

Mentors and Proteges

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With so much technical information to learn and interpret in the dog world, a well-chosen mentor can be of infinite help to the sincere novice. From understanding the nuances of breed type to knowing when you're ready to breed your first litter, the challenges of our sport become far less daunting with an experienced advisor by your side who's been there and done that.

By the same token, the wrong mentor can throw roadblocks in your path, while unappreciative novices with questionable motives have led many worthy mentors to reconsider whether to invest their valuable time in helping future students of their breed.

Good breeders want to give back to the sport and one way to do so is to coach an aspiring fancier. We all recognize a nervous first-time exhibitor. Perhaps their dog isn't groomed particularly well and an experienced exhibitor offers a few tips after the breed judging. An interesting discussion of bloodlines might follow, and a visit to the experienced breeder's kennel or an invitation to the next club meeting. Other novices are more assertive in introducing themselves to a breeder-exhibitor famous in the area, and asking for help.

The best mentors have a quiet confidence about them. They can discuss the breed in general terms without running down the competition. Beware the exhibitor who points out the flaws in other exhibitors' dogs but sees only the virtues in hers; all dogs have faults. Good mentors acknowledge the quality dogs bred and shown by others.

The goal in nurturing a novice is to give a newcomer the ability to evaluate dogs and make decisions. Not all decisions will be the right ones but that's all part of the learning experience. Monitoring a novice's conversations and specifying who the novice may or may not be friends with is a control issue, not a mentoring issue. This is another sign that confidence is lacking so steer clear.

Eventually, novices may come to the conclusion that their mentors' vision of the breed clashes with their own. Again, that is part of the growing process and no good mentor demands unconditional compliance. However, learn to disagree without being disagreeable.

A novice would be foolish to discard the friendship of a past mentor in favor of a newer, "more important" expert – or worse yet, because the novice believed, with a litter bred and a champion or two under his belt, he had nothing more to learn. Dog people talk and word gets around. No one appreciates or respects an instant expert. Have the good manners to acknowledge the time and experience a mentor has shared with you, as you transition your relationship into a friendship.

Also remember, as you navigate your way through the local dog-show community, that a great mentor can often be someone in a different breed. Their knowledge of genetics, reproduction, structure and grooming is applicable to all dogs. They may not be familiar with all the nuances of your breed but they also won't get bogged down in petty breed politics and will be unconditionally supportive. We could all use a heaping helping of that.

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