

Basenji Behavior and the Human Response

A study of *canis familiaris* as applied to the basenji
By Wanda Pooley

As I stood outside the ring waiting for my breed's judging to begin a spectator approached with a questioning, but almost confirming look.

"What kind of dog is this?" the woman quizzed.

I replied, "This is a basenji, the dog from Africa."

Confirmation glistened in the woman's eyes, "Oh no," she smirked, "That's the dog from HELL!" and marched off.

Many newcomers to the breed are often perplexed with the behavior of the basenji. Because of its independent nature, this breed does not conform to the typical behavior expected by most dog owners. Behavior, stereotyped as it is, can either make a dog a hit with its new family, or it can make life a living nightmare for the unsuspecting, or the uninformed.

To study behavior of a specific breed of canine, a general statement should be made to understand the evolution of *canis familiaris*. In his book, The Right Dog for You, Daniel Tortora describes the evolutionary process as

"Certain behaviors that have developed over millions of years of evolutionary trial and error. Some of these behaviors are common to the whole family of Canidae and can be called family-typical behaviors. The set of behaviors common to the genus *Canus* are genus-typical behavior. The set of behaviors common to the species *Canis familiaris* are species-typical behaviors. The set of behaviors common to specific breeds of dogs are breed-specific behaviors. Finally, each individual dog may exhibit more or less of these family, genus, species, and breed typical behaviors in its individual-typical behavior."

In addition, an understanding of why various breeds of dogs developed over the centuries is essential. Dog fanciers saw some set of characteristics advantageous to their lifestyle. Hence, they began breeding programs designed to perpetuate traits in those offspring—herding, chasing, retrieving, obeying. However, the best characteristic in the selection is the satisfactory relationship matched between owners and pets with regard to temperament.

In an attempt to recognize differences in breed behavior and breed distinction, American Kennel Club separated the *Canis familiaris* into groups: Sporting breeds, Hound breeds, Working breeds, Terrier breeds, Toy breeds, Non-Sporting breeds, and Herding breeds. Each group is bred for a specific function such as hunting, retrieving, herding, or just being cute and cuddly. The unsuspecting or the uninformed canine buyer probably makes an assumption that "a dog is a dog is a dog.." and herein lies the problem.

Pat Muller, long time exhibitor, breeder, and trainer, has made several observations about group behavior. She notes because the Toy group was developed to do absolutely nothing but be cute and cuddly, a variety of behaviors within this group appear. However, groups like the Working and the Sporting breeds are used for a specific function which gives them the ability to take orders and directions well and to perform over and over to please their masters.

The Hound group is an excellent example of differences in breed behavior and distinction. The Hound was bred to chase game, not to stalk, retrieve, or burrow after it; only to chase! Game in our modern day society can be anything that moves -- the neighbor's cat, a squirrel, or simply a piece of white plastic tied to a lure line. The chasing function, no doubt, "served man well in a time when he had to run down his meat on the hoof with his dogs instead of buying it by the pound in the supermarket." [Freeman Lloyd]

The chasing desire is an important element for the potential dog owner to consider. Hound breeds, in general, do not have accountability to their humans which always makes them fall short in the area of unquestionable obedience. After all, how can one expect the hound to “drop” on command when some form of “game” is scampering across the horizon? Indeed, more than one hound owner has stood alone while his hound gave way to the chase.

Why does the hound chase instead of obey? To answer this question, Daniel Tortora developed a scale for dimensions of temperament using a range of Very High to Very Low. The Hound group fell somewhere in the medium to medium-low range of the learning-obedience category. This is not to say the hound is dumb and lacks the skills necessary for an obedient dog. It means the hound sees no point in repetitive tasks which seem to accomplish nothing. A game of fetch warrants no purpose in the mind of a hound. To bring an object back several times to his master makes no sense; a good chase is more exciting!

Within the Hound group is the Basenji. This ancient, quick-witted breed imported from Africa, stands head and shoulders above most hound breeds. “Egyptian carvings of 5000 years ago depict the proud little dog with his perky ears and tightly curled tail” [Freeman Lloyd]. Today, to the informed, notable words come to mind when describing a basenji, words such as curious, alert, smart, proud, loving, and most of all, independent. Although many dogs are, to some degree, similarly described by their owners, few can boast the nature of independence that reigns supreme in the basenji. This independent nature, coupled with the basenji’s high ranking in problem-solving abilities, accounts for the human response of frustration. These characteristics may very well have led that spectator to the conclusion that the basenji is the dog from Hell.

Over and over, the basenji has been referred to as the “thinking dog.” That term, “thinking dog” must perplex the more intellectual who realize lower animals do not have a cerebral cortex, an important element which allows humans to rise above other mammals. This part of the brain is what enables humans to analyze, to have cognitive thought, and to reason. Lower mammals lack this “new brain” and instead rely on what is described by science as the “animal brain.” However, within this “animal brain” is the limbic system. A system involved in several important functions such as learning, memory, self-preservation, and the experience of pleasure. These functions are found in all mammals, hardly unique to humans. There is a consensus among basenji breeders and fanciers that the basenji’s ability to “think” is probably a result of a highly developed limbic system and could also explain the multi-faceted behavior of the breed.

The basenji’s “thinking” nature makes him an excellent problem-solver and Daniel Tortora’s description of this behavior portrays the basenji well. He discovered a dog ranking high in problem-solving capabilities “can get in and out situations quickly and is not hampered by detours, locked doors and windows, or fences. It can solve any of these problems quickly and retain the solution for a long time, only to abandon the solution when it becomes ineffective.”

A one-time breeder experienced a good example of problem-solving when his litter of puppies was only seven weeks old. The puppies were kept in a laundry room which did not have full advantage of the heating system. The fellow stacked bricks over the heat register to warm, and the puppies would form a “puppy pile” around the heated bricks. To keep the puppies from the rest of the house while away at work, he then placed a two-foot high board across the doorway. After twice finding the puppies loose in the house, barrier intact, when he returned home from work, the breeder decided to “get to the bottom of this.”

That evening, after the house was quiet, the man hid behind a door, hoping to observe this mysterious escape. It wasn’t long before he heard activity and the sounds of something sliding across the surface. As he peered around the doorway, the puppies, in a collective effort, were sliding the bricks towards the gate. When enough bricks were shoved and pushed high enough, the puppies scampered up the pile of bricks and spilled over the gate and romped off to a new adventure!

Another of the many facets of basenji behavior which fascinates most people is its barkless nature. For centuries the basenji has remained barkless for good reason. Even today, in their natural habitat, the basenji is still on the fringes of human habitations, living from scraps of food tossed by the natives. In Africa, the basenji is used only for utilitarian hunting, never coddled as a pet. Consequently, only the fittest survive the harsh environment of Africa. Because survival is so difficult, the act of barking could seal a basenji’s fate. No animal in

the wild would run around being noisy, making its whereabouts known to other predators! Consequently, basenjis learned not to bark!

The basenji is not incapable of barking. This breed has survived for centuries in a natural environment only because it goes through the complete development cycle – juvenile through adult stages. Other domestic breeds do not complete the cycle. They are stuck in adolescence because of human meddling in genetics. According to research done by Raymond Coppinger and Mark Feinstein:

“Dogs don’t bark because human beings bred them to bark; nor did natural selection specifically shape the dog to be a barker. Barking in dogs, we think, simply came along as a part of a whole package of changes wrought by a genetic alteration in the timing of the life cycle of the ancestral canid. Stuck in adolescence, the dog barks so much because barking is what a juvenile canid does.”

A barkless dog is one that many people desire. However, according to Daniel Tortora “owners mistake the adjective “quiet” to mean inactive instead of noiseless; thus, they become harassed by an active, though relatively silent dog.” Basenjis are fairly active dogs. Their curiosity keeps them busy in new surroundings or with new objects. No purse, shopping bag, box, or package is safe from their prying eyes and nose.

One year my mother came to visit for a couple of weeks. The first evening, forgetting the nature of my curious beasts, she left her purse in the living room after retiring for the night. The next morning I came out of the bedroom and discovered the contents of mom’s purse spread all over the living room carpet. No damage, but every item had been inspected thoroughly by my three “super-snoopers.” By understanding the behavior of the basenji, a new owner can be forearmed to anticipate the dog’s curiosity. Thus, they learn to live in harmony.

As mentioned previously, hounds have little accountability to humans, and basenjis are no exception. They have a desire for purpose and to a basenji, there is no purpose to the constant regimentation of obedience. Several owners have been successful in bringing their basenjis to their Companion Dog (CD) titles, an achievement in formal obedience. Because a basenji is quick to grasp the training steps and just as quick to become bored, those trainers do acknowledge the basenji needs more playing time, rather than rigid training time. One such trainer explained:

“A basenji has to have fun performing. They learn very quickly, but as soon as the training gets boring, they quit, or worst, they become very counterproductive to their owner’s goals. A basenji sees no sense in sitting when you stop, being put on “stay” while you walked across the room, only to discover it is expected to ‘come front’ when it could just as well come along with you. This dog has to be convinced there is something in it for him.”

Even the native basenjis are consistent with their American counterparts. Fellow breeder and owner, Betsy Polglase interviewed Ann Roche, a resident of Zaire who at the time owned six basenjis. Miss Roche confirmed our observations on the basenji attitude to obedience training. In training, her basenjis always seemed to put their own unique spin on every command. The sits might be crooked; they might take their time sitting down; their minds and attentions might wander. Ann found basenjis to be very eye-contact dogs, and their behavior could be modified just by looking at them in a certain way.

One facet of behavior that has the most charm is the loving nature (on their terms, of course) of the basenji. They seek out their humans, “help” them with the chores, keep them warm by lying on them, and keep them clean by grooming—no human foot, arm, neck is left unscrubbed! An example of this engaging behavior was displayed when an older couple came to look at a puppy. Although his wife was convinced, the husband was uncertain they needed a second basenji. When the man sat on the carpet to better view this romping bundle of joy, the puppy crawled in his lap, raised up and began scrubbing his neck with her tongue. With mock scorn, the husband exclaimed, “You are just like the one at home – always cleaning!” Sold! One charming, but conniving basenji puppy.

In the final analysis, people either love the basenji for his independence and quick wit, or hate the basenji for those same reasons. In this, middle ground does not exist! Accordingly, this breed attracts a special class of people who recognize that a basenjis is smart enough to learn quickly, but does not always choose to do what he

has learned. Subsequently, compromise and a good sense of humor must prevail between the basenji and the human. Ownership, in effect, is similar to a marriage – each has to meet the other halfway. Sally Ann Smith once wrote an article “Out of Africa” in which she states the relationship so well.

“Any animal that has been around that long [5000 years] and survived as an independent, quick-witted hunter is not likely to fetch your slippers just because you say so! It will, however, if it loves you dearly and sees a reason to do so at that particular moment.”

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