

## Opening Space

### Breeding for the Pet Market

What is it about dog breeders that makes people so worked up about them? You can talk to almost anyone, from the rabid anti-dog league to the regular pet public, even to people who are involved in dogs and ought to know better, and once the subject gets on to breeders it's amazing what you will hear. Even talking to the breeders themselves it's rare to find anyone who will have a good word for their colleagues.

On the far left you have people like those in PETA, an organization which easily takes the prize for having the most misleading name of all. (It ought to stand for People for the ExTermination of Animals, not for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.) No doubt you've seen or heard of the full-page ad which ran in Sports Illustrated on Sept. 17, showing a cute Papillon puppy on the arm of racing cyclist Levi Leipheimer. The message is brief and succinct: "U.S. animal shelters must put to death nearly 4 million dogs and cats every year" — so "always spay or neuter your animals and never buy them from a breeder or a pet store." The logical consequence of that, of course, would eventually be no dogs or cats at all, which is apparently just what PETA wants.

Whether PETA's figure of 4 million dogs and cats on death row is correct is uncertain, but it is true that far too many pet animals end up on skid row. The fact that none of these come from responsible hobby breeders ought to impress PETA and convince them to support these breeders, while joining forces with the rest of us to help end puppy mills, pet shops and unplanned backyard breeding.

When it comes to the pet public, their reaction to breeders is a little more nuanced, but even if they vaguely understand (at least the better educated half of them) that buying from a pet store is not a good idea, it's often difficult for them to accept that getting a puppy from a hobby breeder is often a fairly complicated transaction, involving a long wait, a grilling about their suitability as a future home for the puppy, seemingly high puppy prices and tight restrictions on what they can and cannot do with their puppy once they get it. ("You mean I have to wait several weeks, answer all those questions, pay \$1,500 — and I can't even breed from my puppy later on if I want?")

Some of the confrontations are simply due to different goals: many show breeders regard the pet public almost as a necessary evil in order to dispose of their less outstanding puppies. And let's face it: not all dog breeders have a natural talent for dealing with the public — sometimes it's easy to understand why a frustrated potential puppy buyer just gives up and goes to the pet shop instead...

It's when you start to talk about breeders with other breeders that you realize how widely the idea of what's acceptable in our sport can diverge. To my mind, for many years there was something almost suspect in providing puppies for the pet market. That there was a genuine demand for puppies from people who loved my breed simply as pets didn't strike me as being at odds with the general condemnation of "pet breeders" — however irrational that may seem now, looking back.

During a recent conversation with a couple of very involved, experienced dog people the talk turned to the subject of a few breeders I don't know personally but had heard a lot about. It made me realize that we really do come in all shapes and sizes. All the following are very successful in the show ring and, based on wins alone, would seem to be at about the same level:

One breeder (large Sporting breed) produces up to five or six litters per month (yes, monthly!), breeds from dogs with serious genetic defects, exports "breeding pairs" overseas and makes big bucks selling show and breeding stock. The breed's parent club is seriously concerned and trying to curtail this breeder's activities.

Another breeder (large Working breed) raises up to 50 litters per year, has an excellent policy for taking back any problem puppies and apparently no complaints from her breed's rescue organization. The kennel runs at a big loss financially and is a true hobby operation.

One breeder (Toys) produces perhaps 20 litters per year in a large suburban tract house, which may seem like a lot until you realize that there are usually only one to three puppies per litter. This breeder has excellent rapport with puppy buyers and does serious health testing.

One breeder (mid-sized Hound) produces an average of one litter per year... Well, that would be me, or any number of other "small" breeders, many of whom put ourselves on a pedestal simply because we breed so little.

I'm happy breeding as little as I do, but I feel that those breeders who provide happy, healthy purebred puppies to the pet market on a regular basis ought to get some respect, both from the general public and from the rest of us in our sport. That is, provided that they have proper facilities, provide their dogs with a good quality of life, observe the highest ethics in



both breeding and dealing with the public — and, of course, take back any dog they bred whenever needed.

How do you check that? Isn't it obvious? The AKC should already have established a "Gold Standard" for breeders, an elite club for those willing to subscribe to the definitions for a "good breeder" which AKC has already published on its web site. And then AKC should advertise these breeders everywhere — not just in Sports Illustrated but in Newsweek, Time, People magazine, Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair... It will cost a fortune but it's necessary for our sport's survival.

There is a lot about breeders in this issue, including an excerpt from my book Best in Show — The World of Show Dogs and Dog Shows, which will be published in December. It's been four years in the works, a long labor of love, and I am both excited and nervous to finally see it in print.

See you at the AKC/Eukanuba show in Long Beach!

Bo Bengtson, Editor-at-Large