

Dog Breeding: To Mentor or Not to Mentor?

A young dog fancier asks if it's really all the "new" dog people's fault...

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At one time or another, most established breeders have wished that a handbook providing rules and regulations on how to enter the dog game had been provided to aspiring breeders.

Don't, they would say, be too cocky. Don't question the status quo too soon. Don't presume to comment if you've never produced a litter. Don't have an inflated view of your own opinion if you've only had one litter. Don't chew with your mouth open. Don't put your elbows on the table. And so on, ad infinitum.

Having looked at the nature of successful relationships between mentors and aspiring breeders as well as the characteristics of effective gurus, we now turn our attention to the student. The apprentice. The protg.

While we have thus far put emphasis on the successes and shortcomings of established breeders, it would be unfair to accentuate their role too much. A successful partnership requires two willing and flexible partners which means our student-breeders have many obligations as well.

Regardless of how many rules or regulations might ever be discussed, insinuated or alluded to, experience tells most of us that success in the dog world initially depends as much on social skills as on knowledge.

First Impressions As children we learn to negotiate the situations we find ourselves in and hone our ability to adapt. When we begin school, for example, we quickly learn the pecking order surrounding use of the sandbox or rights over the monkey bars. At university we negotiate the party and bar scene, working out amongst ourselves who is cool and who is not, who is "in" and who is "out." And when we enter the workforce we begin all over again as we adapt to corporate cultures and office cliques. A short time in the dog world quickly reveals a similarly unique culture one whose rules are often only apparent to those who perpetuate them.

With that in mind, how you go about locating your first dog can have lasting effects on how you are viewed within the breed and by other breeders. For example, contacting every breeder on the seaboard, while a great way to see what is out there, often leaves a bad taste in breeders' mouths. While it may help you to find a puppy, it can make finding a mentor difficult. Breeders want to know that you are interested enough in the breed to have taken the time to research breeders and lines before making first contact.

By the same token, it is important for new breeders to take things slowly. Don't jump headlong into breeding simply because you can. It is true that successful breeding programs are built on great foundation stock, but it is the knowledge gained through experience and observation as well as the advice of your mentor(s) that will cement that foundation.