

Mental evaluation of dogs in Sweden

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Mental evaluation of dogs

(in Swedish “Mentalbeskrivning Hund”, I will call it MH for short in the text) is a form of test where you get a good picture of a dogs mentality. This form of test has also created a lot of interest outside Sweden.

Every dog owner in Sweden has the possibility to enter their dog in a mental evaluation – it gives the owner a good knowledge of “who they have at the other end of the leash”.

This test was from the beginning meant for the working breeds, GSD, Rottweiler, Dobermann etc – but is also very useful for other breeds.

About 210 Västgötaspets in Sweden has gone through this test.

MH has undergone several extensive examinations by researchers, which has resulted in a unique list of diagrams over each evaluated breed. These diagrams make a very good foundation for the specialty- and breedclubs when they evaluate their breeding work.

MH is not a test where the dog is approved or not approved – it is more a description of the intensity in the dogs reactions, put down on a protocol. Dog and owner passes through a number of stations (usually in a forest) with different moments where the dogs behaviour is documented.

MH describes the behaviours that, through research, are known to be very hereditary.

The protocol is official – put into the Swedish Kennel Club’s data base – all the protocols for Västgötaspets are also presented in the SKV year book (where you also find exterior evaluation protocols, herding test protocols, show results, obedience results, which dogs has been used in breeding, hip score results, etc).

When a dog goes through MH, there is no “right” or “wrong”, each dog reacts differently, the important thing is to see how the dogs handles the situation they are put in. They can get angry, scared, excited – totally ok – what you want to see is how they “de-react”.

The MH-crew consists of: Evaluator, who takes care of the protocol, testleader, who leads and helps the owner and dog through the test (the testleader is also responsible for the material – that all stations are strictly made out according to rules) , and three figurants, having different tasks along the track.

All these people have gone through thorough training and are authorized for

their special “jobs” – you are not allowed to arrange an MH with unauthorized persons.

Well, what happens along the test? What is there to see?

1. Contact /how social is the dog

The evaluator observes the dogs reactions in contact and cooperation with a person unknown to the dog– also how the dogs reacts to being handled by the testleader.

2. Palying/playfulness

The evaluator observes the dogs will to cooperate with a person/testleader by looking at the dogs desire to chase and catch a rag thrown by the testleader and how/if the dog gets engaged in a tug-of-war with this person.

3. Will to chase and catch

The evaluator observes the dogs interest in following a fleeing object (a rag tied to a string, disappearing rapidly at some distance), how fast the dog starts and what it does to the object when/if caught.

4. Activity

In this moment the evaluator observes how the dog reacts in a passive situation, where the owner stands still with the dog on leash (for 3 min.) Here you see a great variation in reactions – to be desired is a dog that can relax in a passive situation even if it has recently been active.

5. Curiosity/interest

The evaluator looks at the dogs curiosity, willingness and courage to leave its owner to investigate what has just happened, and eventually become active with something that could have been experienced as a bit frightening to the dog. You also look at the dogs own interest in starting to play or respond to an invitation to play with a figurant, at a distance from the owner.

6. Shots

A dog, sensitive to noises/shots, does not feel well in todays noisy society and dogs who are affected or afraid of noises/shots very often passes this fear on to its offsprings. To be used in breeding and training, it is very important that the dog is not afraid of noises/ shots.

In MH it is tested if the dog is affected/afraid of shots, both during play with its owner and in passivity.

7. Fear

It can be rational for a dog to be afraid, if it is exposed to a sudden threat, as in the moment where an overall suddenly is pulled up in front of the dog. What is important is that the dog lets go of the fear when the surprise/threat stops, that the dog can relax and even show curiosity to what has happened.

This, plus how much support the dog seeks from its owner, is what the evaluator looks for in several moments.

8. Threat

In this moment you use figurants dressed as ghosts, to observe how the dog reacts to unknown threats that slowly gets closer to the dog. The evaluator looks at how much the dog can stand up to the threat, if it wants to defend its owner or itself, also if the dog shows curiosity and interest in examining the ghosts when they stop acting threatening.

9. After the MH

The evaluator goes through the protocol with the owner and explains his/her comments. The dog owner gets a copy of the protocol, the original is sent to the Swedish Kennel Club.

The evaluator also puts "known mental status" in the dogs pedigree.

Additional comments

I (Britta Hammarström) became testleader about 10 years ago, before that I was figurant for several years. I have "worked" at numerous MH over the years, seen so many dogs of different breeds, and I can honestly say – not 2 of them has shown *exactly* the same behaviour, there are always small differences. This is what makes this "job" so interesting and fascinating – you always see new details, you learn more with each tested dog – and so many times you get positively surprised! A dog that starts off a bit shy and "neutral" can grow considerably during the test and you feel so happy and proud to see how well it handles the situations.

Sometimes (but really very seldom) there is a dog that shows "nope, I don't want to be a part of this, I don't like this at all" – in that case we break off the test immediately – there is *never ever* a question of "let's see how much it can take" – no way!!! We are not interested in destroying dogs, just observe their behaviour.

Other things that comes out very clearly in these tests are – is the dog used to play with its owner? Do they have a happy "physical communication"? Does the dog trust its owner? Is the dog pack leader, or is the owner? Has the dog been "wrapped up in cotton" or has it been properly trained socially and environmentally?

These details can either help or tip out the dog.

I have just finished being a testleader – absolutely not because I am tired of it, no no – but it means getting up at 0400hs, maybe driving 200kms (if the MH is not held at my local dog club), checking the material and the “setting”, and then walk, walk, walk (each dog takes approx. 45 minutes – 8 dogs/day, every dog has to be tested in full daylight, the testtrack is always in the forest) – and talk, talk, talk until about 1600hs, then check that every protocol and the other documents are in order.

So – at the age of 68 – I decided to just take care of administrative work around my clubs MH- though I can still follow each test, walk around the test track, watch and observe – but I don't have to do it with every dog :0) There is always an interested audience following an MH. The optimal thing is to test a whole litter at the same time, meaning that e g breeders of course are interested in watching. There can be 10-15 persons walking along the test-track, you can videofilm or take pictures if you like, but you have to keep quiet and stand where the testleader tells you to stand – not to disturb either dog or owner!

Västgötaspets being active in tug-of-war with testleader



Västgötaspets making contact with “ghost” when owner has taken off hood “Aha! It is a person”!



Västgötaspets making contact with uppflýging overall—without help of owner