

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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Perhaps not surprisingly, the relationship did not survive this agreement. Within a few years Patty became frustrated and disillusioned and the pair endured a nasty split.

Where Did It Go Wrong? Patty and Beth are a fictional representation of a situation that is becoming increasingly common in the dog world one that raises important questions for both new fanciers entering the breed and the established breeders watching them.

Though every situation is not as dramatically unequal as this one, even in situations where agreements are more amenable student-breeders often reach a point of frustration with their perpetually submissive position.

In this particular example, and many real situations like it, the relationship was set up to fail from the beginning as a result of the mentor's exorbitant demands.

Discussion of what constitutes a fair agreement could fill several articles, but in the end the basic message is that there is a fine line between a fair agreement and one in which someone is taken advantage of, and it is in this arena that the power and knowledge imbalance integral to a mentorship becomes apparent.

Once agreed to, contracts like this one can lead to what I term the satellite effect, where new fanciers end up with so many restrictions on the dog or dogs they have acquired from their mentor(s) that they are unable to make autonomous choices.

Instead they find themselves saddled with a breeding program that isn't really theirs, raising litters that don't belong to them and keeping puppies they may have limited control over. They feel caught between the wish to get into breeding "the right way" and the desire to make their own mark. And, whether because of legal conditions, lack of confidence in their own abilities or a fear of the unknown, they fail to emerge from the shadow of their mentor.

Well, you say, the requirements were clearly outlined from the beginning it's his/her fault for agreeing to it to begin with. While true, this type of statement ignores the basic inequality of the situation. In many ways the Pattys of the world have little choice but to agree their mentor holds all of the cards. Failure to comply means risking the opportunity to acquire desired lines altogether and, perhaps worse, the mentoring relationship they have come to value and rely on. Beyond that, an element of trust comes into play as student-breeders put faith in their mentors to offer them a fair and equitable agreement. So, while we can judge Patty in retrospect for having unwisely agreed to outrageous terms, it is important to understand her choice to comply was not made in a vacuum. Even if agreements are clearly spelled out and both parties agree to them there is a certain point when the demands of the mentor are simply unreasonable and unfair.