

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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We have all heard the complaints about new breeders. Those who are established berate them for being instant experts and lament the loss of "true" mentorship. Gone are the golden days of the dog fancy, they say, when new fanciers could learn at the knee of the greats in their breed (the current greats, of course, being them). Instead, new breeders today want to jump right in with both feet. They'll purchase a dog from anyone who will sell them one and then cross their fingers, hoping for the best. They don't learn what they need to know, breed indiscriminately and dismiss the knowledge of established breeders whom they should be learning from.

But does the fault rest entirely with those entering the fancy? Are they solely to blame for the lack of communication between new and old breeders? And what of good mentorships gone bad? We've all seen mentoring relationships that have started off well and, for whatever reason, gone astray. How can we balance these unequal relationships?

In this series we will examine the nature of canine mentorship and some of the common pitfalls faced by those they touch. Parts two and three will examine the roles of both and ways to make the most of the relationship.

The OpportunityMentorship, in its purist form, is an opportunity for new breeders to access knowledge and opinions about breeding that would otherwise be inaccessible. Who aside from your breeder, for example, has a photo of your dog's great-great-grandmother and can recite at length the achievements and failures of both her siblings and progeny? Who but a breeder who has "been th ere, done that" can discuss the strengths and weaknesses of certain lines based on dogs in a pedigree they have actually seen? Who else but an experienced breeder can explain, in a panicky moment, how to mix formula or what to do with a colicky puppy?

At the same time, it is also an opportunity for the mentor in question. While it is said that people learn best by doing, the truth is we often learn even more by teaching. In mentoring someone else, breeders can find themselves learning a great deal about their breed, their lines and themselves.

The opportunity to share one's knowledge can lead to unexpected places. Being asked to verbally explain one's breeding strategies, for example, gives a chance for reflection on what you are doing and why you're doing it. Combing through boxes of books and videotapes looking for educational items often leads to hours of review as we locate forgotten texts and photos. And discussing type, structure and breed character with a fresh pair of eyes can reveal interesting insights. Anyone who reads a breed standard, after all, has the right to an opinion on how to interpret it.