

Bullmastiff as a Guard

The bullmastiff as a guard dog

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The bullmastiff as a breed was developed in England in the late 19th century to help gamekeepers catch poachers. There was a need for a powerful, fast, rather silent dog that could work as a team with the gamekeeper and take care of both the poacher and the poachers dogs. The foundation for the breed is a cross between the mastiff and the 19th century type of bulldog.

The behavioral heritage of this breed contains a strong affinity for family members and their friends, as well as a strong guard instinct. The breed was developed to work closely with a small group of people, so this is a people dog. A bullmastiff needs to belong to people and live with people, and the dog needs his family to take leadership over the family pack.

The combination of affinity for people and a strong guard ability makes for a dog that is excellent in discriminating between friend and foe. The bullmastiff is a good judge of people and good at identifying people who are up to no good. This makes it important to expose a young bullmastiff puppy to lots of different people when the puppy is very young, so that the puppy learns all about good guys. Then, when maturity and guard instincts appear later, the dog will automatically identify bad guys. Typically, a bullmastiff displays very friendly behaviors to family members, and tends to be a bit off standish and moderately friendly to strangers. When the dog gets suspicious, he typically takes the time to investigate before deciding what to do about it.

First and foremost the bullmastiff is a guard dog, and it is a type of guard dog that is more protective of territory than anything else. The typical sequence of bullmastiff guard behaviors include running up to a suspicious character, maybe slam the front feet into the ground, and take a stand, maybe growling and/or barking, thus threatening the perceived danger first. Typically, the dog then takes a moment or two to evaluate the problem before taking further action. A bullmastiff exhibiting a threatening posture is usually enough for any person with malicious intent to decide on a hasty departure rather than confrontation. When confronted and threatened back, the bullmastiff will use his weight to shove, and/or bite to take care of the perceived problem. Thus biting is the last in a sequence of guard behaviors of the bullmastiff, and it happens rarely.

This type of guard behavior is quite different from that of herding breeds, like the German Shepherd, and the Belgian Malinois. The typical herding breed guard sequence involves a chase and catch and bite part, with the shepherd jumping and biting and letting go and running around and biting some more.

In order to better understand these behaviors it is useful to look at the evolution of dogs and the behaviors that underlie guard behaviors in today's breeds.

Over the course of thousands of years since the domestication of the wolf to a dog, the dogs' guard behaviors developed from the predatory behaviors of the ancestral wolf. Wolves exhibit a chain of behaviors in hunting for food: eyeing the prey - alert - stalk - chase - bite - kill. This sequence was tapped in developing herding dogs, where the kill part was selected for extinction and the bite part was selected for softness and control. Herding thus involves selected predatory behaviors. These breeds are also good guard dogs, and their guard behaviors are like a predatory chain without the final kill: being aware and vigilant - alert by barking - stalk - chase - bite. They show a strong prey-drive and they tend to like retrieving objects.

The guard behavior of the bullmastiff is quite different from that of herding dogs. Their guarding is closer related to that of the large flockguarding breeds, like the Maremma, and the Kuvasz. These dogs tend to stay with the livestock, and they do not prey on livestock. They also protect their flock from predators. Their guard behaviors do not involve chasing and catching, as much as interrupting the predators' behaviors by interrupting and deflecting. These dogs have a low prey-drive, and they are not interested in chasing and catching objects. They tend to stand their ground to protect their territory and to prevent a predator from getting close to the livestock - or the family.

Looking at guard behaviors this way gives us an understanding of aggressive behaviors in different breeds and why uncontrolled aggression is more serious in a flockguarding type of dog than in a herding type of dog. The herding dog tends to bite quicker and at a lower level of provocation. When they bite, the bite tends to be of the slash and run type. A flockguarding type of dog tolerates more provocation, and makes more use of threats before he bites. When this type of dog does bite, there tends to be a lack of inherited and inbred inhibitions, making these bites more serious.

One important conclusion is of course the necessity of early socialization to people and places and strong obedience training later for any type of guard breed. Anybody who chooses to acquire a guard breed would be advised to understand this, given today's litigious society.

Early socialization involves taking your young 2-4 month old puppy out to meet people and see places. Obviously, take care not to expose the puppy to unknown dogs. But the lack of vaccination cannot, in my opinion, be an excuse for using common sense in exposing the puppy to selected places and people.

Obedience training a guard breed should involve a lot more than just a basic obedience class. In addition to the basics, the guard dog needs to be taken to a more advanced level of obedience, where the dog listens when off leash, has solid down-stays, sits anywhere, comes when called under distractions, and pays attention on demand.

When a guard dog is properly socialized to today's society, and properly obedience trained, they will be under control and pose no threat to the general public. They do not go into guard mode unless provoked, and their size alone tends to act as a deterrent against bad guys. They are typically friendly to family and friends, and excellent family companions.

Reference:

Evolution of Working Dogs by Raymond Coppinger and Richard Schneider. In J. Serpell (1995) *The Domestic Dog: its evolution, behaviours and interactions with people*.

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