

Faithful as a Fila or Fearful Fila

By Outrageous Shadow Filas

“Courage, determination and outstanding braveness are part of its characteristics,” yes, that is what you read in the breed standard. There seems to be a problem however. Apparently my fila puppy did not read the standard!! You have heard so much about the Filas courage, yet here sits your chicken in a Fila suit, feathers proudly sprouting all over his young body! Your Fila goes through times of absolute confidence and you are lulled back into that feeling of security. Then, out of no where, there they go at a full run away from a noise, a movement or perhaps it was even you that caused them to panic! Anxiety comes rushing back. My Fila is not normal!! The breeder has sent me a fila pup with a weak nervous system.

Not to worry. Most likely all is normal with your fila. Yes, there are those filas who do not possess a correct nervous system. This condition is not normal nor is it very prevalent within the breeding programs of ethical breeders. If, after reading this article in it's entirety, you can with certainty say that your fila is NOT going through a fearful period, then please refer to a professional trainer or dog psychologist who is actively working with filas for a formal evaluation of the stability of your filas nervous system.

That having been said, let's take a moment and evaluate the potential causes which promote the existence of fearful periods which occur in dogs in general and in filas specifically throughout the growth process. There are very real physiological changes which occur during the maturing process which in turn trigger chemical changes throughout the body. Teething, rapid growth spurts, and sexual maturity are just a few of those changes. There are also those changes which occur externally that have the same powerful affect as the physiological changes. Some examples of these changes within the structure of the pack and the over all mind set of the owner.

It should be noted at this point, the very real significance that the owner, their position within the pack, their mind set, and their reactions to the fearful period plays in the outcome of their mature fila's level of confidence. It is within the power of the owner to either be a benefit or a detriment to their dog during these fearful periods. Just as a parent has the ability to shape their child's confidence, so to, the dog owner possess' that very same ability. It is of the utmost importance that the owner exhibit strong leadership during these periods. This in turn will give the dog confidence, a sense of acceptance by the pack leader, and establish boundary settings.

There are a few varying schools of thought on the fearful periods that a fila (and most breeds of dog) go through as they stride toward maturity. The first school of thought on fearful periods is held by behaviorist/dog psychologists/breeders/trainers who believe that there are specific intervals relating to chronological age, during which these stages occur. For example, a common behaviorist belief is that the first fearful period occurs between 8 and 11 weeks of age and the second period occurs between 6 and 12 months of age. Keep in mind that these individuals do not go by the exact chronological age, but have set these ages as a general guideline for when the fearful periods will occur.

- Tuck the tail and stand shaking.
- Tuck the tail and run to some place they view as safe.
- Barking over the shoulder while quickly retreating.

The set of reactions below are some that might be observed while the dog is on a leash or restrained in some manner.

- Hiding behind owner/handler
- Running to the end of the leash away from the source causing the fear.
- Barking while backing up.
- Tucking the tail and squatting on the ground. (sometimes if the source of the fear intensifies or does not cease and the dog feels trapped, they will urinate)
- Become frantic when the dog discovers they cannot escape the leash and the source of their fear.

Now that we have made note of the types of reactions that we can expect from the dogs, let's consider what a typical reaction on the part of the owner would be. While out on a walk you witness your puppy exhibiting one or more of the signs of fearful behavior. Instinctively you reach down to lovingly stroke your dog and offer soothing words to comfort and calm him. **WRONG!!** Actually, this is the most common reaction that we as dog owners have when we see our beloved companions trembling with fear. It is our nature as nurturing beings to immediately seek to offer comfort.

I can see the questions that are even now twirling about in your head, "How can this action be wrong? Shouldn't I offer comfort to assure my filia that all is well?" In actuality, this is one of the worst actions you could choose to take. Take heart, for you are not alone in this. If a formal study was conducted among trainers and dog behaviorists, we believe that this study would reflect that this is the one mistake that is made most often by dog owners. The reality is that this course of action would be fine with humans but is actually detrimental to dogs. We must teach ourselves to consider the behavior of our dogs within the context of pack behavior. Dogs have a unique way of communicating with each other and it is of utmost importance that we learn how to effectively duplicate this method of communication so that our dogs are correctly interpreting the messages we are sending. It is important to know that dogs would interpret this particular method of comfort, as a positive reinforcement that their fearful behavior was correct. Effectively accomplishing exactly opposite what we intended!!

Having established that comfort is not what our filias need during the fearful periods they will experience; let's establish guidelines for appropriate reinforcement. Our goal is to diminish the intensity and frequency of the fearful reactions while increasing the level of our filias confidence both in them and in us as pack leaders. A phrase which is used often by the well known dog psychologist Caesar Milan is "calm assertiveness". The use of the word calm denotes tranquility as well as a lack of agitation or excitement. Assertiveness is being used here to mean "positive or confident in a persistent manner." Over time, it has become our belief that no two words could more accurately describe the characteristic that needs to be displayed consistently by the owner, but even more importantly during fearful periods, than that of calm assertiveness.

Listed below you will find a compilation of various training methods as well as behavioral reinforcements. We believe that you will find when implementing the training methods daily or at a minimum weekly, it is likely that the occurrences of fearful periods will be greatly reduced in frequency, duration, and/or intensity.

TRAINING METHODS

1. Exercise-Dogs were not meant to be immobile creatures. A daily walk of 20-45 minutes will do many things for your fila. Benefits will range from good health, confidence, and excess energy relieved, as well as increasing the filas trust in you, the owner. These walks should not be explorations or bathroom breaks but should instead focus on maintaining a brisk pace with your fila at your side or slightly behind. Following this will ensure maximum benefits from your walk.
2. Obedience-All dogs, most especially the fila, should have a good grasp of basic obedience commands. This would include: sit, sit stay, down, down stay, heel, come, and stand. Having your dog competent in basic obedience not only builds your dogs confidence but makes ownership that much more joyful. If you do not possess the knowledge to teach your fila basic obedience, then research the available dog trainers in your local area. Do not be afraid to “interview” the trainers and find out which one has a working knowledge of the Fila Brasileiro or other protection breeds. It is also important that you feel your trainer will work well with you and your dog. Group classes have their pros and cons. Whether a group obedience class will be appropriate for you and your fila will depend on your fila, the level of your filas ojeriza, the group instructor, and the group settings. This is very individualized for each dog. You know your dog and have the ability to determine what makes up a good learning atmosphere for you both.
3. Agility-Consider the possibility of working your fila on basic agility movements at a public or a private facility. Agility is a proven confidence builder as well as great fun for both you and your fila. Please keep in mind the slow growth of your fila and do not participate in any consistent jumping or agility work until after the age of one. Working at low heights in addition to working infrequently (2-3 times a month) should not have any ill effects on your growing baby.
4. Tracking-Tracking when done in conjunction with a Search and Rescue type group can be rewarding on many different levels. In addition to honing your fila’s natural abilities, think of the great sense of service and accomplishment you will feel should you ever have the opportunity to put you and your filas skills to work!!
5. Public Work-Working on your obedience, agility, and tracking in public areas will teach your fila to trust you in a variety of situations. When you and your fila are in areas that contain people who are strangers to your dog, have a variety of breeds of dog present, with a required behavior, this intensifies the level of trust between the two of you. This is also a great opportunity in which to develop new ways to of communicating that will further build the bond you share.

BEHAVIORAL REINFORCEMENTS

1. Boundary-It is necessary that you establish boundaries for your filia. These boundaries should be communicated in a clear, concise manner. Once you have established these boundaries, it is important to be consistent in the enforcing and re-enforcing of said boundaries.
2. Discipline-All dogs will need discipline at times. It is vitally important that the discipline be administered in a prompt fashion and in an appropriate manner. Discipline that is not carried out within 5-10 seconds of the infraction occurring will serve no purpose other than to pacify you. Discipline should be appropriate to the offense and delivered in a calm manner. Angry screaming will not have the desired effect of teaching your filia that his behavior was inappropriate.
3. Fairness-Fairness is simply what it appears to be. Training, boundaries, and discipline should always be fair in relation to the pack mentality of dogs. We cannot relate to our dogs as humans but must deal with them as the leader of a pack of dogs would. If we will handle them in this manner, then we set ourselves, as well as our dogs, up for a successful relationship.
4. Consistency-Consistency means "holding always to the same principals or practices." This cannot be emphasized enough! If you are consistent in all you do with your filia, you both will find great joy. Not only will you have an obedient dog who loves your company, but you will also see that dog mature to be very willing and confident in all that you ask.
5. Do Not Ask-Do not ask for things at which your dog cannot possibly succeed. If you place tasks before your dog which are not possible, then you take away their confidence. Just as your confidence grows when you succeed, so too, will that of your filia.

The behavioral reinforcements used in conjunction with the training methods are pivotal to having a confident dog at any age. This becomes especially vital to dogs that are becoming fearful for whatever reason. Whether this fearfulness is from mishandling (even when done in innocence), trauma, or physiological changes, holding to these axioms will place you in a position for success. Just remember that you never feed fear by rewarding anxious, fearful behavior. This statement is equally true for any unwanted behavior.

It is when we observe fearful reactions to those things which we feel our filias should be accepting of, or familiar with, that often times the questions regarding the stability of their nervous system or the correct confidence inherent to the filia, become prevalent in our minds. Before coming to any conclusions regarding the lack of confidence in your filia, let us examine the complete picture being presented. It is of great importance that we consider all aspects of the following:

- Are we, as the owner, the pack leader?
- Has the communication with your filia been within the realm of pack behavior?
- What stage of maturity applies to your filia currently?

- Have we provided training and behavioral reinforcement when appropriate and in an appropriate manner?
- Are the fearful reactions consistent or do they vary from situation to situation?

As much as we would like to completely enable you to accurately assess your dog and its behavior, it is just not possible within the scope of one article to teach all the nuances involved in dog behavior/psychology. It is our considered opinion that within these pages we have provided you with accurate tools and information to assist you in making an informed decision. If there still remain serious doubts and/or questions regarding your filas confidence, please seek out a professional trainer or psychologist which actively works with the Fila Brasileiro breed to assist you in obtaining an accurate assessment.

There does exist the occasion in which owners may not think their fila have experienced any fearful periods. This is due in part to the owner's instinctive ability and/or knowledge in dealing with their fila. Not all dogs experience fearful periods with the same degree of intensity, thus leaving the impression that they may not have experienced them at all.

Outrageous Shadow Filas extends their sincerest hope that you and your fila will walk a path that is confident, rewarding, and overflowing with the unwavering faithfulness and love that only being owned by a Fila can bring.

We leave you with this quote from a wise woman who has shown excellence in the training, raising, and breeding of the Fila Brasileiro; always conducting herself with the highest of ethical standards.

“It is all about respect and trust. You cannot have it without earning it and you cannot keep it without re-enforcing it.”

Dawna Berg Bancroft