



FBCSA: PANEL OF TRAINERS

TRAINING & TRIALLING SYNOPSIS

The versatility of the Boxer lends itself to being able to partake in a variety of training and trial disciplines. Because of this, what trials are on offer, the training thereof and what it all means, are aspects that often become cumbersome and difficult to understand. This is a synopsis of the various training aspects and trials in an attempt to clarify what the FBCSA offers in terms of trials. For the sake of readability, we will break down the aspects into various phases, namely *puppies*, *the active years*, and *the slowing down years*, as a means to indicate where the various aspects fit into the various life stages of your Boxer's life.

PUPPIES

The family decides that a Boxer puppy would be a welcome addition that will enrich their lives and give the kids something to befriend and play with. This is a great idea, as we all know that Boxers make wonderful family pets, and when treated as part of the family, really do become "part of the family". What the novel Boxer (and any dog really) often fails to grasp is that the dog remains a dog and is governed by instincts and behaviours that have evolved over millennia.

A puppy will arrive in your house with basically two "aims" in its new life: (1) to get fed, and (2) to start climbing the social order within its new pack - your family. This is rather amusing to the family initially as the puppy guzzles his food down and will very often start growling and rumbling when we try to remove it before he is finished. This often creates a game between the puppy and (very often) young children who fuel the behaviour by evoking it and then letting the puppy win from growling and possibly starting to snap at them - amusing behaviour...for now. Another scenario is when the new puppy chooses the softest spot on your bed or couch. It looks far too cute to get it to move, so we will sit somewhere else. Eventually the puppy learns this and takes possession of the "best spot on the couch" and may challenge the family for it. Once again, amusing...for now. The family is enthusiastic about the new puppy and so take every opportunity to take it to the park. This is of course exactly what we should be doing, but all of a sudden we start noticing that the puppy becomes aggressive toward other dogs in the park. We try to reprimand him and he turns to snap at you! We take him home and he starts to demand attention and food through inappropriate behaviour, or the toddler in the house happens to get "too close" to the young dog during feeding time, picks up a "designated puppy toy" or tries to get up on the couch and gets too close to the puppy and gets snapped at. How could the puppy do this? We thought the puppy was a part of the family whom we could trust. After all, the breeder and all the websites you visited during your research on the ideal family dog all said the same thing – that the Boxer has an ideal temperament for a family environment. Did you get a bad

temperament puppy? Do you take it back to the breeder as such? Or, do you simply re-home it and get another puppy with the hope that “this one will be more dependable”?

The reality of this scenario is that it is all too common and the reputation of the breed suffers purely through ignorance and naivety of inexperienced dog owners. We must remember that during the development of the breed in the late 19th century to the early 20th century, traits selected for were not the “cute and cuddly” factors that make good family pets, but rather an athletic, powerful and energetic body structure that was able to chase down large game. Together with a head and jaw structure that would allow for powerful grasping and tenacious biting, and a temperament that allowed it to tackle dangerous situations with courage and determination, and a hardness to endure, the traits of the typical Boxer are such that confident, focused and tenacious temperaments are what a typical Boxer should be displaying. With these factors in mind, we can then ask ourselves if the puppy described above really had a “defective” temperament, or rather a product of a misguided upbringing. We get our puppies normally at 8 weeks old, which is an age critical in the development of its temperament. That is why it is *critically important* to attend puppy socialisation classes from an early age.

The aim of puppy socialisation classes is to empower the new puppy owner to raise a well behaved and balanced dog. Dogs are instinctually pack social animals that derive security and stability by being part of a well-structured pack. There is a place for all temperament types (governed by genetics) within a pack structure. Confident and aggressive dogs become the pack protectors and safeguard the pack territory. The confident dogs with high prey drives are most often the most successful hunters. Then there are those dogs with temperaments that fall between these two extremes, which would depend on the pack merely for security and provision of resources. Confident puppies will therefore naturally try to gain status within the pecking order of the family environment as this is viewed as his new pack. All a puppy therefore requires for sound temperament development is security in knowing where it fits in within the pack. Very often a family treats a new puppy as a person rather than a dog, which very often leads to the absence of adequate leadership and the young dog, growing into adulthood, will naturally assume the position. And, observations of the social interactions of a wild pack structure will show, there is no sentiment involved when a dog that is the pack leader deals with insubordination. This sort of behaviour is fine when the pack is a wild dog pack, but when the pack includes your children, it is another story altogether. It is you, the owner, that is required to be the pack leader and the dog has to learn that the family is above them in the pecking order. This will lead to a dependable dog. A dog that knows its place in the pecking order is also more at ease with its surroundings and is therefore happier. This is a situation that is easily manipulated if the puppy (and pack) has appropriate and strong leadership (that means “you” as the owner). A proper socialised puppy will also act appropriately towards the other dogs in the family pack. The synopsis of puppy socialisation classes is that, through a series of interactive sessions, a puppy is taught to act appropriately within a pack structure, and teaches the new owner how to develop a proper pack structure. A situation where a new puppy does

not act appropriately within the pack structure in the household of existing dogs leads to an imbalance and either an overly-aggressive puppy (which is inappropriate and will only lead to disruptions and fights) or an overly-nervous puppy (which is also inappropriate behaviour) as this puppy will often snap out at people and established dogs in the household. This is the typical “bite-first-before-I-get-bitten” behaviour. This situation becomes dangerous when the puppy learns that he gets results from this type of behaviour. The training of *all* puppies should therefore start with puppy socialisation classes. This teaches us how to mould certain behaviours, including house training a new puppy as well as laying the foundation for basic obedience training later on. It usually spans over an eight week period.

THE ACTIVE YEARS

We have now completed a puppy socialisation course and now, hopefully if all has gone well, we have a puppy that is house trained, knows how to “sit” and “down” and comes to you enthusiastically when called. Your puppy also allows you to remove food, chew toys and bones from it without any objections, allows you to do inspections of eyes, teeth, paws, etc, also without objection, and plays and interacts with you with enthusiasm, but control. It doesn’t demand food or attention from you by understanding that these are aspects provided on your terms. The young puppy also does not behave inappropriately in strange situations or is aggressive toward people or other dogs. The puppy (and the family) also understands that it has a designated sleeping place, which is never in competition with any family member.

Then, what do we do next?

As your puppy grows and develops, you will start noticing that it loves chasing things, loves chewing things and loves digging up things. These are three characters that are considered all standard Boxer traits. Training a dog to utilise these traits in a non-destructive manner is what then makes for further development of a great family dog. Boxers are highly energetic and, coupled to a high degree of intelligence, makes for the build up of frustration. If this is not relieved in a constructive manner, it will be relieved in inappropriate and often destructive behaviour. The reality is that digging up the garden, chewing the wrong things (the hosepipe, cell phone, shoes or remote controls rather than designated chew toys), are aspects that can be taught and controlled and are merely surrogate and alternative behaviours for lack of interaction, walks, playing tug, playing fetch, etc. The natural exuberance of the Boxer calls for equally energetic owners, some notably greater than others. These behaviours can be utilised in obedience work, where the whole concept of rewarding appropriate behaviour comes in. This is done with food or toy rewards. Puppy socialization classes will teach the new owner how to reward appropriate behaviours and, perhaps more importantly, the timing of the rewards to make them effective. This concept will be carried over into basic obedience classes. Food rewards are great if used correctly. Eating is one of the basic drives within all dogs (once again, some more than others) and a dog will quickly learn that appropriate behaviour and obeying certain commands will lead to reward – being fed. The trick is to teach the dog to focus on you as the handler first and foremost, as

focusing on you means that the dog is with you and not forging forwards or lagging behind. Food and toy rewards are not used as “carrots” to lead the dog, but rather as a reward for obeying. The ultimate aim of reward training is to build the anticipation of receiving the reward rather than the reward itself. A dog that is constantly rewarded loses interest in the reward itself and the effectiveness of the training tool is lost.

Obviously, if you are using food as a reward, then the dog needs to arrive at the training field hungry. If you are utilising a toy, then it cannot be a toy that your dog sits and chews all day. It needs to be *your special toy* that you are allowing the dog to play with for the limited time of training. Another important aspect is to train within the limits of the progress and temperament of your dog. One cannot expect an hour’s worth of focus from a puppy or a dog that is highly distracted. It is also up to you, as the handler, to make things interesting for your dog in both rewards and body language that will encourage the dog.

Working Trial Scheme (WTS)

Once your dog has reached a certain stage in its training, then it is great to enter into obedience trials to test your dog-handler teamwork against others. The FBCSA hosts the Working Trial Scheme (WTS), which is a series of progressively more difficult obedience trials. *Beginners* starts with basic on-lead work and short sit and down stays and recalls. *Preliminary* and *Elementary* levels increase the degree of control, both on lead and off lead. A dog/handler team that wishes to remain purely with obedience routines can then enter into the *Intermediate* and *Advanced* levels, where scent discrimination, area searches, advanced distance control, etc are tested. Alternatively, once a dog has qualified at the *Elementary* level, then it can be entered into the *Protection Dog* level. This includes bitework, and requires a great level of control over a dog that has to protect its handler from single and double assailant attacks, protect the owner’s possessions and be recalled after it has committed to a long attack. It needs to be remembered that the WTS is a competition at all levels. A handler-dog team that passes a particular level can remain at that level at subsequent trials to compete, or choose to qualify at a higher level. Once qualified at a particular level, a dog-handler team cannot compete in a lower level, however.

Further Working Trials

Further to the WTS, the FBCSA offers three further trials that count towards titles for your dog. Completion of all three titles goes towards qualifying your dog as a Grand Champion. This is subject to the dog qualifying as a Champion within the show ring first though. These trials include an Endurance Trial (Ausdauer – AD), Traffic Steady Companion Dog (Begleithund – BH) and Breed Standard Test (BST).

Endurance Trial (Ausdauer – AD)

The Endurance Trial is a trial hosted every year during winter that tests the dog’s endurance, fitness, hardiness, and, because a dog that has good conformation will perform better, a degree of physical soundness. It is a trial run over 20 km, broken up into 8km, 7km and 5km stretches, run at a pace of

between 12 and 15 km/h. The dog follows beside the handler on a bicycle. A hip rating of not worse than C2:C2 is a prerequisite for entry from a recognised animal radiography clinic (e.g. Onderstepoort). The age limits are between 18 months and 6 years.

Traffic Steady Companion Dog (Begleithund – BH)

The Traffic Steady Companion Dog Trial (BH) is an obedience test with both on-lead and off-lead routines, and down and sit stays. It also incorporates a test for gun shyness. Gun shyness is a congenital trait that rendered the Boxer unsuitable for service work during the war and post-war era of Germany where dogs were required to fulfil a working role in society – a fact that ensured the survival of the Boxer as a breed during that time! Testing for gun-shyness is therefore an integral part of testing the Boxers for Boxer-typical temperament. Another part of this trial takes place in a public parking lot at a shopping centre, where the interaction of the dog with traffic, other dogs, strange people and strange situations is tested. The minimum age limit is 12 months.

Breed Standard Test (BST)

The Breed Standard Test is a test that is done in two parts, namely the temperament section and the conformation and movement section. The temperament section tests protective instinct, fighting spirit, courage and hardness, as well as a test for gun shyness. This section of the trial requires a high level of training for protection and bitework. The minimum age limit for this is 15 months and the dog's hips need to be rated. A hip rating from a recognised animal radiography clinic (e.g. Onderstepoort) of not worse than C2:C2 is a prerequisite for entry as well as a certificate showing the heart to be clear of heart murmurs. If a murmur is present, it needs to be established by means of echo-cardiography by a recognised animal cardiology clinic to be due to causes other than aortic or pulmonic stenosis. A dog has two opportunities to pass this trial. If it fails on both occasions, it may not be entered into any future BST trials. As the BST trial is aimed at certifying and grading the dog for breeding purposes, only entire males may enter. Males and females that have been sterilised may be entered upon application to the FBCSA and as long as the sterilisation was not due to abnormality, providing that these dogs have produced a litter of puppies.

What else is on offer?

Both dogs and handlers normally love the bitework training to the extent that they want to progress further. After qualifying in the BST, training for the WTS Protection Dog can begin, where control over the bitework comes into the training. Dog-handler teams that would like to compete at an even higher and more competitive level can then train toward IPO (Internationale Prüfungs Ordnung). This is a trial that is split into Tracking, Obedience and Protection phases at the same trial. IPO is hosted at three different levels of increasing intensity and demands a high level of training precision, level of dedication and, above all, a high level of teamwork between dog and handler. This sport also calls for dogs with high-drive, hardness, endurance and focused temperaments.

THE SLOWING DOWN YEARS

After a very active life, your Boxer will show signs of slowing down from about 7 years old. This, of course, is a generalisation and is different for all individuals. It is within these years that your Boxer will start to prefer lazing about in the sun or on the couch more and more. Boxers seemingly never lose their zest for life and your dog will still enjoy walks and outings as before – just a bit slower. What we all love about the Boxer is that they remain puppies at heart throughout their life, but we must understand their limitations within these “golden years”, making special provision for joint supplements, foods specific for older dogs, etc.

The time for heavy training and trialling is over, but, if you have enjoyed the life with your Boxer and enjoyed developing these various phases of your dog’s life, then there will be a *new* puppy tugging at his ears, tail, legs, etc. wanting to play. Take this youngster outside and start training – there’s nothing good on TV anyway!

Remember, for any training and behavioural problems, questions or advice, please feel free to contact the Panel of Trainers (Secretary Mrs Corinne Young – 082 873 8038/011 318 1906 or Mathew Ross – 082 293 5752) who will be able to answer your questions or refer your query to the relevant person.

Happy Training,

Mathew Ross
POT Chairman