

Weimaraner vs. Toy

It's a beautiful summer day and lots of people are outside puttering around their houses. One neighbor says to another, "Did I see a delivery truck at your house dropping off one of those ultra-fancy exercise bikes?" Almost sheepishly the reply is, "Yes, it's just another one of my husband's toys."

Can't you hear the dismissiveness in that exchange between two neighbors? It's just a toy. It's of no great importance, just the current whim. Adult humans seem to feel obligated to apologize for the collections of stuff they buy for amusement. Weimaraners, on the other hand, have a totally different opinion about toys.

To a Weimaraner a toy is an object to be tossed, chewed on, carried around and defended from other dogs. In the hierarchy of objects that are important to a Weimaraner, food may come in first but toys are a solid second. Why are they so important to our dogs?

The simple answer is that they are fun. They are objects to be played with as opposed to all the things we say are off limits to our dogs. We tell our dogs do what you want with your ball but don't dare touch the curtains, the rug, the dangling electrical cords and the list goes on and on.

More than fun, toys provide mental stimulation. Playing with that raggedy, chewed up toy is the equivalent of us doing a crossword puzzle or word game. Not only are toys mentally stimulating, one interesting study shows that dogs will play with new toys more than well-known old toys. Novelty gives them the added mental stimulation that they crave.

Playing with toys also fosters a way to expend energy and get exercise. Put a dog in the yard and after an initial burst of running, things slow down. On the other hand, toss a ball or a frisbee and suddenly it's game on. Chasing and retrieving replace an ambling, half-hearted poke around the yard. Toys help to redirect energy to activities that we sanction.

Toys are also important for building a good relationship with your dog. Play fosters safe, interactive behavior between us and our dogs. While they delight in solo time with toys, turn the situation into a retrieving game and there's far more interest. There are canine behavioral studies that show that dogs play longer when we join in their game. Retrieving a thrown toy gives your dog great exercise and strengthens the bond between you and your dog.

It's impossible to talk about Weimaraners and toys without mentioning toys with squeakers. How many of you have witnessed the savage disemboweling of a toy that squeaks? My guess is that there's not a reader out there who hasn't presented their dog with an adorable plush toy that was quickly turned into a pile of stuffing and rags. In the twinkling of an eye, what's left are bits of fluff and you desperately trying to get the squeaker before it's swallowed. Sound familiar?

What is it about toys that squeak? The answer is that they awake the predation instincts that are hard-wired into our dogs. While today we refer to our gray friends as omnivores, their ancestors harken back to carnivorous predators. The search for dinner involved hunting down prey, grabbing it by the neck and shaking until there's no squeak left in the hapless critter. Watch a Weimaraner with a squeaky toy and you'll see the vestiges of these hunting roots.

There's something that I don't understand about the relationship of Weimaraners and their toys. On one hand I've had dogs that destroy any toy with a vengeance but conversely others who seem to nurture their playthings. At first, I assumed the nurturing related to maternal instincts, but that theory quickly went out the window. The most nurturing of all my dogs was a very "studly" big male who, at the age of five still had intact toys that were given to him in his puppyhood. On the other hand, of my most maternal females showed her commando tactics on any toy. While she was a model mother with her puppies, if a toy wasn't sold as "for power chewers" it wasn't given to her.

How Weimaraners interact with toys is as varied as their individual personalities. Some show nurturing behavior toward their toys while others are on a search and destroy mission. Like so many things about our breed, there's no one answer and that is part of their charm.

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