

## Performance-Dog Buyers, Beware

**Before buying a puppy for agility, flyball or any other dog sport, make sure you and your breeder are on the same page.**

*Terry Long*

Since she began competing in flyball and agility in 1996, Melinda Dayhuff has purchased several dogs from several breeders. She has Border Collies, Jack Russell Terriers, and Australian Shepherds. Dayhuff has gotten better at researching and selecting breeders on whom she depends to provide sound dogs destined for the physically demanding sports to which she is addicted.

Even so, a Border Collie purchased from a “reputable” breeder was prematurely retired at age 3 because of severe degenerative changes throughout her spine (bridging spondylosis and osteoarthritis of the vertebral column) that caused chronic back pain, weakness, and affected coordination in the rear limbs.

Another Border Collie from the same breeder had triple pelvic osteotomies on both hips to fix severe hip dysplasia, and his luxating hocks (which cannot be surgically repaired) affect his ability to control rear-end movement. Recently, she returned two Australian Shepherd pups to two different breeders because of structural problems that made them unsuitable for either sport.

### A working knowledge

Dayhuff is not your typical handler. She is a small-animal veterinarian currently working in an emergency practice in Southern California. She has done considerable research into the structural prerequisites for these two demanding sports and was a veterinary assistant to Pat Hastings at one of Hastings’ local seminars where agility dogs were evaluated for structural soundness.

Hastings, along with her late husband E.R. “Bob” Hastings, developed the structural evaluation process, detailed in the highly acclaimed Puppy Puzzle video and DVD, which forms the basis of “Puzzle” seminars she has been presenting for 17 years. It is so ubiquitous among breeders that it is widely referred to as “puzzling” a litter. Puppies receive evaluation and are rated at 8 weeks of age. The ratings determine suitability in show, pet, or performance homes.

“I am looking for structural soundness and the tissue to support it,” said Hastings. “I am not looking for the generic show dog but for the actual weaknesses that lead to damage and breakdowns. Tissue does not have enough strength to hold structure in place before 8 weeks. You can put a 7-week-old puppy on the table and make it look any way you would like it to look. But at 8 weeks, there is enough strength to prevent you from doing that. We were also taught that all of the bones in the body grow at different rates, and they are as similar in proportion at 8 weeks as they are at maturity. If you look at a pup at 9 weeks, you have no idea if it is the pup you are looking at or a growth stage that pup may be in. We did an experiment evaluating 100 litters at 7, 8 and 9 weeks and again at 18 months, and only the 8-weeks evaluation was 100-percent accurate.”

When Dayhuff researched her most recent purchases, she was told in personal correspondence that the litters she was interested in were “Puzzled” and very suitable for physically demanding flyball, her primary sport. After she picked up one puppy at the airport, she was devastated to discover that the puppy had luxating hocks. She reluctantly returned the puppy to the breeder. The next breeder she chose made similar promises, but Dayhuff found that this puppy had luxating hocks and luxating patellas.

“It’s meant to be a standardized system,” said Hastings, “but it seems people don’t have the discipline to be consistent in applying and scoring the tests. Of all things that should be screened out, it’s luxating hocks.”

### Show versus sport

For Hastings, “the best-made dogs we can produce should be the ones destined for performance events. The more structural issues a dog has, the more susceptible it is to injuries, the faster it will break down, the more the breakdown will affect its temperament, and the less quality of life it will have. We all want good structure, but what affects a dog in one ring, may have no impact in another.

“Barrel hocks are not a major fault in the show ring, but it impacts tight turns so it is a problem with an agility or herding dog. A ewe neck is not uncommon in the show ring, but a dog with a ewe neck does not like to swim, so in a water-retrieving Sporting breed, that would be a horrible fault. Shoulder blades that are too close together prevent perfect

movement coming at you. As far as faults in the show ring are concerned, that is pretty minor. But a dog with shoulders that are too close cannot lower his head to the ground so that is a deal-breaker fault in a tracking dog. No dogs are perfect, but we want them to be sound enough to be able to do what we ask without worrying about damaging them in the process.”

Over the years the emotional and financial impact on Dayhuff has taken a toll. “It’s very hard to crate up a pup and put it back on a plane for a long ride (the first pup came from Maine), and you feel very guilty about putting the dog through that.” Dayhuff has also become quite skeptical about breeders’ testimonials about their products. “I’d talked to both breeders about my insistence on performance quality, and I e-mailed video clips of flyball to the second pup’s breeder.”

Dayhuff affectionately calls her orthopedically challenged dogs “train wrecks.” She routinely takes them for chiropractic work, keeps them physically lean and fit, and closely watches for signs of fatigue in training. Asked what tips she would give prospective puppy purchasers, she said, “Even the best assessments at 8 weeks won’t always guarantee that problems won’t arise after bringing your puppy home. But you do the best you can ... go to as many of Pat’s [Hastings] seminars as you can. Any skill takes practice to refine, and it never hurts to get a refresher in structural evaluation. If you don’t have the skills yourself, find someone who does. Document and verify everything the breeder says.”

Hastings concurs. “People are getting so good with websites and giving people the answers they want to hear that it is getting very difficult to trust many. The best solution is for the buyers to educate themselves so they are not conned by the breeders.”

Some believe that it will take consumer-oriented product liability laws to change how puppies are marketed and sold. In several states lawyers have sought to apply the principles of product liability to the sale of domestic animals, opening the door to a variety of potential suits. (Journal of the Veterinary Medical Association, Vol. 230, No. 11, June 1, 2007, p. 1638)

Perhaps the Golden Rule should apply to all of us. As Hastings puts it, “The entire goal of all of our sports should be about the dogs – not our egos – so please go out and do the right thing.” Whether that be breeding for performance structure or choosing to retire a dog early, it’s up to each of us to do what’s right for our performance dogs.

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