



# MAN'S MOST NOBLE ACHIEVEMENT

*by David Darlington*

Slave, protector, hunter, confident, food, no other animal claims more honors than the common dog. They have followed us on the hunt, in war, through starvation and plenty. Praised or cursed, the dog is an inseparable part of our existence and has been for 20,000 to 30,000 years.

Paradoxically, the dog's closest relative is the wolf, who has been vilified, hated, exterminated, and feared, and yet held in reverential awe. Like the wolf, a dog will spin around before laying down, trampling the tall grass buried deep in the primordial re-

cesses of his mind. From the wolf to the tiny Chihuahua, to the huge mastiff, all mark their territory: a wind-swept granite boulder, a corner of the house, a lowly bush, a tree, the neighbor's tire, and sometimes your favorite chair. No surprise that the dog and wolf share over 99.9% of their respective DNA and are biologically the same species.

Both are descended from a common ancestor that lived some 30,000 years ago. Interbreeding, continuing into the present, has kept their genetic relationship close, but with remarkable differ-

ences. Like the dog, wolves have been trained to obey commands and are incredibly intelligent; yet they never really become the loyal, loving, and obedient companion we expect our dog to be (From *Wolf to Dog*, by Virginia Morell. *Scientific American*, July 2015).

Ancient hunters brought wolf pups into camp as curiosities. As the pups grew, their allegiance focused on the man or the woman who fed them. Man naturally favored those individuals who were friendly and could be trusted. He allowed them near the fire on



*A black Labrador doing what they love best. Originating in Newfoundland as the St. Johns Water Dog, the ancestors of the Lab were used by fishermen to retrieve nets, lines, ropes, and even fish that had slipped from their hooks. By the late 1800's, the breed had been refined into the upland game dog, retriever, and family pet so popular today.*

cold winter nights, no different than we do today. Vicious, unpredictable animals were driven from camp or killed. Or an occasional wolf chose to hang around the outskirts of camp, cleaning up discarded scraps. Either way, they and their offspring entered a symbiotic relationship with man; clueless to the changes that relationship would bring.

Gradually, imperceptibly over many generations, subtle differences in behavior occurred. These ancestral dogs learned to depend on the wild game killed by man, and consequently shifted their allegiance from the alpha member of the pack to man the hunter. Man, in turn learned to depend on the dog to help in the hunt and guard camp. The keen

nose, ears, and speed of the dog complemented the stamina and intelligence of man.

However, these early dogs, less than a stone's throw from their brother the wolf, were not the pampered pets we love today. There are archaeological specimens in Wyoming and elsewhere of wolf/dog jaws where the canines were intentionally broken, presumably by their Native American masters.

Historic, Greenland Eskimos sometimes removed the canine teeth from their sled dogs with a hammer, breaking the tooth off just above the enamel base and then grinding the remaining stub smooth to prevent the dogs from chewing their seal skin tethers. Without their canines, these dogs

were less aggressive and safer to have around camp, nor could they effectively hunt on their own; becoming totally dependent on those who fed them.

Through time and in many different places, certain traits were encouraged, others discouraged. Short legs were bred to hunt badgers and long legs to run stags. Strong muscles were needed to pull sleds and carry packs. Thick, heavy coats were needed in the Arctic. Short, sleek hair was needed in the tropics. Where there was a need there were dogs bred to meet it.

Genetic memories propel black Labradors to retrieve oily ducks from frigid, icy waters; blue heelers to work cattle and sheep, and to heel the occasional guest. Blood hounds and many other breeds find lost children, illegal drugs, bombs, and even detect low blood sugar levels in diabetics. The list is long and remarkable, but to the dog there is nothing remarkable at all. He is merely responding to buried memories of the hunt and the sanctity of the pack now led by a man.

Just as remarkable, the dog's diet changed to match ours. Around 10,000 years ago man began to till the ground, perhaps by necessity to cope with a warmer, dryer world. Soon after, the first cities grew out of the desert, nourished by irrigated fields. Agriculture radically changed the diet of man; from one dominated by meat to one dominated by starchy grains. Meat, the primary diet of the wolf, was often scarce and highly desired, considered too valuable to feed to a mere dog. Subtle, genetic changes in

the dog's digestive tract allowed him to survive and thrive on the starchy food of man: cooked wheat, barley and rice in the old world, and corn in the new world.

But there is a dark side to man's partnership with the dog. The hunt is a little different from the battlefield. "The Dogs of War" is not just an idle saying. Throughout the world, throughout human history, man has bred dogs for war. Often as sentries, but also big, strapping dogs who could, and did wreak havoc among the enemy lines. Continuing long tradition, dogs were used with savage effect in the conquest of the New World by the Spanish conquistadors. Hernando

Cortés brought war dogs to conquer the Aztec of Mexico, where they were highly prized for their vicious pursuit of Indian men, women, and children.

Tales are told of feeding slain Aztec warriors to the dogs, piece by piece. Nursing babies were torn from their mother's breasts to placate the hunger of the Spanish dogs, and certainly the twisted minds of some conquistadors. Horrified, the mothers could only watch as their babies were devoured; terrible by any standard, even those of that time period. Historic records tell of a Spaniard, who in jest turned his dog loose on a poor, unsuspecting Aztec woman. Seeing the



*A Prehistoric dog skull and jaw showing the intentionally broken canines. Without their canines, the dog's bite is less lethal, making them unable to survive in the wild and dependent on their human masters.*



*Labrador blood trailers sometimes needed to find wounded elk or deer. It's no different than finding a downed pheasant in the tall grass or retrieving a duck from an impassible stand of cattails. Wyoming allows dogs to trail and find wounded big game provided they are on a leash. Even if the shot is good and the animal goes down right away, it can be hard to find in the never-ending big sagebrush that dominates the desert of southwestern Wyoming.*

dog racing after her, and fearing the cruel savagery of the beast, she fell on her knees and begged the dog to spare her. The vicious killer stopped, looked quizzically at the old woman, turned, and trotted away, disdainful of so pitiful a prey. But before passing judgment, remember, the Catholic Spanish had just waged a horrible, brutal war to drive the Muslim Moors from the Iberian Peninsula. A war that lasted intermittently for 800 years! Ruthless? Yes, but no more so than the Aztecs themselves.

Conquistador Francisco de Penalosa had a magnificent war dog whom he valued very highly. Cortés sent Penalosa and a small party of men to the unconquered town of Michoacán. The Chief of Michoacan invited the Spaniards into town. He entertained his guests for eighteen days with



*A yellow Labrador: companion, hunter, confidant,  
and certainly man's most noble achievement.*

feasts and human sacrifices. At the end of those eighteen days the chief presented Penalosa and his party with a proposal. They wanted Penalosa's dog for one more sacrifice or else they would offer Penalosa and his men instead. The Michoacán's numbered 20,000-armed warriors to four Castilians, 20 Indian interpreters and servants. They were hardly a match.

With great reluctance, Penalosa gave up his beloved dog and watched as his loyal companion was stretched across the sacrificial altar. Fearful and whining, the dog's chest was ripped open and his beating heart offered to the gods with the invocation "now, with your own life you will pay for the death of so many that you have slain, and you will kill no more." The altar was caked red with the blood of hundreds of enemy warriors captured in battle and sacrificed by the Michoacans. They respected the dog as

they might an enemy warrior, and for that reason sacrificed it too.

There have been many other dogs that have died in the service of their master. Some for noble causes, some not. But for the dog there are none of the philosophical concerns that bother men. What they do comes from the heart, out of loyalty to the man who feeds and trains them. The child-devouring beasts of the conquistadors and the pug-nosed Pekinese share the same loyalty and devotion to their master. No other animal comes close.

We spend millions of dollars on our canine friends, giving them privileges we would never grant another human being. How many of us allow our best buddy, or even our wife to lick our face? They comfort us in time of sorrow and are a safe-haven from the cares of the world. They share our joys and triumphs and are the most loyal of our friends; often our only friend when friends are

needed most. Dogs lower blood pressure and prolong the life of their master or mistress. The mere responsibility of taking care of a dog gives life meaning for lonely souls without friends or family. A dog is always ecstatic to see us; he does not care what the world thinks of us. Without trying, dogs teach young children to be kind, generous, and caring, and reinforce those values in adults when we forget.

They have an incredible ability to sense danger, good intentions, evil intentions, anger, and frustration, and are far better judges of people than we are. When your dog speaks to you, listen, it may save your life. Dogs are truly man's best friend and our most noble and worthy achievement. Nothing else can compare; except maybe the love of a good woman and the admiration of our grandchildren. If we have all three we are truly blessed. DD