

WHAT LIES BENEATH

WHEN GOOD DOGS GO BAD

BY COREY VAN'T HAAFF



ANYONE WHO KNOWS ME KNOWS I WOULD LAY DOWN MY LIFE FOR ANY OF MY dogs. I wouldn't hesitate to put myself between my girls and any threat that came our way.

But last autumn, a threat did come calling: an internal threat. One of my dogs, a gorgeous 18-month-old German Wirehaired Pointer named Matilda, became the threat.

It was Sunday evening. We had just finished a pizza feast and, of course, the dogs got their nibbles. The TV was on, the empty cardboard box still on the coffee table. I had claimed my space on the corner of my very long couch, purchased to accommodate all my canine friends, when my very old Poodle, Stella, walked over.

In a flash, Matilda was on her, attacking her ferociously. It took a long time to pry her teeth from Stella and once that was accomplished, the damage was severe. Stella's side was ripped open and without the muscle to hold back her internal organs, her intestines had tumbled out, protruding against the skin. I was in full panic mode. I locked up each dog separately and rushed Stella to an emergency clinic, but her injuries proved to be fatal. I was devastated.

What followed—the question of what to do about my baby, Matilda—was heart-rending. I thought this could be simply a one-time occurrence. I rationalized that I could not euthanize a perfectly healthy puppy for one mistake. I discussed the situation with my vet and my dog-owning friends. Reaction was mixed.

One friend said to euthanize her immediately. Another said not to be hasty—it could be an isolated incident. Maybe it was jealousy, another chimed in.

Aggression in a multi-dog household is a huge problem, according to Peni Fitzpatrick, dog behaviourist, trainer, and owner of The Dog Company, a dog training facility on Vancouver Island in British Columbia.

“Aggression is the outcome of an issue not being addressed,” she says. “Aggression is not a natural thing. Wolves are rarely aggressive toward their own kind unless threatened.” In our world of dog/human relationships, aggression develops when a dog issue is not dealt with. “Aggression always accelerates if it's not dealt with,” she says. “The human must be the pack leader.”

Naturally dominant dogs need to know in no uncertain terms that it's you in charge, not them. They cannot be allowed to exhibit any unacceptable behaviour, including growling or mounting another dog.

And it's a 24/7 job.

“The moment you let it slip, instantly the dog will take charge. The leader is the leader around the clock.”

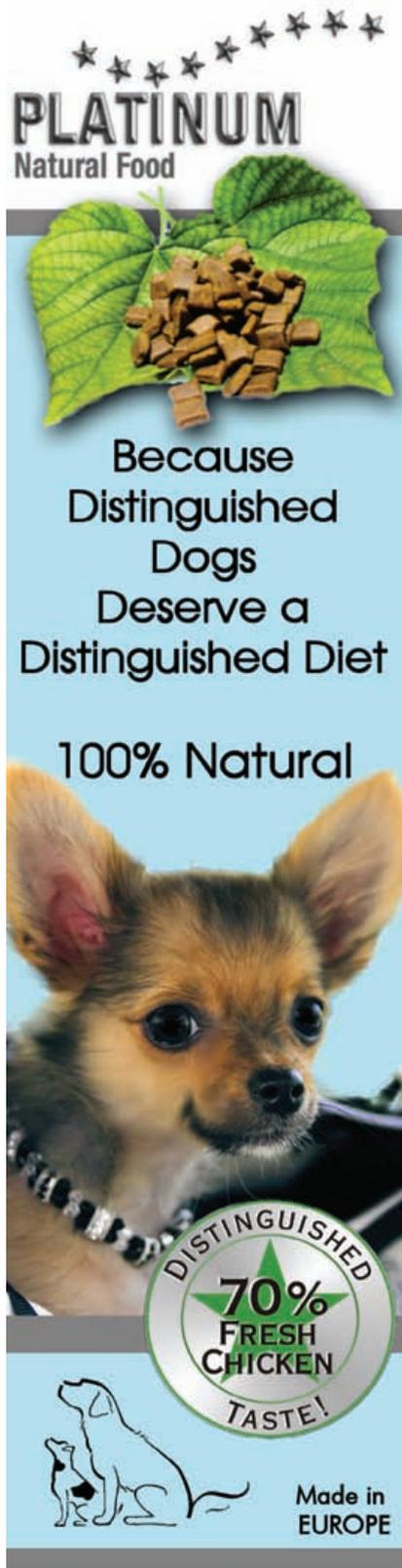
At the same time, says Dr. Stanley Coren, noted psychologist and dog behaviour expert, the top dog needs to know that you recognize and support the pack hierarchy; you may be dominant over the alpha dog, but she or he is dominant over the others.

“Among dogs, the largest and strongest always have higher ranking in the social order,” he explains. “When you are distributing food, praise, affection or anything of value to the dogs, do it by starting with the largest and strongest animal and working downwards to the smallest and weakest animal (regardless of your own sense of honour or justice or preference). If you fail to do this you are setting things up for trouble. For example if you feed the Chihuahua first and the Pointer later, then you have violated natural pack order. This means that the Pointer must prove that it is higher in the pack and that will be done by attacking those dogs that appear to have usurped [her] rightful rank and so forth. It may not make sense to you as a human, but it does to the dogs.”

Guilty as charged. I had always given any treats, food, love, and affection to the dogs in the order they came into my home.

There were probably many warning signs I didn't notice, or gave little thought to. Stella only came into my home a few years ago. She was lovable but definitely grumpy and had nipped at almost all the other dogs from time to time. I ignored it because of her age.

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I didn't know what caused Matilda to attack, but figured if it was even partially my fault, I couldn't live with myself if I punished her for my shortcoming. She would be given another chance.

But I knew I had to make some changes. Whenever I left the house, my two little dogs were kept in one half of my home, the two big dogs got the other half. When I was home, I kept Matilda close by my side so I could watch her. When I had my bath every morning, she was in the bathroom with me. When I was working from my home office, again, she was with me. If I ran to the corner store, Matilda was in my car. I was mindful all the time of Matilda's location in the house and if I wasn't where the other dogs were, Matilda was with me.

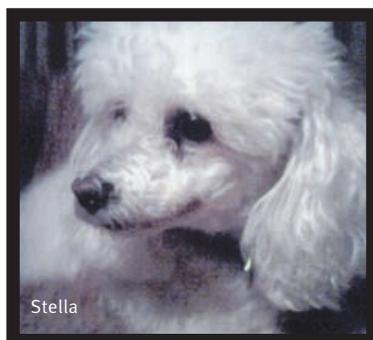
And, of course, my heart froze many times after that terrible night.

When someone knocked and the dogs would run to the front door, I ran with them. My friends used to complain at the total chaos upon entering my home. The dogs all barked, jumped, and vied for attention while I, the pleased-as-punch mom, stood by, so proud of all my girls.

No longer. Now, I would grab Matilda's collar in an attempt to control her. I tried to make her sit quietly and I tried to maintain some type of control. I was hopeful this would be enough.

On a Saturday several weeks after Stella's death, I had invited company for dinner. As I opened the door to welcome my guest, my Chihuahua, Clara, barked. Clara, sweet little Clara, always timid, always the first to bark and the last to stop.

Matilda turned on her, attacking her and holding her to the floor. I pried her off and followed Clara, who was yelping and screaming, to the bedroom where I had to drag her from under the bed. The damage



was considerable but not life-threatening. I took her to my vet, who stapled up her wounds and I returned home knowing that Matilda could no longer be trusted. The next day, Matilda was euthanized.

Was the whole tragedy my fault? I'll never know for sure. As with most things in life, the answer is complex. Possibly, I could have done more to assert my leadership status and support Matilda's place in the hierarchy, allowing her to feel secure and making her attacks on the other dogs unnecessary. I could have trained my dogs more and perhaps managed the situation better. Probably some of the problem also lay beyond my control—somewhere deep inside poor Matilda's psyche.

Dr. Ian Dunbar, renowned veterinarian and animal behaviourist, says that it's normal for dogs to argue, squabble, and fight,

sometimes with good reason and other times without provocation. The key issue is whether they cause damage when they bicker.

"All dogs fight," he says, "but very few dogs cause damage because they have developed bite inhibition while play-fighting and play-biting other dogs during puppyhood."

"The simple fact is that, for whatever reasons, [this dog] did not develop bite inhibition during puppyhood and so caused great damage during the attack," said Dunbar. "We do not know the reasons for this because we cannot turn back the clock. However, the most likely suggestion is that she did not have sufficient opportunity to play as a puppy."

Dunbar added that these incidents are so rare that it is virtually impossible to predict them beforehand.

This gives me some wee comfort. I feel I failed Matilda by not foreseeing this situation and by not doing more to have avoided it. Matilda forever changed my life with her big, goofy demeanor and limitless love for me—and mine for her. Ultimately, she paid the price for some cheque I didn't know had been written.

"As a psychologist who studies human problems as well," Coren said, "let me assure you that playing 'blame games' doesn't help. Stop thinking about the past and start thinking about establishing order and harmony among the dogs that remain. Ultimately they will comfort you and provide the social support that you need to get through the hurting." ■

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