



Temperament: What Should We Expect?

“I could tell Bella wasn’t the typical dog by her behavior, but she was still young, about 1 year when I met her. I took her in after Bella’s family told me she had attacked a neighbor, resulting in almost 20 staples, and they could no longer keep her. She was a good dog all-around with me, but quite unpredictable, and we had a few scares with strangers (she was responsible for serious injuries at least 3-5 times). I was always so careful about introducing her to people who would be around me. She ended up attacking my fiancé, unprovoked, after we all lived together for about 2 years, and I had no choice but to consider behavioral euthanasia, as I knew she would seriously hurt or even kill someone. I considered trying to surrender her to a rescue, but I knew she would do this again, and she may be euthanized in a bad situation, rather than a “good” one, surrounded by a few people who loved her dearly. My vet, vet tech, and I ended up making the decision that we would compassionately euthanize her before another tragedy occurred.” (1)

This true story is typical of many that have been shared with me over the last few years. When I got my first Tibetan Mastiff (TM) 25 years ago, the breed was known for being protective but not aggressive. I read and heard stories of TMs placing themselves between their people and a threat and standing their ground; TMs who knocked down an intruder and stood guard until the owner took control of the situation; TMs warding off predators or protecting their owners when the need arose; but never stories of TMs attacking their owners, or even strangers, without cause. They were fearless, they protected and defended, but they did not initiate an attack. They were protective, not aggressive.

Somewhere along the line, this has changed, and the Tibetan Mastiff has gained the reputation of being an aggressive breed. In a Livestock Guardian Dog group on Facebook, a TM was mentioned, and the overwhelming response was “No way, those dogs are aggressive, they will kill you”. Admittedly from people who had never owned a TM, but this is the reputation the breed has gained. I have talked to potential puppy buyers who have heard all of the following from breeders: They are *supposed* to be aggressive; it is their nature to attack; it is innate; they will attack anyone they don't know and see on a daily basis; *expect it!*

To be clear, people have different ideas of what the term “aggressive” means, so let me define it as most American English dictionaries do: Engaging in hostile action without reasonable cause (2); Tending toward unprovoked attacks (3); Initiating fights (4). Key words here are without cause, unprovoked, and initiating. Synonyms given are violent, savage, and vicious. A Tibetan Mastiff, or a dog of any breed, that is protecting its owner or defending its territory is not acting without cause and is not vicious or savage. That is the distinction we need to make between protective and aggressive.

Those who want to assert that the Tibetan Mastiff is an aggressive dog are quick to point out photos and videos of TMs lunging and snarling at the end of a chain at a stranger just out of view, provoking the dog. They are less quick to point out how quickly the dog responds when a small Tibetan child walks up, takes the chain in his hand, and brings the dog under control. The dog would never bite its owner, even in the frenzy of trying to ward off an intruder. In Tibet they are working dogs, raised and cared for by the women and children to protect the home as well as the herd, essential to the lives and livelihood of their owners. A dog with a temperament that is unstable or untrustworthy could not fulfill this role.

Writing in the American Kennel Gazette in 1937, Irma Bailey wrote:

“When approaching a nomad encampment, the first sign of life is usually the barking of dogs. On this, the owners come out their black yak-hair tents and inspect the cause of the alarm. They, or more usually their

children, then see that all dog fastenings are secure, and often hold the dogs down while it strains to reach the stranger. Although fierce, as a result of being tied up from puppyhood, these mastiffs are affectionate and good-tempered with people they know, and one often sees the smallest children handling and calling them off their attempts to attack the intruder with perfect ease and safety.” (5)

Similarly, Don Messerschmidt, as recently as 2010, describes his encounter with working guard dogs at Kesang Camp:

“Tibetan mastiffs are rarely aggressive unless seriously provoked or badly abused and mistreated by prolonged confinement or constantly chained, for example. Their behavior at Kesang, we noted, was typical. While we assumed that strange intruders would be summarily repulsed, as guests we were allowed in without any trouble, especially after being gently introduced by the dogs’ master. After a brief examination, as visitors we were considered safe by the dogs. So much for the myth of the innately ferocious and uncontrollable Tibetan mastiff.” (6)

On a recent trip to Nepal, European visitors encountered both aggressive working Tibetan Mastiffs as well as Tibetan Mastiffs that were people friendly when off chain and off duty. Interestingly, the conclusion drawn was that the aggressive dogs exhibited the true TM temperament, while the friendly dogs were “westernized”. This is diametrically opposed to what we have historically considered as correct temperament for the breed, as recounted above. Note that Ms. Bailey’s account is from 1937, well before any “westernization” would have taken place. I have to wonder if this inference was due to conditioning to *expect it*.

These accounts accurately describe the temperament of the Tibetan Mastiff as I have known it over the years. So, what has brought about the change in temperament that we are now seeing? There are several factors at play: Mixed breed dogs being marketed as aboriginal Tibetan Mastiffs; irresponsible breeders; and market demand for bigger and “badder” dogs.

Within the last 15-20 years, there has been an influx of mixed breed dogs marketed and sold as Tibetan Mastiffs. The trend started in China but quickly took hold in Europe and is now becoming increasingly common in the U.S. These dogs have brought with them a myriad of health and temperament issues. Almost without fail, a report of a “Tibetan Mastiff” attacking its owner has involved a dog from mixed breed Chinese lines. These dogs not only don’t look like the traditional TM, they also don’t behave like one.

Another factor to consider is selective breeding. When the Tibetan Mastiff was initially introduced in Europe and the U.S., some breeders selectively bred for a milder temperament that would fit well and meet the expectations of western society. This does not mean that true temperament was lost, but rather that abnormally aggressive temperaments were eliminated. Just as we’ve had those who selectively bred for stable temperament, we also now have those who are selectively breeding for an aggressive temperament, either through ignorance of what a true TM temperament should be, or purposefully to produce an aggressive attack dog to appeal to a certain segment of the buying public. They breed and train for aggressive attack dogs. These are the breeders who are warning puppy buyers to *expect it*.

While definitely the minority, there is a base segment of the population who are looking for an aggressive dog to fuel their ego. The meaner the dog, the better, as they compete for “baddest dog” bragging rights. These buyers support breeders described in the previous paragraph and add to the problem and perception.

Aggression can occur in any breed, even the most docile breed, but it does not mean it is to be expected or glorified. As a breeder, it is simple enough to choose not to pass that forward and remove that dog from a breeding program. I have experienced aggressiveness in a TM, but I do not EXPECT IT. Out of the all of the TMs I have owned/co-owned (18 total), I have only had one that had the potential to attack without cause, and I considered her temperament extreme and an aberration for the breed. This doesn't mean my other dogs won't take care of business if a threat presents itself, but just as Mr. Messerschmidt noted in his travels in Tibet, I can

walk anyone into my yard and my dogs are fine with them once introduced. This is why I chose the breed: I wanted a guardian to protect my home and family, not an attack dog that I would have to worry about being a liability. With rare exceptions, I believe this is what most TM owners want as well. They do not want the horror of seeing a loved one mauled by an aggressive dog or the heartbreak of euthanizing a dog that has done so.

Breeding for and promoting aggression is to the detriment of our breed. It does not represent true TM temperament and puppy owners should not have to *expect it*. I would encourage potential puppy owners to specifically ask breeders about temperament and their expectations, and to visit your breeder in person to meet their dogs. If you can't walk into their yard and meet their dogs without fear, walk away.

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[American Tibetan Mastiff Association](#)

References

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- 6). Messerschmidt, Don. *Big Dogs of Tibet and the Himalayas*. 2010. Orchid Press, p. 70.

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Noble Legacy Tibetan Mastiffs