

Belgian Malinois

By Kerry Gardner

How to build prey drive

A well-bred Malinois dog is born with a strong prey instinct. Meaning, he is naturally inclined toward chasing and biting anything that moves fast and/or makes a high-pitched noise. A member of the shepherd family, Malinois instinctively display herding behaviors such as chasing and circling. The dog is most content with a full-time job, such as police or military work. It will excel at competitive sports but is not suitable as a family dog for toddlers who run and scream.

Building on the dog's impulse to chase and bite is not particularly complex, according to Kathryn Smith, who raises Malinois puppies for future police work. Smith starts building drive using leather puppy bite rags, hard rubber balls and knotted ropes. She produces so-called *green dogs*, without any obedience. Her only job is to encourage bite work and respect. The bond between the police officer and canine partner is extremely important, so obedience training doesn't start until they are paired.

Training happens early and often

Smith doesn't use treats in her training, but instead makes the puppies earn their daily allotment of kibble. That's where the training comes in. She says she teaches them right from wrong by rewarding desired behavior with pieces of kibble throughout the day. Everything the puppy wants has to be earned, from play-time to cuddles. If the puppy wants to play, he must be calm and attentive to her first. He is not allowed to simply bring a rope toy over and drop it in her lap. Instead, he must wait for her to initiate the tug session, which she regulates, then ends. When the puppy releases the rope or rag on command, he is rewarded with a bit of kibble for a job well-done. Control is very important. Smith is always in control and the puppies must respect her authority.

It's important to recognize that building prey drive is not equal to building aggression. The Malinois should be environmentally sound and be both people and dog-friendly under normal circumstances. Dogs can be trained to make decisions and it is imperative to teach them when it's appropriate to chase or bite, such as when a K-9 officer is chasing down a dangerous suspect.

Recognizing a strong prey drive

A Malinois dog with a strong prey drive loves to sniff the ground or air and gets excited by moving objects, like squirrels, bike riders or runners. You'll also see her stalk cats, other dogs or things in the grass, and she is likely to pounce on her toys when at play.

Training the Malinois

The Belgian Malinois will respond well to the use of treats and toys during the teaching phase. The trainer should be confident and firm and will find that, while easily motivated, the Mal is just as easily distracted by moving objects and high-pitched noises. Working obedience will be equally as important as bite work. The challenge will be in maintaining control with distractions. Work diligently on, and frequently review, basic obedience commands while slowly adding distractions. If the dog does not respond to a command it knows, there are probably too many distractions. Go back a step and work the command with fewer distractions before moving on.

A final word

The Belgian Malinois is independent and not easy to live with as a pet. It will bond well with its human only through mutual trust and respect. Bring in a professional trainer at the first sign that either aspect is damaged.