

## **Understanding the Fila Temperament**

**By Minida Dowdy, SouthLand Farms Fila Brasileiro**

Trying to understand the unique temperament of the Fila is difficult without having experienced it first hand. Trying to explain that temperament to someone else can be an almost impossible task! I have written this in hopes of explaining it to you and at the same time clarifying the temperament in my own mind. I don't claim to know everything about the breed, I can only say that I have owned Fila Brasileiro since 1987. They are the most unique of all dog breeds that I have ever owned or experienced. I have owned Fila of all ranges of temperaments and I have developed this explanation based on my own personal experiences with the breed. I hope you find it useful.

I divide the Fila temperament into 4 basic groups—any particular Fila can fall somewhere within the range or one of the groups, but most will be primarily in one of these 4 categories:

### **GROUP 1:**

Group I dogs have the full and correct temperament of the Fila. The correct temperament is composed of two parts which are defined in the breed standard as 1) OJERIZA (the dislike/hatred of strangers) along with 2) DEFENSE or guarding ability. Both parts of the temperament are first and foremost genetic, but training and socialization can condition the display of both Ojeriza and Defense. The Ojeriza portion of the temperament drives the dog to avoid contact with people they do not know. The dog is not interested in seeking attention/petting/treats from strangers. They either shy away from the touch of a stranger or react more strongly to the point of biting or attempting to bite strangers who try to touch them or to drive the strangers off their territory. This reaction or the degree of reaction is tempered by various factors including the age of the dog, the degree of training and socialization they have received, and the natural strength of the ojeriza drive the dog has. Young pups may start out by just moving out of the reach of someone trying to pet them—with the reaction of “yuck, I don't want you to touch me!” People often misconstrue this reaction in young puppies to indicate “shyness” in a dog, but it really is not. It is simply a natural, innate desire of the dog to avoid contact with strangers. This reaction will continue to develop until the mature dog reacts with strong hatred and often snaps/bites the offending hand (more of a “how DARE you try to touch me!” reaction). "Ojeriza" is what makes the fila different from all other breeds.

Training and socialization do not eliminate the natural born ojeriza in a Fila, it just directs and controls the display of it. My adult dogs still retain the ojeriza they were born with. Training/socialization gives me the control to take them into public situations, dog shows, vets office, etc. without them constantly lunging at people or acting out of control. I can even command them to "stand" and they will accept (albeit grudgingly and grumbling) the touch of a stranger (judge, vet, etc). Make no mistake, the dogs do NOT LIKE the touch/attention, but they accept it because I asked them to. Their desire to please me will overpower their dislike of having to accept this request of me. Remember, just because they have been trained to respond to my command of “stand” does not mean that they will be “social” and accept the petting/ attention of the stranger outside of the ring or

once released from the “stand” command. I do NOT believe Ojeriza can be "socialized out"! In addition, would never allow the dogs to be touched without having my hand on their muzzle. No matter how much they have been trained the dogs simply DONT LIKE the touch of a stranger . Since I cannot anticipate every move of the stranger around the dogs, it is best to keep a safe hold on the muzzle to avoid an accidental dog bite. I have seen too many “dog professionals” (judges, vets, etc) do stupid things around my dogs including excessive eye contact, over handling the dog, grabbing the mouth or testicles of the dogs. These things are just too much for the Fila with strong ojeriza to accept.

In addition to the Ojeriza, the second component of the temperament is the dog’s natural desire to guard or DEFEND. This part of the temperament is linked to BONDING more than to training. A dog with strong defense when threatened guards against (going so far to attack) the "threat". This is the part of the temperament you see during the temperament test when the “bad guy” threatens the dog with the stick. It is also displayed when strangers enter the dog’s area -- the dogs try to keep you OUT of their home/ areas. The stronger the dog is bonded to a person or an area, the stronger the desire for the dog to defend that person/ area from intrusion by strangers. It is usually true the smaller the area being defended, the stronger the display—so that if the dog is inside the crate, inside the car, inside a small dog run the defense display will be much stronger than when the dog is inside a large yard or outside the home on a leash. Training and socialization will increase the overall confidence of the dog. The higher the confidence level and the “bolder” the dog ‘s attitude, the stronger the defense may be. Socialization gives the dog a point of reference to what is considered “normal” and OK to both the dog and the owner. Training (especially obedience training) gives the owner more control over the actions of the dog. Training the dog to “OUT” ( to stop an attack) or to re-direct the dog’s guarding behavior is the responsibility of the owner. Responsible owners do not allow their dog to become an uncontrolled menace of society. Responsible owners also encourage their dog to learn the difference between true threats and “normal” things in the world around them. I teach my dogs “that’s enough” command, which basically gives the dog a chance to “warn” me of something the dog sees as a threat and alert (growl , bark, etc) but once I say “that’s enough” I expect the dog to settle down. In this situation, I have determined **that I do not** see the situation as a threat, even if the **dog** may alert. I expect the dog to respond to my training and settle down.

The Fila that is high in GROUP 1 (strong Ojeriza, strong Defense) is the "easy " fila to own because you KNOW to be careful ALL THE TIME! You know exactly how your dog is going to react-- **fast and furious!**

To be correctly tempered according to the standard, the Fila should have both the Ojeriza and the Defense portions of the temperament.

## **GROUP II:**

Group II temperament Fila do not have the strong Ojeriza of Group I Fila. Their weak ojeriza may range from just ignoring strangers who enter the property to an extreme lack of Ojeriza shown in a dog who actively seeks attention/petting/treats from strangers. I believe Ojeriza is mostly an inherited trait and puppies that lack strong ojeriza will display this from the start. With just a minimal amount of socialization, they are just

naturally "people friendly" kind of dogs. Do not be deceived, the dog that lacks ojeriza may still retain the GUARDING/ DEFENSE portion of the temperament instincts and will actively defend home/property with the slightest provocation. This is not the desired temperament (according to the breed standard). The dog may still pass the TT because they DO defend. The GROUP II Fila is the one that often gets fila owners in trouble. It is easy to be "casual" around these dogs-- owners "forget" their dog is A FILA because they seem "OK" with people ...until the stranger does something the dog perceives as a threat!! then BOOM! the dog has reacted in defense and has bitten the offender. This is probably the most difficult of the Fila to own because owners are lulled into a false sense of security with how "safe" their dog is. This is also the dog that can be a bad ambassador of the breed because it gives the wrong impression to newcomers to the Fila world—that the dogs can (or should be) "people friendly" AND still be a guardian. Group II dogs often end up in rescue because it eventually bites someone "for no reason". "For no reason" actually means the owner just got too casual with the dog and the "stranger" does something "aggressive" the dog reacts to—remember, the fila still reacts to perceived threats (eye contact, aggressive body language, entering the property or moving rapidly or unexpectedly etc) because it retains the DEFENSE portion of the temperament.

A perfect example of a Group II dog that ended up in rescue was a dog who was fairly social with people. The family would introduce a (sitting) stranger to the dog inside their house. Once the dog had sniffed them with encouragement from the family, the dog ignored the stranger and the family felt it was then OK to have that person inside the home. The dog has "accepted" them. The father-in-law had come to visit for a few days and the dog was fairly accepting of him inside the home until one afternoon the dog attacked him "for no reason" the wife had reported to me. On further questioning of the situation, the story unfolded that the family had purchased a new set of bunk beds for the kids and the father-in-law was helping to assemble them in the child's bedroom. The man picked up a hammer to pound the assembly peg into the frame of the bed when the fila grabbed the man's arm and bit him. The wife was in shock that the dog had attacked the man "for no reason" and now they were afraid to keep the dog because he might attack the children or other family members.

To me it was very clear what happened. The dog saw the situation of the "stranger" (the father-in-law who was visiting) picking up a "weapon" (the hammer) and starting to attack the family (pounding the bed frame). The dog's reaction was that of a "normal" fila defending his home and children from "attack" by this man with a hammer! The family did not truly understand the temperament of the fila and would not keep the dog after the attack—the father-in-law insisted the dog had to GO!

### **GROUP III:**

This temperament Fila lacks both the ojeriza and guarding instincts of the breed. Members of this group are nothing more than big, friendly dogs that come in a body that "looks" like a fila. If you own a Fila from this group, you might as well own a Labrador or golden retriever or mutt. They make fine pets, but do not depend on them to defend your home or property. During a temperament test, they just stand there wagging their tail or looking at the "bad guy" like he has lost his mind. They might try a bark or growl, but their heart is not in it, others may even attempt to play with the agitator as a friend. These

“fila” are easy to own because they like people and they aren’t likely to bite anyone. “Friendly fila” should never be used for breeding and owners should go to great lengths to explain that their dog is NOT typical of the breed to anyone inquiring about the Fila so as not to create a false impression of the breed.

#### **GROUP IV:**

These fila retain the OJERIZA-- they do not want to be touched by strangers-- but they lack either the confidence or strength of nerve to maintain the DEFENSE/ GUARDING instincts. When faced with a threat at home (or on a TT) they will cower (or, if able, RUN) --leaving the owner holding an empty leash. These are often "fence dogs" which put up a great display of "aggression" when behind the safety of their fence (or standing behind the leg of the owner) but once the "safety net" is removed, the dog will “chicken out” and bolt. You will often see a Group IV Fila hide behind the owner during the TT, refuse to step forward, and defend against the "bad guy" (although they might bark/growl from behind the owner).

It is easy to confuse this reaction with that of a very young dog who HAS the instinct to guard, but lacks confidence to come out, given time and maturity this young dog will mature into a correct fila. Compare that with the reaction in an older dog who lacks correct temperament; it is easy to see in an older dog, watch the head/ear posture as well as the tell-tell sign of the tail tucked under the belly of the dog. Confident, correct Fila will display tails and ears are erect and up and whose attention is focused on dealing with the threat, not focused on trying to find an escape away from the threat

A good agitator will be able to draw out a young dog, but a dog who lacks guarding instinct will not come out. Dogs which lack guarding instinct keep trying to escape and will often put as much distance between themselves and the "bad guy" as the cable/leash will allow-- even leaving the owner open to attack by the "bad guy". The most extreme of these dogs will actually go "belly up" or urinate on themselves. If they were given the leash and the freedom to attack they would not take advantage of it but rather chose to run or to hide behind the owner.

The GROUP IV dog will often become sharp/shy and will bite out of fear if cornered. If the agitator has to "chase the dog down" to the end of the cable to get him to bite the sleeve, this is not correct. The standard clearly says the correct action on the part of the dog is to STEP FORWARD and defend the owner. This dog is not a candidate for breeding nor should the owner put too much faith in the defense of the dog as he is likely to leave you stranded if you are trusting him to actually protect you in the face of a real danger... but he will keep most people out simply by barking at the fence, he can put on a good show. Depending on how extreme the delicate nerves of the dog may be, the dog is a candidate for “turning on” or attack its own family members out of fear or frustration. In my opinion, the type IV dog is a time bomb and dogs with extreme type IV temperaments should be euthanized. It may seem harsh, but it is not worth the risk of having your human family members bitten by this type of dog.

I have been asked how the general population of Fila divide into one of the 4 groups. It is difficult to say exactly, but from dogs I have had direct experience with I would say that

only about 60% would have GROUP I -- correct fila balance of both Ojeriza and Defense instincts. Group II dogs seem to be the most rapidly growing category as breeders are breeding more and more away from Ojeriza to a more "social" fila. About 30% of the dogs I have seen in the recent years would fall into this category—little Ojeriza, but still retain the desire to defend. Group III fila --those who are just big, friendly dogs—would be about 8% of the general population. The last 2% (and thankfully a small minority) would be the sharp/shy or fear biters, and even fewer still are true "basket case" dogs which are extreme in weak nerves and temperament.

I have personally owned dogs that would fall within Group I, II, III, but never a Group IV. I see Groups II and III being fast growth groups and Group I losing ground. I don't see that many Group IV dogs, but the ones I have seen leave a lasting memory! I guess they are mostly left at home because the owners can't do much with them or are embarrassed or afraid to bring them into public. I have seen a whole lot of dogs recently which "just don't have it"-- Group III dogs-- no ojeriza and no guarding. I have seen several breeders over the years trying to produce "friendly fila", so I guess they are succeeding... too bad for the breed.

In America, temperament is one of the hardest things to live with -- and as I have said, I believe it is genetic. If you breed Fila of weak temperament, their pups (or at least most of them) will be weak. You will hear people talking about certain bloodlines as being "best" for temperament-- just more proof that temperament is mostly genetic with control/display moderated by training and socialization. If you find a dog in group III-- its not uncommon to find many related dogs are also group III's even if they were all raised/trained differently... same with Group I and II. Group IV's are less common and tend to just crop up randomly as "throwbacks", or may have developed from harsh abuse.

I would be curious to hear how others rate the general population across the US. For me its getting hard to find a correct temperament group 1 dog (ojeriza + guard) especially when you try to also match it with good type and sound structure!

Happy Hunting

**High  
Ojeriza**

**Group I**

**Group IV**

**High defense  
Low defense**

**Group II**

**Group III**

**Low  
Ojeriza**