

THE BITING DOG

By Maxwell Riddle

My father was a breeder of Bloodhounds. But beyond that, he was a passionate lover of dogs, dogs of any kind. So usually we had a variety of dogs about the farm. My father always dreamed of having a pair of each kind, or breed of dog on earth.

I tell you this because you may be shocked at the incident which I am about to relate. Yet it illustrated a point which dog owners may never forget. One of our dogs was a fox terrier. One day it bit one of us children. I no longer remember who was bitten. But I can remember seeing father come home and the rush we made to tell him about the incident. Dad didn't say much. Not then. He just got out a shotgun and killed the dog. All the children cried and mother too. But then Dad gave us a lecture and repeated it many times afterward. **"No dog has the right to bite his master," he said. "And only very rarely can a dog be forgiven for biting a human being under any circumstances."**

Some weeks ago at a dog show, a Great Dane bit the young woman who was handling it. She was bitten so savagely that she was unconscious when taken to the hospital and required 81 stitches. Now I know this young woman. I helped her bury three of her dogs, a Dane, a German Shepherd, and a German Short-haired Pointer. The last two were biters which she had rescued from the pound where they had been sent because they bit their owners. This woman is as passionate a dog lover as was my father. But with this difference – she makes excuses for biters. This one bit because she accidentally bumped against it. So she said.

In more than 30 years of breeding, owning and training dogs, I have heard all the excuses people make. Perhaps a dog has a right to bite a burglar or a trespasser if that trespasser is not a child. No other excuse is valid. In dog fights, a dog will bite whatever gets near its snapping mouth, including the owner's hand. But this is a true accident. Other excuses simply aren't valid.

Dogs can be taught not to bite. I make it a practice to teach my puppies that they can never do so. The dog which has bitten once finds it easier to bite again, and for less reason. Biting may start with just the turning of the head when you pull its hair while grooming. You didn't mean to hurt the dog, and you were trying to help it. But still, unless you punish the dog for that head turning, growling, more nipping and finally biting will follow.

This subject is extremely serious. Time after time for 30 years, people have told me: "At first the biting dog only growled. Then one day it bit. After that, the bites came more often, and always with less reason. Now at the slightest provocation, it bites me or anyone." Thus, I know that there is some psychological barrier which the dog crosses. It finds it hard to bite its master that first time. Once over the barrier, it's no longer psychological problem for the dog.

We have always taught our puppies that they could not bite nor growl. At the community feed dish, puppies are likely to growl at each other or at the person feeding them. We would wait for this. Then we'd take the puppy by the tail and just roll it across the floor. It would come back to the dish as though nothing had happened. But after a few lessons, it had learned forever that it couldn't growl over its food. And usually that it couldn't growl at all. Sometimes we'd just lift the puppy by the scruff of the neck and shake it. That would be all the punishment it would need for that lesson.

In more than half of all cases, the dog bites a member of its own family. In more than half of those cases, the person bitten is a child. And 75% of the time the child is bitten on the face.

These are reasons why you must teach your dog that it cannot bite. A second reason is that the dog which has bitten is thereafter, under the law, a vicious dog. And it does not matter why it bites. So the owner is liable and may be sued for damages. There are dogs which fight back if you attempt to punish them. Such dogs are fear biters. They are attacking you out of fear. They will bite in sudden terror.

Owners complain: "He always seems sorry afterwards. He knows he has done wrong. But then he does it over again." Such a dog is far too dangerous to have about. It should be put to sleep.

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