

# ROBO-DOG

by Rick Smith & Sharon Potter

Have you ever seen a dog that goes through the motions of hunting, does everything right, rarely ever makes a mistake, yet has no style or enthusiasm for the work? Just going through the motions, they work like some sort of Robo-Dog, mechanically and methodically, and when on point they stand perfectly still, but with no intensity. There's no joy in what they're doing; it's just a job. If you look at a photograph of such a dog on point, it would look like a picture of a dog just standing still. There is very little - if any - animation, the expression is pretty ho-hum, and the tail is relaxed. The dog is doing what's expected from a training standpoint, but doesn't look the least bit excited or happy to be doing it.

It's not unlike people and jobs. You know that old saying, "If you love what you do for a living, you'll never work a day in your life"? If you enjoy your job and look forward to doing it every day, it just doesn't feel like work. But if you go to work and watch the clock all day just waiting for quitting time, you count the hours until the weekend, and are doing the job because it's a paycheck and you have to do it, then it's just a job, with no joy in it. We

don't know about you, but that's not how we want our dogs to work.

So, how do dogs get that way? There are two things from a training standpoint that can and will take the style and enthusiasm out of a dog: pressure and overtraining. Of course, other things like poor condition, heat, exhaustion, and the like can make a dog look uninterested, but in those cases, the dog usually isn't doing too much right. We're talking about the dog that has got it all - except enthusiasm.

Pressure and overtraining can go hand in hand, a "cause and effect" sort of relationship, or they can work individually.

Pressure in a training situation can be physical (a leash, collar, e-collar, checkcord, hands) or mental (when a dog feels the need to think and find a way out of an uncomfortable situation). Even birds can cause a level of pressure, depending on the dog's mental state. Of course, we need some level of pressure to train, but it's carrying the pressure beyond training or learning and into venting anger and frustration that sucks the joy out of a dog.

Two of the most common pressure-related issues are overcorrecting and poor timing. Overcorrecting hap-

pens when we give a physical cue and are heavy-handed with it, using a lot more than is needed to get the desired response. It can be something as simple as a lead correction - for example, when a very light tug would have done the job, but instead a hard jerk is used and it throws the dog off balance. It can also be an e-collar correction on too high a setting, which is why we recommend that you always use the minimum, go up a bit if needed, then promptly dial back down as soon as the correct response is given. This keeps a dog working at the lowest possible level, giving the dog a chance to do things right rather than scaring it into submission. There are few things that will knock the style out of a dog faster than bad e-collar use, and it can ruin a dog permanently.

Isn't pressure the same thing as overtraining? Yes and no. We obviously use pressure during training, and as we said above, it certainly can be overused. That's where pressure and overtraining go hand-in-hand. However, overtraining can happen without the overuse of pressure.

So exactly what is overtraining? Simply put, it's micromanaging every single move the dog makes, and includes overhandling. Every move



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**NO ROBO-DOG HERE! THIS DOG HAS STYLE, INTENSITY, AND YOU CAN JUST TELL THAT IT LOVES WHAT IT'S DOING.**

is directed and dictated. If you have a job and have a boss, imagine how much you would come to hate it if your boss never left you alone to complete a task. Rather, he leans over your shoulder constantly, micromanaging every move you make, and criticizing every effort. We don't know about you, but we'd likely be searching for a new job with a

less-critical boss. It's not much different with dogs - except they can't quit and go find a new job with a better boss.

Overtraining translates to overhandling, too. A classic example of overhandling (and we've probably all seen this) is the handler who turns the dog loose to hunt and then is yelling and whistling and giving

arm signals non-stop, telling the dog to go toward that tree line or that patch of cover and now check out that clump of grass over there and now go over to this one ... and on and on and on.

This kind of handling shows no partnership or teamwork and no trust in the dog's nose and ability to find birds, and is usually the result



of handler insecurity or inexperience. Then, if the dog actually does stumble across a bird, the next thing that happens is a string of loud, “Whoa... whoa... whoa” repeated over and over again, even though the dog isn’t moving.

A really big sign of overtraining happens at home. A polite dog that’s a good citizen is something we should all strive for. However, there are dogs that rarely ever get any time off, meaning every second that the owner’s around, the dog is being told what to do, where to be, how to move, and is corrected constantly. They’re told to go lie in their dog bed or crate, only allowed to move from that spot when told, and have no freedom to just be part of the family.

While a well-trained dog is a joy to have around, the overtrained dog is seen more as a possession or a tool. It’s a lot like that old saying that children should be seen and not heard. While we want our children to be polite and respectful and we sure don’t want our kids to run wild and be rude, we also don’t want them to be invisible. Same goes for our dogs. Polite and respectful is good. We like to see each dog’s personality show through and interact with it while still retaining boundaries of behavior we’ve set. But the overtrained dog lives from correction to correction or command to command, and rarely does its personality show up for fear of yet another correction.

So where do we draw the line between polite and respectful and overtrained? The polite and respectful dog looks up to you as a leader and friend. The overtrained dog looks at you like a drill sergeant or prison warden. The dog’s attitude will re-

fect your attitude. As we said, in the field, this shows up as a dog that goes through the motions with no style or enthusiasm. They lack desire and the spirit to even try to do anything without direction, because they feel like they’re always wrong.

One point we’d like to make in clarification: Different dogs and breeds have different styles. Don’t expect a slower, close-working breed to show the same intensity and style as an Open All Age pointer or setter. Neither is better nor worse than the other - they’re just different personalities.

Also keep in mind that a softer, more sensitive dog can end up becoming overtrained and downtrodden a lot faster and easier than a tough minded, high-energy dog.

Training and hunting with a good bird dog of any breed requires a team effort. Treat your dog fairly, teach it what is expected and what the job description is, and then trust it to do the job it was trained for - let it go be a real dog, not a Robo-Dog.

When the two of you head to the field together, the dog’s job is to go where you go, find and point birds, and bring ‘em back after you shoot them. You each have your job to do out there. Trust your dog’s nose, don’t micromanage and interfere, and if you’ve done your homework, you’ll have a winning team.

As we said at the beginning, if you love what you do for a living, you’ll never work a day in your life. That goes for our dogs, too, and it’s our responsibility to make sure they love their job.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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