

Six Signs of a Great Dog Breeder

Look for these clues, and you'll go home with a healthy, happy puppy.

Susan McCullough

Although Ed and Marsha Silberhorn of Va. adored their Shetland Sheepdog, Abby, they knew she had one big behavioral problem: extreme shyness. And they were pretty sure they knew the reason.

As a young puppy, "Abby clearly hadn't been socialized," Marsha Silberhorn recalls. Rather than being introduced to her household's goings-on, the puppy and her littermates lived in the breeder's garage and had very little contact with people. However, the Silberhorns had never bought a dog and didn't realize how a puppy's environment could affect not only her physical health, but also her temperament.

After Abby died at age 10, the Silberhorns knew that they wanted their new dog to be more outgoing. To find one, they needed to find a better breeder. How would they recognize such a breeder when they met one?

Experts agree that great breeders have six traits in common.

They Know and Love Their Breed

A great breeder is an expert on the breed she raises and sells-or at the very least, a dedicated student.

Carlene Snyder, a breeder referral coordinator for the Shih Tzu Club of America, believes that a person shouldn't breed dogs until she has been involved with that particular breed "for at least a couple of years and [has] joined a breed club to learn more about the breed." When a fledgling breeder joins such a club, she learns more about the breed because she deals with people with more experience, Snyder explains.

In addition, a great breeder doesn't raise puppies just to make some cash or to have something to do. "Each breeding you do should be one that betters the stock that you have in some way," says Snyder, who lives in Fla.

"Sometimes you breed to improve conformation, sometimes it may be temperament or markings. Health issues need to be considered in-depth when planning a breeding. [You] always breed to improve what you have."

Most good breeders gain additional knowledge by entering their animals in dog-related activities, particularly dog shows (conformation competitions). "It is important for breeders to be involved with conformation and be members of a breed club," says Geri Mercer, a Shetland Sheepdog breeder from Va. "This participation helps provide a stimulus and also a constant influx of knowledge about the breed. When you go to club activities or to dog shows, you always wind up discussing some aspect of breed behavior."