

The Other Side of the Dal Issue

DCA Secretary and 35-plus year breeder offers opposing view.

Dear Editor,

In the 1970s Dr. Robert Schaible, a Dal breeder and geneticist, embarked on a quest to study stone disease in the Dalmatian by breeding a Dalmatian to another breed. To cut to the chase, Dr. Schaible was not able to get and keep registration on what have become known as the "backcross dogs." Although he continued his breeding plans on a somewhat abbreviated scale, he did not keep records of the results of urinalyses, ultrasounds of the puppies' bladders, blood tests, birth-to-death notations, day-to-day observations, etc. Therefore, to say that the project spanned 35 years would be literally correct, yet in the absence of any recorded data, not significant.

A few years ago a group of well-intentioned people resurrected Dr. Schaible's project and bred an AKC bitch to the last remaining male available descended from that project. To date a number of these breedings have taken place. However, there is still no trackable scientific data upon which the members of the Dalmatian Club of America can find comfort in going forward with registration. To quote from the "Final Report" of the DCA committee formed to advise on the low uric acid (LUA) issue:

"LUA Project — this is a misnomer. There is no formalized 'project', 'study' or 'research' that pertains to the breeding of LUA Dalmatians.

"LUA Research — again this is a misnomer. There is no formalized scientific protocol for the breeding of LUA Dalmatians. The introduction of the canine normal urinary uric acid gene... followed scientific principles, but was part of a breeding program and not a formalized scientific research protocol. There is no formalized project, research protocol, database or clinical trial to keep follow up data... There is no formal LUA project."

DCA members fear that the influence of another breed, though relieving the Dalmatian of one problem, could bring in others.

One puzzling question is, why, when we accept that the gene to produce high uric acid in the Dal is indeed fixed (they all have it), are some dogs affected but most are not? Is there another factor which we could identify that would achieve the same result without having to introduce a complete set of genes contributed by an individual of another breed? The members would like more research done to answer this and other relevant questions before they agree to open the stud book, because once it is opened and the dogs are registered there will be no turning back if, in five or 10 years, we find that we should have proceeded with more caution.

Breedings of backcross dogs to AKC Dals have thus far produced litters of half or fewer LUA puppies, according to proponents. Literally none of the LUA puppies have been tested and found not to be carrying the gene for normal Dal high uric acid (HUA). Therefore another concern is why there is an apparent absence of dogs from these breedings which are pure for low uric acid, and what happens when they are actually bred to HUA or to each other. This would seem an important piece of the puzzle. Proponents answer that they have avoided any close breedings or in-breedings. Why? Any worthwhile research project should go there in the interest of test results! A recent communication from an LUA leader says, "...the fact that members would like to see more data and results of LUA to LUA breedings as well as birth-to-death records of dogs from the backcross is interesting, and some breeders may justifiably wish to have this data before incorporating backcross Dals into their breeding program. However, this data is irrelevant to the registration issue. Registration should be based upon nothing more or less that (sic) a determination of the backcross dogs being Dalmatians, or not." Many members find this theory particularly disquieting.

The DCA Board initiated a series of avenues by which members could find a comfort level for registration. A website was created which followed the project and its findings. Several lectures and panel discussions were held at National Specialties. Articles on the subject appeared in the club magazine with pages of pictures devoted to the project. At a booth at the 2008 National Specialty the backcross dogs were on display and members could see and touch them and learn more about the project. An AKC-approved special attraction showcase was held at the same time and scheduled so that the maximum number of attendees could see them. The DCA Foundation helped subsidize travel expenses of the dogs so members could see them. Does this sound like a board that is pigheadedly refusing to allow registration "just because"?

Most people do not oppose the backcross research. Who among us would deny our dogs the very best health they can have? If it is in our power to provide it, we have a responsibility to pursue it. But... members want to be assured that nothing comes with it that we'd rather not have. Hence, registration should be approached with caution. Backcross proponents have said that all of the questions have been answered. They say that once one feature of stone disease has been removed, high uric acid cannot form. The renowned and accepted experts on stone disease, Drs. Bartges and Osborn, who each have devoted years to research and testing and have written extensively on the subject, have said that there are many facets of stone disease and that uric acid alone is not the culprit. Based on the available information, members find it unwise to rush headlong into registration just so that the current dogs can be shown in AKC events and produce AKC puppies.

A 2008 DCA vote indicated that the membership is not ready at this time — not that they will never be ready — until more research is done and more questions answered. Proponents refuse to cooperate to find a compromise and have made it clear that they will take their backcross dogs to another registry. It has truly caused an unprecedented rift in our club with long-time friendships broken and ugly accusations being cast about on the e-lists.

We now seem to be at an impasse, with the DCA board and membership wanting the research to go on and the backcross proponents unwilling to do so.

The board recently asked the membership to submit questions they felt needed answering. Currently this process is underway. Hopefully soon both "sides" of this controversy will find a way to make themselves one side... the side of the Dalmatian.

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