

“HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM!”

By Diane L. Bauman

It has happened again. At a recent obedience trial on the East Coast, a small dog was viciously attacked. As the toy dog galloped out to retrieve his dumbbell in the Open B Class, a Cattle Dog from the adjacent Novice B ring, jumped the ring gates, grabbed him, pinned him to the ground and punctured the little dog who was screaming.

If it had not been for the swift action on the part of the handler of the toy dog, the incident could have easily ended with a lifeless body.

The handler of the Cattle Dog screamed and fainted. Two judges stood frozen as the little dog’s handler flew to his defense. The handler scooped the Cattle Dog up (with both arms) and in one very quick motion, tossed it way up in the air and away. The Cattle Dog landed stunned, which gave the toy dog and his owner time to escape their ring.

The small victim was immediately examined by veterinarians who happened to be at the trial exhibiting their own dogs and the owner of the injured party left for the pharmacy to purchase antibiotics.

While the physical damage to the toy dog turned out to be minor, the psychological damage will prevent this dog from ever competing in an obedience ring again. Obedience has lost more than one entry. The emotional after-shock has caused this owner and handler to find safer, less stressful venues in which to compete with his dogs.

Days later, as I spoke at length with the handler of the small dog that was attacked, I searched for answers. How could this happen? How did the Cattle Dog make it all the way to the Novice B ring without anyone knowing he had the potential to seriously attack another dog? Even though the Cattle Dog in question has been banned from ever trialing again, how long would it be before another dog followed suit? And finally, why didn’t anyone try to help this exhibitor?

I cringe when I think about what has happened to AKC Obedience and the dogs that are supposed to be under control, respectful and trained.

The fault of this incident lies not with the Cattle Dog; he was not the one who sent in the entry for the trial, but with the humans who are responsible for the training and performance of the dog.

Further investigation uncovered that the Cattle Dog had a history at match shows of “going after other dogs.” Having discovered this flaw in training, why wasn’t it repaired and proofed before the dog was entered in a trial?

As an obedience instructor of many years, I believe that it is my responsibility to inform students when they are ready to enter a competition. While I cannot prevent them from doing so prematurely, I would certainly not permit a dog that would run out of the ring, for any reason, to compete with my blessing.

I never thought I would become one of those people who talked about “the good old days.” Ten to fifteen years ago, I do not remember as many dogs breaking stays or being out of control in a ring. What has happened?

Simply put, the trend in dog training has changed in the last fifteen years. We are now in an era where some people feel it is wrong to ever correct a dog. Amidst this liberal setting, dogs are “redirected,” “clicked” (reinforced with the use of a clicker to create behaviors) and people applaud themselves for being able to train in a “purely positive,” “hands off” way. Dogs today are frequently distracted, cajoled, and bribed with food. Training problems are often managed instead of eliminated.

I consider myself to be a very positive trainer. My dogs are all taught with gentle techniques before I expect them to understand and perform. Once I am sure that a dog understands, I am also positive that the dog is going to choose to comply. This part of the equation is based on my belief that a dog who willingly disobeys should learn that there are consequences for his actions. My dogs all understand that “crime doesn’t pay!”

Good trainers are fair and balanced. They use the mildest correction that works and teach dogs what the correction will be ahead of time, should they choose to disobey.

I do not believe that the Cattle Dog mentioned above thought that there would be a serious consequence for his actions. Actually, I doubt he was thinking at all. More likely he was just reacting to a moving animal nearby, oblivious of his handler. I am willing to bet that this dog was never worked on livestock so that he could learn to control his impulses while in prey drive.

To add to the complexity of this problem, trainers today encourage dogs to play with toys when schooling as a form of reward. It is not uncommon to see dogs lunging at furry, fuzzy toys. Motivating dogs with play is a wonderful tool but it also raises the prey drive in a dog who might then think it permissible to grab a real, furry dog in the next ring!

Not all dogs are equal. They all have different levels of drive. Some require serious consequences to get them to change their behavior. Others will comply with their handler’s wishes with nothing more than a mild suggestion. Good training adjusts to the individual dog at the end of the leash and does not stipulate that dogs should never be corrected.

There is definitely a place for food in dog training. Treats should be used to teach, guide, focus and reward a dog; but not to bribe. Every dog must eventually be able to perform without the promise of a treat or he is not trained. The dog must understand when it is fun to play with a furry toy and that he may never leave a ring to chase a live dog that resembles his toy! People who own dogs that do not understand these rules are not ready to exhibit.

Assuming a dog is well trained and ready to trial, there is always the risk of an accident. Even expert training is not a guarantee. Knowing this risk, handlers continue to enter trials, but who wants to feel that if something goes wrong, no one will help? Why did two judges just observe? Did anyone from outside the ring try to assist? Whose responsibility is it to break up a dog fight? What is the AKC protocol in this situation?

Having reviewed the AKC Obedience regulations, I find references to what to do if a dog attacks another dog or person (lots of paperwork and a hearing) but no information about what to do when the attack is actually taking place. If nothing else, shouldn’t the judge at least have thrown a clipboard at the offender?

Dog fights at obedience trials are a very touchy subject. Each incident carries with it specific circumstances. I have not written about this event to judge but rather to draw attention to a growing problem in the sport of obedience. A problem, I believe, which is founded in modern day training techniques. If training does not swing back to a more balanced approach, including correcting dogs for inappropriate behaviors, I fear the sport is doomed.