



Does Breed Matter? Utilizing the Siberian Husky's Genetic Blueprint When Training

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“*A dog is a dog is a dog*”—or so author Gertrude Stein would say—if she were writing about dogs instead of roses! But is that really true? Do breed characteristics make a difference in how we design a curriculum for training and/or behavior modification—or is it just a matter of “one size fits all?”

We believe that breed characteristics *do* matter. Just as certain breeds’ hard-wired behavior patterns can work against us, they can just as easily aid us in teaching new behaviors, as long as we know how to “mine” that genetic nugget and use it to our advantage. Let’s put on our headlamps and start digging, as we invite you to explore this idea along with us.

We suggest that you keep in mind any other breeds you are familiar with to see what blueprints you can find. Because the authors of this article are both intimately knowledgeable about northern breeds and their unique characteristics, we will center our study on the Siberian Husky, and begin with the two basic behaviors that seem to cause the most consternation for both instructors and owners of Siberians alike: Loose Leash Walking and the Recall. Siberian owners competing in obedience have stated that these behaviors are “more foreign to its nature than to other breeds. Its natural aptitude for racing or pulling a sled is as far removed from obedience as the sun from the moon.”¹ This learning challenge results from the Siberian’s intel-

ligence, strong will, and ability to make his own decisions, coupled with an innate desire to run and a strong prey drive.

Loose Leash Walking

This behavior is a challenge to teach *any* dog, not just northern breeds. If you watch Siberians moving freely, you’ll notice that the gait most often chosen for forward movement is the trot—a single-tracking gait that the breed standard terms “brisk” and mushers refer to as “touring speed.”² They will break from a trot to a walk when they find something interesting to investigate or if closely following a scent. Now, if you compare what we humans do in most circumstances, which is walk, you’ll see why there’s such a disconnect between how we move forward and how our dogs naturally move in the same environment. Note as well, dogs roaming freely are not on leash, so being on one can be quite a foreign concept at first.

When you take this natural canine way of moving, then factor in the additional genetic blueprint of the Siberian Husky, who is hard-wired to run and pull, you certainly have encountered the “Mother of All Training Challenges.” So, how do we address this special genetic need while training our best friend to walk nicely on leash? One way to do this is by rewarding the dog’s urge to move forward at a more rapid gait only after he listens to our cue for walking nicely without

pulling. After walking a few steps at a normal pace without pulling, allow a bit of a trot for a few steps by taking your own pace up a bit to a slow jog. This rewards the dog by allowing him to do what is natural for him. In other words, we are invoking the Premack Principle³ in order to teach Loose Leash Walking. Of course, first you need to teach the dog cues for these two behaviors. For example, you could use “by me” for a regular walk, and perhaps use the mushing term “hike” for the “trot.” A helpful trick when teaching a “by me” command is to show your Siberian just how crazy you really are by changing directions at unexpected times, always announcing the changes in a happy, upbeat voice and rewarding heavily for eye contact and successful (read: loose leash) changes. Remember to keep it fun for your Siberian; when training becomes boring, they lose interest.

Speaking of rewards, you may find that you need to think “outside of the box” when it comes to the Siberian Husky. Many Siberians are notoriously picky⁴, and some (including Jo’s) aren’t motivated by food at all, but all of them love a chance to have fun—their way. Stories of their vaudevillian antics abound in obedience and agility circles; our work with rescue groups and breeders has stressed the need to “warn” prospective owners of the Siberian sense of “humor” that causes them to add silly twists to previously-trained

behaviors. As Siberian owners, we see this daily with our own dogs as well as from our professional teaching exposure. Here's a word to the wise: find out what *really* motivates that particular Husky, and use it to your advantage. For example, in order to teach one of our Siberians to greet people by walking up to them calmly (instead of pulling forward at 45 mph), we used her most-valued reward—the chance to interact with children—in combination with a method known as “penalty yards.”⁵ With children waiting up ahead, we started walking toward them—the second that our Siberian began to surge ahead, we called her and walked backwards, with our bodies still oriented toward the children—her “prize.” As soon as she reached us, we began walking forward again, repeating the sequence if she surged, but walking backwards approximately three feet further each successive time. She soon realized that pulling was getting her further away from her desired reward—and decided to walk. Not only does this example illustrate the Premack Principle, it also speaks to the intelligence of the breed. Siberians are often characterized as “stubborn” but, in reality, they are displaying their genetically based intelligence. The breed was specifically bred to be smart enough to make decisions in order to avoid leading the rest of the team and their human into dangerous situations, such as unstable ice on frozen lakes. Since the human standing on the sled runners can be anywhere from 8-16 dogs behind the leaders of the team, this is a crucial skill that these dogs needed to develop.

The Recall

For hundreds of years, the Siberian Husky has been bred to run and run and run, for mile upon mile—so when it comes to developing a reliable recall, you need to remember that Siberians have a hard-wired tendency to run *away* from you, which is how they would normally be oriented in relation to the musher, so it's worth spending lots of extra time and effort on building reliability. When working on the recall, the first rule (as with any dog) is to make any time they come to you an enjoyable experience. This means never calling them in an angry voice, chastising them, or doing anything that they don't see as “fun.” This includes ear cleaning, nail cutting, or ending fun by calling them away from something of interest. Create another cue for going in or going home, and make it fun—both during and after the behavior. For example, when you are out with your Siberian and decide to go home or inside, kick in that Siberian prey drive and start running—your Siberian should follow happily.⁶ You can give this “follow me” behavior a cue in an excited voice while running, such as “let's go!” or “time for treats!” or even something silly (Jo used the phrase, “the bus is leaving!” with her Siberians, who *still* respond years later by racing her to the house). Once inside, don't let the fun end—play tug or dance around or whatever your dog likes for a little bit before settling down. Another idea for increasing recall compliance is a friendly game of Hide and Go Seek—most Siberians love this game, especially if you give lots of praise and a very special treat when they find you! With

both of these games, it's important to start in areas of little distraction, then, when your dog is reliable, take the games on the road, making sure to keep your Siberian on a long line if not in a fenced area. Siberians should *never* be off-leash unless contained—once that drive to run kicks in, they're miles away before they realize you aren't right behind them. More than any other breed, the Siberian has a natural love of running, and once running or hunting, they are likely to become selectively deaf to your commands.⁷ As a result, there are few Siberians that are 100% reliable off-leash.

Another useful and fun exercise to build a reliable recall with your Siberian is to add the game “Find It.”⁸ This game taps into both their hard-wired running behavior as well as their prey drive. In this exercise, after your dog has come back to you on cue (either using his name and/or a recall cue), show him a treat, drop it on the floor near him, point to it and ask him to “find it.” As he does, mark the behavior (verbal marker or clicker) and then repeat a few more times. When he is successful at this distance, show him the treat while within his line of sight, toss it a foot or so away, cue “find it,” mark when he finds it, then call him back using your normal recall cue. At this point, you can either reward him for the recall or toss the treat again and ask him to find it. Eventually you will be throwing the treat further away. Once they have the concept, it's fun for both of you to mix it up a bit by sometimes also rewarding him when he comes back to you and throwing it again. *Note:* It is important to toss the treat within his line

of sight (no overhead tennis serves please!) so that he is successful in actually finding it. If your Siberian also likes toys, you can substitute a toy instead of a treat. However, since this exercise is different from teaching a “retrieve,” if your dog doesn’t like to retrieve, you can stick to treats or other rewards that your dog likes. The point of this exercise is to create a positive association with “coming when called” by making it fun and more like a game. This is what helps to build the reliability into the “recall.”

Summary

Given that many of us involved with Siberians are not standing on sled runners, we need to find ways to address and utilize their most important trait—independent thinking coupled with intelligence—in a meaningful way for everyday training. Here is where a genetic characteristic can actually work “with” us. Positive reinforcement training, including shaping and choice behaviors, seems tailor-made for the Siberian Husky and other northern breeds. We can harness (pun intended!) that Siberian intelligence to teach him how to walk nicely on leash, sit, down-stay, or come when called by engaging his intelligence and using life rewards to encourage making the correct choices. The exercises above are just some of the many that can help you achieve this. After all, our Siberians seem happiest when they think it was “their idea” to do whatever was cued by their two-legged partner on the other end of the leash!

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