 'act' with a sound and correct temperament which will allow it to be adaptable and trainable and to excel in the purposes for which the breed has been developed. The temperament qualities referred to in the breed standard required for a conformation and field championship are: bold, confident, fearless, independent, alert, keen, intelligent, obedient, friendly, kind, and protective. Viciousness, strong fear, shyness, and nervousness are listed as severe faults.

Until the last few decades, temperament was likely the primary deciding factor in determining which dogs would be bred. For example, Weimaraners that had keen noses, ran fast, hunted hard, took direction well, pointed staunchly, got along well with people and other dogs were the ones which were most useful in putting food on the table and therefore were bred. Unfortunately, in recent times, many breeders have placed more emphasis on the physical appearance of their dogs and less emphasis on temperament and working ability in selecting breeding stock.

Most breeders do not fully assess temperament in their breeding stock, and some do not assess it at all. The result? A deterioration in temperament, with far too many cases of 'lawn-ornament' Weimaraners, who may have the chest depth, front and rear angulation, topline, foot structure and size that, as it says in the breed standard, 'above all... indicate the ability to work hard in the field', but which do not hunt, point, trail, or retrieve, or are too hyper, too skittish, too dominant, or too submissive to be trainable, or that lack the boldness and independence essential for usefulness in the field.

A Weimaraner that lacks either a sound temperament or a correct temperament for the breed is no different than a dog which fails to meet the breed standard by having severe cowhocks, a roached back, or being grossly oversized, or missing many teeth. A Weimaraner with both a sound temperament and a correct temperament for the breed is a pleasure to live with, easy to train, and readily is made into a useful hunting partner.

If the goal of a breeder is, as it should be, "improvement of the breed", temperament characteristics should be given equal weight with both conformation characteristics and health characteristics, in planning a breeding.

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