

# Signs of Stress in Competition HTM and Freestyle



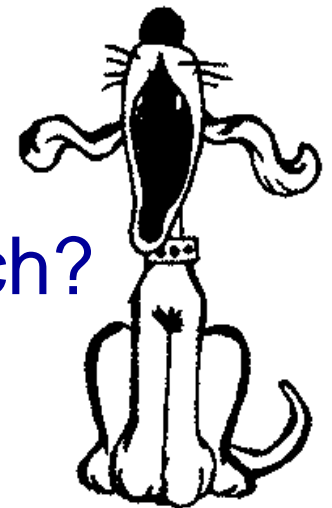
# Ambition vs. Reality

- In competitive sports with dogs we plan toward the ideal performance
- HTM/Freestyle is a show sport
  - Perfect performance
  - Style and charisma
- However, our dogs don't always perform the way we would like them to.....for a number of different reasons



# Why Do Dogs...?

- Have difficulty staying focused during the performance of an HTM or Freestyle program?
- Sometimes not respond to the handler's cues?
- Whine or bark?
- Display hectic behavior?
- Tune out, sniff the ground or scratch?
- Lick lips/nose, move slowly?
- ...



# Calming Signals

- The term calming signals is used to describe several types of behavior
  - Deliberate communication aimed at another dog/a person
  - Expression of internal emotional state
  - Displacement behavior
- Nose/lip lick, head turn, yawning, blinking, paw lift, turn body away, ground sniff, scratching, freeze (or slow movement), smile, walk in arc, playbow



# Calming Signals

- Calming signals are displayed in a number of situations and at different levels of arousal
  - Friendly social interaction
  - Tense meetings
  - Conflicting motivation (displacement behavior)
  - Resource guarding
  - During training (pressure/concentration)
  - Direct conflict with another dog where the intention is not to harm the “opponent”



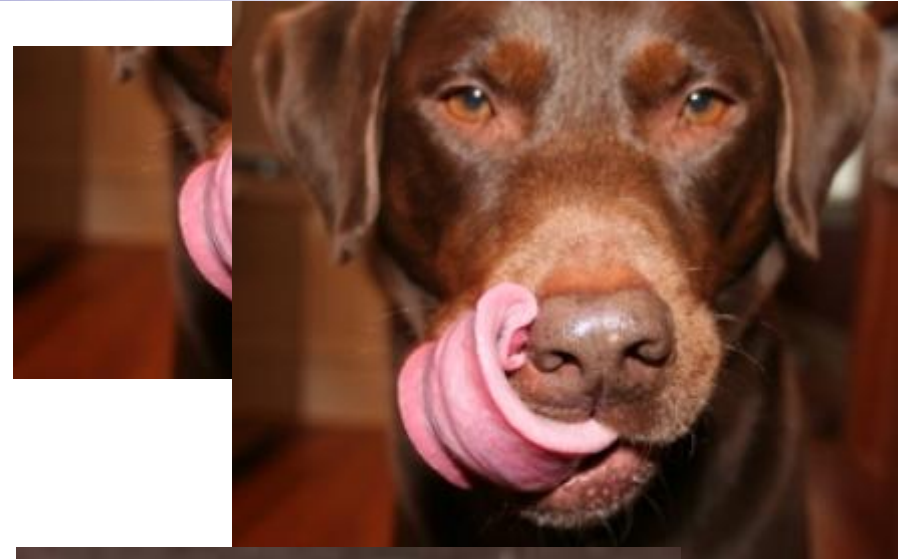
# Canine Communication

- Not all canine behavior has a receiver
- We can distinguish between
  - Deliberate communication – aimed at a receiver (dog/person)
  - Expressions of an inner emotional state – do not have a receiver
- We are not looking for calming signals but rather for signs of stress when we look at the behavior of dogs in competition



# “Reading” Dog Behavior

- Rule number 1 when looking at dog behavior
- Always look at the whole dog
- Look at the behavior in the context in which it is displayed



# Stress



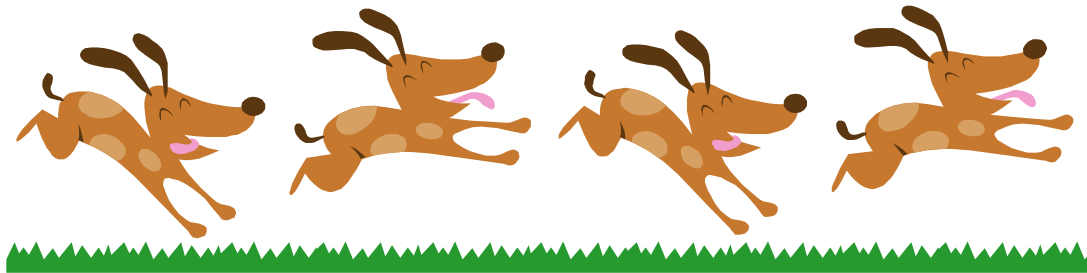


# Competing Is Stressful

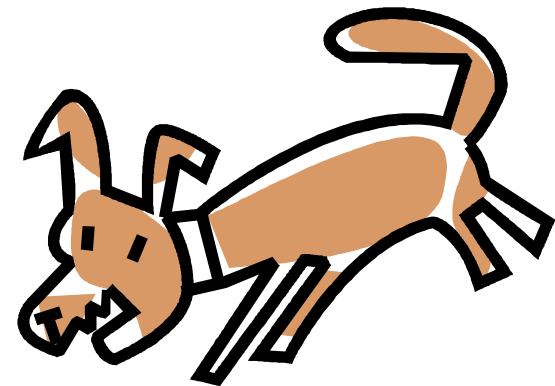
- Competition performance will always entail a certain measure of stress for the dog (and handler)
- This is not a bad thing in itself
- Depends on the kind of stress the dog experiences



# Stress



- Stress is a survival strategy
- A product of evolution
- Increases the individual's chance of survival
- The stress response prepares the body to be physically active
- Increased ability to cope with a situation that requires an extra effort



# Two Types of Stress

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- Eustress
  - Short-term release of moderate levels of adrenaline and cortisol
  - Increase in physical fitness, ability to learn and perform
- Distress
  - High intensity and long-term release of stress hormones
  - Decrease in ability to learn and to perform known behavior
  - Chronic stress

# Two Types of Stress

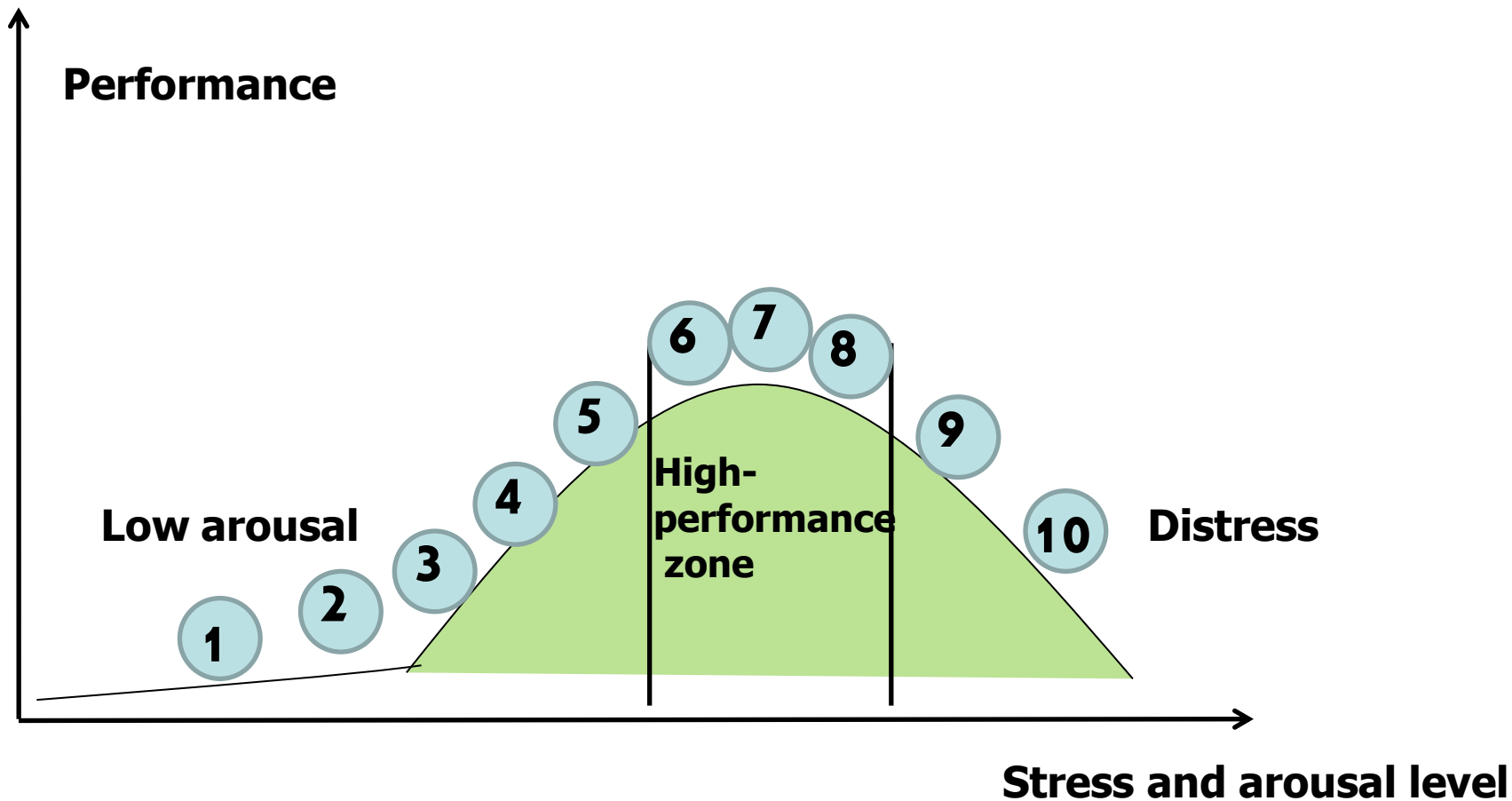
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- Eustress is the good kind of stress
  - A “here and now” response
  - The stressing situation ends and the dog returns to a relaxed state
- Distress is the bad kind of stress
  - Chronic state
  - Does not end
  - May be caused by fear (e.g. punishment-based training), unpredictability, chronic pain, etc.

# Control vs. Unpredictability

- Training/competition leads to eustress if...
  - The dog is trained with positive reinforcement
  - The dog is not required to perform beyond its capacity
    - Leads to a sense of control/empowerment
- Training/competition leads to distress if...
  - The dog is trained with punishment
  - Trainer feedback is unpredictable
  - The dog is pushed to perform beyond its capacity
    - Leads to a sense of disempowerment

# High-performance zone



# Signs of Stress



# Signs of Stress

- The signs of stress that dogs display during training/show performance are primarily an expression of the dog's inner emotional state
- Are not directed at the handler





# Signs of Stress

General reason – emotional response –  
due to being under pressure

Stress/  
discomfort

Hectic behavior  
Excessive panting  
Does not respond to cues  
Nose/lip lick, ground sniff,  
scratching, slow movement

Frustration

Vocalization:  
Whining  
Barking

Fear

Escape/  
flight  
Avoidance

# Stress and Discomfort

- Hectic behavior
- Excessive panting
- Does not respond to cues
- Nose/lip lick, ground sniff, scratching, slow movement



# Hectic Behavior



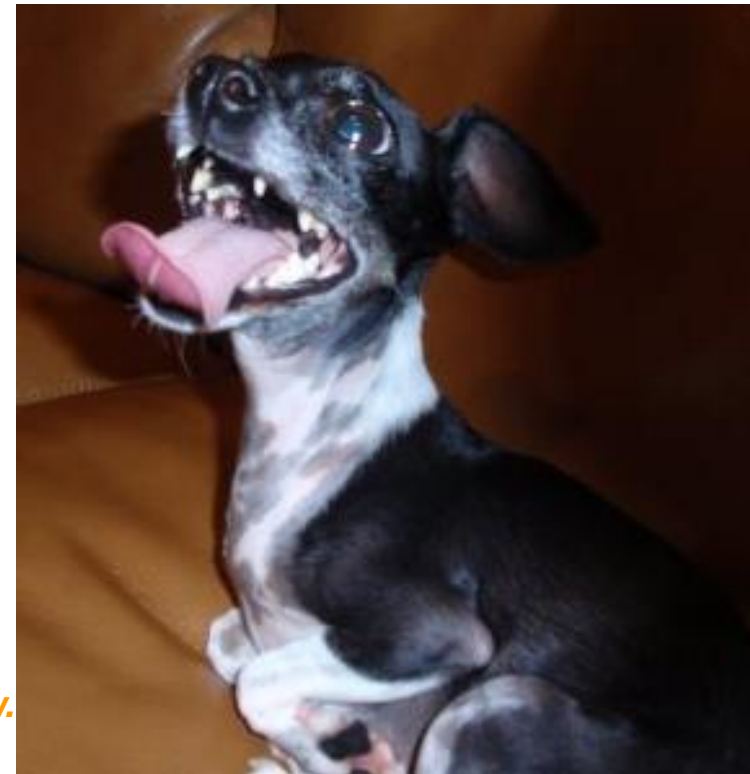
- Fine line between intensity and stress
- High intensity behavior does not necessarily indicate that the dog is happy
- Important to distinguish between high intensity
  - Due to enthusiasm
  - Due to stress



# Excessive Panting



- Many dogs pant during HTM/Freestyle performance
- Panting has several causes
  - The dog is hot
  - The dog is stressed
  - The dog is fearful



# Does Not Respond to Cues



- There can be different reasons why dogs don't respond to the handler's cues during performance
  - The behavior is not trained properly
  - The behavior is not generalized properly
  - The dog is distracted
  - The dog is stressed



# “Calming Signals”



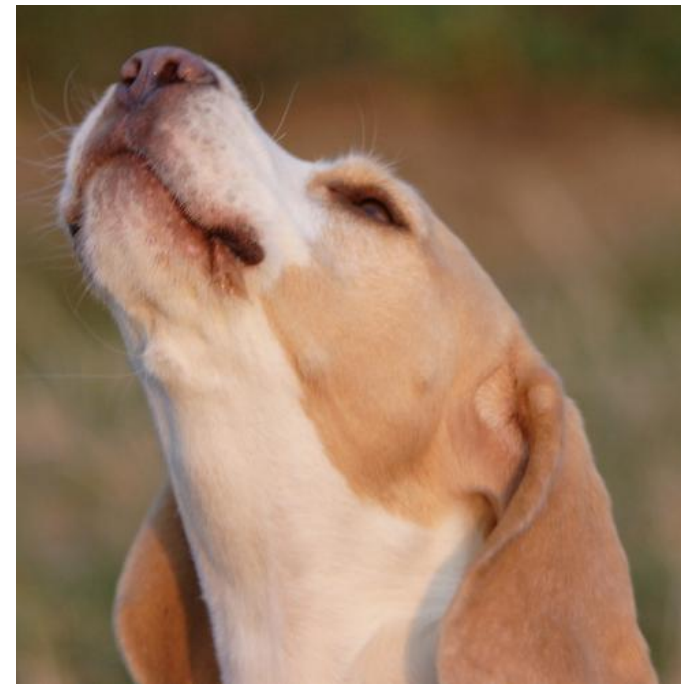
- In HTM/Freestyle we see displays of certain behaviors that are often identified as calming signals
- In this context they are probably primarily an expression of the dog's inner emotional state
  - Nose/lip lick
  - Ground sniff
  - Scratching
  - Slow movement



# Frustration



- Dogs often vocalize during competition performance
  - Whining
  - Barking
- Different reasons
  - Enthusiasm
  - Frustration (lack of reinforcement)
  - Stress (due to pressure)



# Fear



- We rarely see displays of fear in dogs in HTM/Freestyle competition
- Still important to recognize the behavior
  - Escape/flight and avoidance
  - Dog cowers, keeps a distance to handler, runs away
- Causes
  - Traumatic experiences
  - Punishment-based training





# The Happy Performer



- Sparkle and charisma
- Enthusiasm
- Dog is in control
- Good contact between dog and handler
- A happy performer does not necessarily work with very high intensity
- Intensity must reflect enthusiasm – not distress

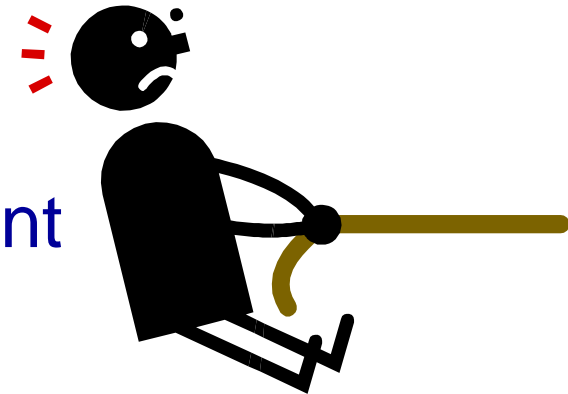


# Reasons



# Reasons

- Competing can become overly stressful for the dog for a number of reasons
  - Training method
  - Generalization
  - Reducing rate of reinforcement
  - Dog's personality
  - Dog's competition experience
  - Handler's behavior during competition
  - Traveling
  - Competition environment



# Training Method

- Training method is important
- Influences the dog's emotional experience of the interaction with the handler
  - Positive reinforcement/  
extinction (clicker training)
  - Negative reinforcement/  
positive punishment



# Training Method

- What drives the dog's motivation?
  - Gaining access to something attractive
  - Avoiding something unpleasant
- The two strategies do not go well together
- Aversive stimulation overrules reinforcement



# Training Method

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- Long road from the first idea to a complete HTM/Freestyle program
  - A step by step process
  - All behaviors in the program must be trained to completion separately
  - Gradual process of chaining behaviors
  - Working to music
- Undue pressure is put on the dog if it is required to perform before the final program is trained to completion

# Generalization

- Generalization of learned behavior is extremely important if the dog is expected to perform at competitions
- Big difference between working in a known environment and at a competition
- Trained behaviors may fall apart if they are not properly generalized



# Reducing Rate of Reinforcement

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- An important part of the training process is reducing the rate of reinforcement
- An HTM/Freestyle program is performed without the use of primary reinforcers
- The dog must be able to perform the entire program without reinforcement
- If reinforcement has not been phased out properly, the dog becomes frustrated and stressed



# Dog's Personality

- Some dogs are more sensitive than others and more influenced by various kinds of pressure
- “Soft” or sensitive dogs are more easily stressed or frightened
- Outgoing dogs with a more robust personality are often less affected by the environment



# Dog's Competition Experience

- Competing is a learning process
- For dogs and handlers alike
- Novice dogs are more likely to become stressed by the environment at competitions
- Experienced dogs with a long learning and reinforcement history are less likely to be affected by unexpected events or new impressions



# Handler's Behavior



- The handler is often nervous before and during a competition
- Behavior is different from handler's regular everyday behavior
- Puts pressure on the dog
- May cause handler's cues to appear different



# Traveling

- Traveling and staying in a new location is always stressful – even when the dog is used to it
- Dogs spend a lot of energy coping with their surroundings when they are on the road
- Also when they are not performing



# Competition Environment

- The location where the competition is held may hold a lot of new impressions for the dog
- Distractions and disturbances
- Puts extra pressure on the dog when it is required to perform



# A Behavioral Point of View

- Looking at HTM/Freestyle from a behavioral perspective
- Is the level of stress acceptable?
- Eustress or distress?
- Is the dog happy and eager or hectic and under undue pressure?



# A Behavioral Point of View

- Look at the dog during the slow parts of the program
- Signs of stress are often most obvious at this point
- Speed and forward motion, e.g. trotting or running at full speed, will make most dogs look enthusiastic



# A Behavioral Point of View

- Try to get a general impression of the dog and the dog-handler relation
- Look at the whole dog
  - Head position
  - Ears
  - Eyes
  - Mouth
  - Tail
  - Body posture
  - Muscle tension

