



APDT

NEWSLETTER

Building Better Trainers Through Education

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Diane Whitney
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Assessing the Alpha Roll

by Terry Ryan

The alpha roll is a frequently mentioned technique in canine behavior and training literature. In general, the roll is implemented by turning the dog onto his back and pinning him until he assumes a state of submission. However, there is usually no clear definition of the term "submit," nor is there an explanation of what to do if a dog doesn't submit.

Similarly, there appears to be no standard definition of "alpha roll"; in fact, there are many variations demonstrated by trainers and instructors. One popular variation starts with a scruff shake—grabbing the dog on either side of the neck—and then lifting the dog's weight off the front feet and staring into his eyes until he submits.

Why are dog owners encouraged to do the alpha roll? Supposedly, it simulates the natural methods of the following canine behaviors:

- establishing leadership
- dominating a dog
- correcting a dog
- punishing an inappropriate behavior

Alpha roll advocates often justify the technique because "it's the way wolves do it," but that rationalization is weak. As professional dog trainers, we—and ultimately our clients— would benefit from an

explanation grounded in critical analysis rather than habit or myth.

If we could successfully interview a wolf (or a dog, for that matter) we'd be light years ahead in training. In the absence of such communication, we must rely on the careful observation and astute second-guessing of experts with strong backgrounds in wolf behavior.

For this article, I called upon the expertise of four team members who teach a "Wolf and Dog

Behavior" course with me every summer at Wolf Park, IN: Dr. Ray Coppinger, Professor Erich Klinghammer, Pat Goodman, and Ken McCort.

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THE WOLF-DOG PARALLEL

According to Erich Klinghammer, PhD, an ethologist and professor emeritus at

Purdue University and the president of the North American Wildlife Federation, "the so-called alpha roll overpracticed by some is nonsense."

Klinghammer believes that there is a big difference between wolves and dogs, and to "simply extrapolate from wolves to dogs is at best problematical."

Dr. Ray Coppinger, a biology professor at Hampshire College and a co-founder of the Livestock Guarding Dog Project, concurs. He

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says that, in evolutionary terms, "to be descended from a wolf doesn't mean dogs are wolves or behave like wolves." Furthermore, he states that dogs develop in "very different environments and acquire ... very different social behaviors than wolves."

DO WOLVES DO THE ALPHA ROLL?

These experts are skeptical that the alpha roll is a uniform and routine dominance behavior in wolves. "In watching the wolves," says Pat Goodman, MS, a resident ethologist at Wolf Park, "I find it is rare for them to forcibly push down and hold down a subordinate, a rival, a youngster. In the overwhelming majority of cases, rather than being pushed down, the wolf who ends up on the ground is already going down in response to psychological pressure. ... I have seen the alpha roll 'work' in wolf-wolf and in wolf-human encounters, but I have also seen it backfire."

Klinghammer notes that the preferred strategy of one wolf establishing dominance over another is "usually a drawn-out series of encounters that eventually convinces a wolf to submit and run away." In fact, says Ken McCort, a

dog training and behavior consultant, "with wolves the inguinal presentation behavior is usually volunteered by a lower ranking wolf as sort of an appeasement to a dominant animal in the face of some threat or altercation" ... and leaders in packs "control assets (possessions, territory) more often than physically controlling individuals."

DOES THE ALPHA ROLL WORK ON DOGS?

According to Goodman, there is probably no peer-reviewed literature that addresses testing reactions of dogs to variations of the alpha roll. Even without such research, Coppinger takes a clear position against alpha rolling: "I cannot think of many learning situations where I want my learning dogs responding with fear and lack of motion," he says. "I never want my animals to be thinking social hierarchy. Once they do, they will be spending their time trying to figure out how to move up in the hierarchy."


SO WHAT SHOULD TRAINERS DO?

In general, I believe that "down" is a good position to teach your dog, if for no other reason than physical control. I frequently use downs at a

distance instead of a recall, and I use downs and belly rubs as a relaxation technique. The down cue is also a means to reduce barking and establish control of overly excited dogs in my classes. (Yes, they can have too much fun playing games!)

I have observed situations in free-playing dogs where one dog will stand over a dog who's lying in a submissive position, and there seems to be communication in this interaction. For me, it boils down to this: With some dogs, I want to catch them in the act of standing up, in the owner's presence, and reward that "I'm okay" behavior. For other dogs, I want them to volunteer (or I will cue or lure) a relaxed or tummy-up position so I can give them a belly rub or get them to relax.

All of my anecdotal, nonscientific experience with dogs reinforces the reality that dog training is an art, a science, and a mechanical skill. Deciding which dog needs what is the art of dog training.

Terry Ryan is a "train the dog trainers" expert who holds trainer classes and workshops all over the world. She can be reached via e-mail at terryan@olypen.com. 



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