

The Working Catahoula



The hunting and working instinct of the Catahoula are really one and the same. It can be difficult to explain how a breed can be both a hunting dog and a cattle dog, but I will do my best to clarify this.

A Catahoula is not a “herding” breed. When they are working cattle, they are using their prey drive. With a true herding breed, such as the Collie, they “stalk”, (still a part of the prey drive) but their natural predatory aggression has been inhibited through selective breeding so they no longer have the desire to pounce, grab and kill that all canine descendants once had.

Many hunting breeds still have a high predatory aggression. Although in a sense this is not “aggression” at all, in compared with Social/Dominance Aggression or Fear Aggression. Predatory aggression is a natural survival-related behavior. It is not vicious, malicious or vindictive nor is it preceded by a mood change or threatening gestures, as when we think of other types of aggression. Therefore it is more appropriately referred to as predatory drive or prey drive. Catahoulas have an intense hunting instinct. Remember: all dogs are predators.

I’ll explain further how this prey drive associates with the Catahoula’s working drive:

The natural hunting behavior of a wolf is as follows:

- Stalk
- Chase
- Pounce
- Grab-Bite
- Kill-Bite/Shake
- Dissect and Eat

The “working” nature of most breeds uses these traits to various degrees to achieve the required result in that breed.

- Herding breeds – “Stalk”
- Pointing breeds have a more inhibited “stalk”
- Retrieving breeds have a “chase” + inhibited “grab/bite”

Some breeds will go through the entire sequence of wolf type hunting, but stop short of actually dissecting and eating the animal.

Since the Catahoula as a breed is more primitive psychologically, many Catahoulas will go through all phases, many times while hunting this includes the eating of the meal they have just caught.

This is why they do not make a good retriever, their predatory drive is too high. They do not have a soft mouth and rather than “retrieving” the bird will, in most cases proceed to keep it away from their owner and eat it.

They do not make a good sheepherding dog, because they do not stop at the “stalk” phase as most herding breeds are required to. They are too tough for sheep and if given the chance would continue on with hunting the creature instead of herding it.

Cattle and hogs are much tougher adversaries for the Catahoula and although the in proper terminology, they are working/baying these animals, they are in effect “hunting” them, putting into use their high prey drive. Catahoulas and other Cur breeds are well-known for their ability to locate cattle in brush or wooded areas, tracking or trailing them using scent, in other words....hunting. They are also effective at holding livestock until their master commands them to make the next move, essentially holding the cow at bay. When a rancher is looking for that perfect cow or stock dog in a Catahoula, they need to evaluate the hunting ability of the dog. Catahoulas bay cattle in much the same way that they hunt and bay hogs, so to say that a Catahoula is “herding cattle” is incorrect.

Catahoulas, being a Cur breed, have a very distinctive style of working cattle. Different from the other breeds that we think of when thinking of a cattle or stock dog, as an example –

- Border Collie
- Hangin’ Tree Cow Dog
- Australian Kelpie

These breeds can be seen more as “heelers”, they will move cattle in the general direction indicated, working from behind the cattle, “driving” them forward, and have higher “stalk” traits.

The Catahoula, being a “**bay**” dog, their natural instinct is to stop the cattle and hold them in a group or bunch. To keep them from moving, holding them at “bay”, until the owner arrives. In order to accomplish this, a Catahoula will work from the front, in “header” fashion, barking and moving in a semi-circle face to face with the animal. If there is a need to put pressure on an animal to stop, the dog may bite at the nose area quickly, for a split second, but should never “hang” on. The true Catahoula style is not that of a “catch” dog. A Catahoula will naturally make a wide circle around any cattle in sight to gather them into a herd. After the cattle have settled, the owner can then start to push or move the cattle from behind, while the dogs cover the area in front of the herd to quell any thoughts of escape.

Although an excellent cattle dog, Catahoulas are not a herding breed. A Catahoula is a hunting dog at heart and their working ability is an offshoot of that same instinct.

Cat’s Cradle Catahoulas

with Wavin’ K Working Dogs