



An excerpt from

From Birdbrained to Brilliant

Ch. 3: What is Typical Sporting Dog Behavior?

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It is important to understand that a dog's personality and behavior are influenced not only by genetic predisposition, but also by environmental factors and unique individual experiences. However, there are several characteristics sporting dogs tend to share in common. A sporting dog may not exhibit all these traits all the time—in fact, your dog might not show some of these behaviors at all. The specific behaviors you will see from your dog depend on a number of factors, including his genetic makeup, experiences he had before you even brought him home, all the experiences and training you've done (or not done) with him after you brought him home, and his own unique personality. Dogs are thinking, feeling individuals, so no one can ever say with 100% certainty how a particular dog will behave based strictly on what is considered "normal" sporting dog behavior. But it's a safe bet that your dog has shown you at least one of these traits at some point in his life. We've already explored the ways a sporting dog is different from any other type of dog, so now let's look at some of the behavioral traits these breeds share with each other.

High energy levels and physical endurance

Writing in 1840, John Colquhoun, in *The Moor and the Loch*, offers his expertise on selecting hunting dogs. In his opinion, "the most necessary qualifications of a dog are travel, lastiness, and nose." In other words, hunters need dogs with physical and mental endurance who can locate game readily. These dogs had to be able to hunt all day, day after day if necessary, to help a hunter put meat on the table for his family. Hunting for sport and pleasure didn't come within the reach of the average person until well into the late 1800's, after the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and changes in work life left more people with the time and money to pursue hunting more casually. Even then, sporting dogs were expected to be able to hunt as long and as often as their owners were able to hunt. Physical and mental stamina were vital to the early sporting dogs, and those key traits still exist in our sporting dogs today, even though the vast majority of them will never be used to hunt. Miles of rough terrain, harsh weather conditions, and taxing physical labor were just a few of the challenges that faced our dogs' ancestors. The dogs who could successfully meet those hardships were the ones most likely to pass their genes down to future generations and, as a result, our dogs still have the physical capacity to deal with these situations (with proper training and physical conditioning, of course). Very few of our modern sporting dog companions come

close to getting the amount of physical exercise they need to be physically fit and mentally comfortable. Pent up energy tends to express itself in inappropriate ways, such as jumping, barking, and digging. Successful sporting dog owners who find ways to decrease these high energy levels have a head start on reducing behavioral problems and making their dogs' training much easier.

Intelligence

Two common beliefs among many first-time sporting dog owners are: 1) sporting dogs are so smart they just "know" how to behave without any training; and 2) when the dogs don't behave appropriately, it is because they are stubborn or seeking revenge for some imagined wrong. But neither of these beliefs is true. Although sporting dogs are known for their keen intelligence, they are born knowing only how to be *dogs*, with absolutely no understanding of what the rules are for dogs living in a human world. Fortunately for sporting dog owners, these breeds are also known to be easy for most people to train as a result of their intelligence, but training is a must if you are to keep one step ahead of your sporting dog and help him become an enjoyable family companion.

In his book *The Intelligence of Dogs*, researcher Stanley Coren divides canine intelligence into several categories, including working/obedience intelligence, instinctive intelligence, and adaptive intelligence. Working/obedience intelligence measures how well a dog will learn to perform commands and act under the direction of humans. This is the most common measure of canine "intelligence" because this is the type of intelligence that is most desirable in a pet. In most cases, the average dog owner simply wants a well-behaved dog who doesn't take much effort to train and is willing to please. Competitive obedience trials measure this type of intelligence. Sporting dogs usually excel in this particular measure of intelligence.

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