



## Why do they do it?

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By Julie Hecht

**O**N A BEAUTIFUL, WARM AFTERNOON, I watched a group of dogs frolic in a dog park. Suddenly, I heard a woman's high-pitched yelp, followed by the pounding of human feet. There was no need to look; it was obviously about humping, which we can also refer to as mounting.

Dogs hump the air, they mount pillows and blankets, and they can be found poised behind the neighbor's dog or befriending Uncle Joe's leg but not Uncle Albert's. Mounting pops up in many contexts and is directed toward any number of objects, both animate and inanimate. Apart from giving mounters silly nicknames like "the humping bean" or "Sir-humps-a-lot,"

what are we to make of all this bumping and grinding?

Talking about dog behavior is like talking about politics: everyone has an opinion. According to Cynthia Heyman of Utah, her three-year-old Danish-Swedish Farmdog, Jet, is a play-humper. "Jet is intact, and he likes to hump when he plays. He seems to like the boys better than the girls. Last weekend, he was humping a neutered Aussie who humped him right back as they were playing."

For Margaret Duclos of Seattle, Wash., mounting is related to excitement and arousal. "One of my dogs sometimes humps the other when we get into the car—usually only when it has been a few days since we've

gone somewhere and he is especially excited."

On the other end of the spectrum, some attribute humping to dominance. Brigitte Reed of Salt Lake City, Utah says, "My female dog, Snickers, who is spayed, will hump our male dog, Kitna. The reason being is she is alpha and she is asserting her dominance over him. Putting him in his place, as it were."

When a dog's a humper, there's inevitably an owner nearby with a story, usually one that describes who or what is mounted (the stuffed animal, the cat, other dogs) and the context in which the humping occurs (when guests come over, at the dog run, during obedience trials). Owners postulate that sex, breed, age, reproductive status

and even size might provide information about humpers. Most of these stories culminate in questions—“Why in the world does she do this? Aren’t males the humpers?”—or impressions, anything from “It’s just play” or “She’s dominant” to “He’s quite popular!”

### TAKING NOTE

As you might expect, animal behavior researchers have a lot to say on the topic. When exploring any behavior, we can turn to the insights of Nobel Prize-winner and famed ethologist Niko Tinbergen for help. Tinbergen’s “four questions” provide a reliable framework within which to understand why animals behave the way they do. One of Tinbergen’s questions is particularly apt: “How does a behavior develop during an individual’s lifetime?” After all, behaviors don’t simply fall from the sky, land on a dog and voilà! Mounting! For nearly as long as ethologists have studied dogs, they have taken note of dogs’ tendency to hump outside of reproductive contexts.

In the early 1970s, University of Colorado ethologist Marc Bekoff, PhD, began investigating the development of canid social behavior. Bekoff observed the interactions of young canids, pairs of three- to seven-week-old wolves, coyotes and dogs. Particularly among the dog puppies, mounting, clasping and pelvic thrusting appeared early on in play. While males mounted more than females, females also engaged in aspects of the behavior. Dr. Sunil Kumar Pal, assistant teacher at Katwa Bharati Bhaban School in West Bengal, India, got similar results when investigating social behavior of young, free-ranging domestic dogs. By six weeks, both male and female puppies were mounting, clasping and pelvic thrusting.

“It’s what dogs do. It’s a completely normal behavior,” explains Carolyn Walsh, PhD, associate professor of psychology at Memorial University of Newfoundland, who studies the nuances of dog behavior in dog parks. “Both males and females mount, regardless of whether [they are] sexually

intact or not.” Celeste Pongrácz, a Mudi breeder in Hungary, finds that mounting can change with hormonal shifts. “Right now, we live with seven bitches, and when somebody is coming into season or is in season, some dogs want to hump, and others ‘ask’ to be humped. Regardless, it always involves the bitch in season.” Studies find that neutering males can decrease mounting, but certainly does not stop it in its tracks. After all, there is more to it than hormones. (Alas, not a single study noted if Barry White songs were playing in the background at the time the behavior was exhibited.)

### COMPLEXITIES

From tail wagging to barking, dog behavior is riddled with nuance. A wagging tail might convey “I’m quite scared” or “This is the best day ever!” Like tail wagging, mounting is far more

complex than it may appear, and there is not one simple explanation. But there are some likely candidates.

In many cases, mounting is related to a surge of emotion, such as feeling anxious or being aroused (in this context, “arousal” means general stimulation). In a recent investigation of dog park behavior, Walsh and her student, Lydia Ottenheimer Carrier, found that the dogs doing the most mounting were also doing the most playing. Walsh explains, “Dog parks can be quite stimulating, and for those who are highly aroused physiologically, mounting behavior could easily come out. There can be such a buildup of social motivation and the desire to affiliate that some of that energy spills over into the sexual motivation system. You see sexual behavior coming out, but it’s mostly out of context.”

General arousal or anxiety is not restricted to the dog park. Stimulation



easily translates to everyday situations: a new person comes over, a new dog is introduced or a dog is cooped up in the house all day. “One of my dogs humps the others when I grab the leashes, or otherwise am doing things that signal going somewhere,” says Duclos.

Dawn Cleary, owner of Blue Cerebus Dog Boutique in Madison, Ind., attri-

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butes mounting exhibited by one of her Golden Retrievers to excitement. “When my Frisbee champ catches the Frisbee, my littlest one likes to run out and hump her. It’s the only time she does it ... sort of like she wants to share in the glory of the Frisbee being caught.” (Is this the canine equivalent of painting your face and watching the Super Bowl?)

So why mount? Peter Borchelt, PhD, and Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB) in New York City, reminds us, “There are only so many behaviors a dog has access to, and dogs do what is part of their species-typical behavior. It is something they know how to do.” Since their options are somewhat limited, a dog, rather than read the funny pages during downtime, might be inclined to get to know a stuffed animal a little better.

#### **DOMINANCE DRIVEN?**

What else could mounting be about? For some owners, mounting equates to dominance and control, words that suggest you might not want your four-legged friend engaging in this behavior.

But what is dominance, and where does mounting fit in? According to Carlos Drews, PhD, dominance is not a characteristic, but rather, relates to describing interactions between two individuals. “Dominance is an attribute of the pattern of repeated, agonistic interactions between two individuals, characterized by a consistent outcome in favour of the same dyad member and a default yielding response

of its opponent rather than escalation ... Dominance is a relative measure and not an absolute property of individuals.” The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior defines it as “a relationship between individual animals that is established by force/aggression and submission, to determine who has priority access to multiple resources

such as food, preferred resting spots and mates.”

Is mounting associated with dominance? Not necessarily. Becky Trisko, PhD, behaviorist and owner of Unleashed in Evanston, Ill., studied dog-dog interactions in the dog daycare setting. Mounting was not associated with status-related (“agonistic”) behaviors like aggression and submission, but instead was correlated with play and other affiliative behaviors. For example, a dog who muzzle-licks another dog—a behavior often associated with “Let’s be friends. Like me! Like me!”—might also mount the same dog. If mounting indicated status or a dominance relationship, we would expect mounters to receive submission from other dogs, but that’s not what we’re finding. Likewise, a dog is probably not trying to dominate the dog bed he just mounted.

#### **MULTIPLE MOTIVATIONS**

Mounting occurs in a variety of contexts and can be surrounded by many different behaviors. Humping could be an assertive behavior related to social bonds rather than competition for resources or status. In friendly contexts, mounting could be an attention-getting behavior to instigate an interaction. As Trisko explains, “Among preferred play partners (scientific jargon for friends), it almost seems to be a way to get the other to play. A dog might do a play bow, bark and paw at a dog. If the second dog isn’t really responding, mounting will often get a rise out of the dog, and then they’ll play.”

Trisko also suggests that mounting among friends is associated with bonding. “This is the idea that dogs perform potentially annoying behaviors like mounting to test the strength of the recipient’s investment in the relationship. It’s like saying, ‘How much will you put up with?’ ‘How much do you really like me?’” Since mounting seems to appear in affiliative, not aggressive or status-related contexts, this is a provocative possibility.

At the same time, mounting is not always related to friendship. Aimee Moore, CPDT, of Dog’s Best Friend Training in Madison, Wisc., says, “I don’t think there is one simple explanation, but with unfamiliar dogs, or often even with owners, it can be pretty rude and related to status.”

As Borchelt, who has treated behavior problems for more than 30 years, observes, “Mounting could be part of a suite of behaviors associated with aggression, such as high posture, resource guarding, direct stares, and threats and standing over. But mounting, by itself, doesn’t indicate a status issue. By itself, mounting might not mean a lot.”

He also feels that it could even be problematic to ascribe the label of “dominance” to a dog who is a mounter. “If you perceive a dog as dominant because he mounts, you might think you have to take steps so that the dog isn’t dominant to you—maybe always make the dog heel, which could cut back on sniffing, exercise and dog-dog interactions, or use intimidation to make the dog follow explicit rules. This could have negative consequences for the relationship.”

But there is more to the story than the mounter. Not all dogs welcome being mounted. Jessie Nelson of New York City notes that her dog Gracie, a mutt who more closely resembles Falkor the Luckdragon from *The Never Ending Story* than a member of *Canis familiaris*, changed her relationship with mounting as she aged. As Nelson recalls, “Gracie used to let other dogs hump her, and then they would continue playing. Now she will freak out at dogs who mount her.”

## WHAT TO DO?

Training and dog-owner communication can help a humper maintain friendly interactions with dogs and humans alike. Moore suggests various training techniques. “I would work on obedience so I could get my dog’s attention when she starts to focus on another dog. I would also work on call-aways—dog greets and sniffs appropriately, then call her back and reinforce for that behavior. This way, you are catching her before she mounts.” Since mounting is often associated with arousal levels, when working on mounting, Moore recommends relaxation protocols, down-stays or teaching an alternative behavior. Angela Limburg of Chicago, Ill., tries redirecting her dog. “My boy humps his bedding... It seems to happen when he is overexcited. We try to redirect him—usually, offering cheese or cookies works.”

But at the end of the day, mounting is still a tricky behavior to figure out. “Mounting is one of those behaviors you would not want to have a single answer for,” explains Borchelt, and Bekoff agrees. “It is complex, and we don’t want to say mounting is always this or always that. What we are learning about animal

behavior is that we need to be very careful about generalities. Dogs don’t always greet each other by sniffing the anogenital region, and they don’t always circle before they lie down.”

It is not uncommon for owners to say, “I am deeply embarrassed that she humps.” Some sense disapproval from other owners: “I feel a social imperative to stop his humping.” These feelings are understandable, because for many, dogs don’t simply contribute hair to our favorite black pants; they are our family members and best friends. Which means that some of our best friends are humpers.

“I think the sense of embarrassment is not well placed,” remarks Walsh. Given that mounting is a normal part of a dog’s behavioral repertoire, owners can eliminate some of the stress and anxiety by getting to know mounting as it pertains to their individual dog.

When trying to get behind any behavior (pun intended), Bekoff recommends becoming an at-home ethologist. “Get a paper and pencil, and watch and record what happens before and after the behavior of interest. This can tell you more about the behavior itself.” This technique can help you determine

when a behavior needs to be managed and when it’s just fine.

If dogs could talk—and they actually are with their behavior—they’d ask us not to clump mounting into one universal meaning. So what’s your dog’s mounting behavior telling you?

All in all, when we’re trying to figure out a behavior, we’re better served by observation and understanding of its roots than by the stories we tend to tell ourselves and others. **B**

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