

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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A Culture of MistrustThe truth is, mentorship today has in many cases become an extension of the classic dog show ego and mentality. Being selected as a mentor is a great honor and one can't help but feel pride in having been successful enough in one's breed to be perceived as an expert. For many breeders, such an acknowledgement is equivalent to any Best in Show award and is equally as addictive. After all, don't we all enjoy a bit of flattery now and again?

In addition to our hidden and rarely admitted yearning for superiority come the creeping fingers of suspicion. If dynamism and experimentation were the name of the game in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, protectionism and legality characterize the current age.

Established breeders are increasingly concerned, and justifiably so, with not only what they produce but who it is sold to and where it may end up three or four generations down the line. Political and personality conflicts within breeds often create false boundaries and pit breeders against one another. The ethics of others in one's breed are always of concern. Consequently, in an attempt to protect our lines from exploitation or from "falling into the wrong hands," we begin going to extraordinary measures to control not only everything we produce but all that comes after. Sales contracts, co-ownerships, non-breeding agreements all designed to limit the actions of those we choose to work with but who, at a basic level, we don't trust.

The wisdom of these attitudes and their subsequent effects on the dog world as a whole are a separate issue (and strong arguments can be made justifying them), but their impact on new breeders cannot be ignored. This leaves many new fanciers in a precarious situation one that is likely unique to present-day dog breeders. Can you imagine, for example, where the Doberman Pinscher might be if Louis Dobermann had decided he wouldn't allow any of the dogs he sold to be bred? Would the breed even exist today? What of the large kennels of the 1930s and 1940s that produced what is regarded as the foundation stock for many of today's most successful lines? Where would those breeders be, where would your breed be and where would you be if no one had ever taken the leap of faith we call trust?

The end message? Mentorships succeed or fail for a variety of reasons and it is unfair for established breeders to place the blame at the feet of new fanciers without looking carefully and objectively at their own role in the relationship. In addition to the failings of new breeders commonly discussed (i.e., not accessing experienced breeders, not selecting good breeding stock, not taking time to learn about their breed and its conformation and health or good breeding practices, wanting something for nothing), the naivete and lack of foresight shown by students when entering into agreements regarding dogs and potential breeding stock is of concern. At the same time, failed relationships often find their root in weighted hierarchies, mistrust, control issues and superiority complexes supported and perpetuated by the mentors themselves.

The question is, how do we avoid these pitfalls and ensure a long, happy relationship?