

Dog Breeding: Being a Good Mentor

Taking a closer look at the roles mentors must fill.

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world. Having invested hundreds of hours of time in educating the novice breeders, giving them tools to make educated and responsible decisions and nurturing their love for our breed, when it comes time for them to shine on their own it is the mentor who often falters.

I came across an interesting quote recently that had strange parallels to the situation faced by Jeff and Charlotte. It was found on a martial arts web site and read as follows: "I have heard a sensei once say that a student surpassing the teacher is a teacher's greatest honor. I'm not sure I agree. I would feel great disappointment in myself if I was defeated or surpassed in skill by a student."

And so it can be in the dog world. Whether it is rooted in our own insecurities or simple jealousy is immaterial, as it is our actions that speak most clearly to those we aim to help. Just as teen-agers secretly look to their parents for approval and recognition, new breeders look to old for confirmation of their successes.

Good mentors recognize that the successes of their students, both former and current, are an extension of their own accomplishments. At the same time, however, at its base competition is about winning. Regardless of whether you are defeated by a friend or foe, losing is still losing. While one might sit in an ivory tower and expound the theoretic virtues of taking pride in the accomplishments of one's student, that sentiment is sometimes neither realistic nor practical. Feelings are feelings, and competition speaks very strongly to our fragile human egos. With that in mind, it is hardly surprising that some of the best mentors are those who no longer actively exhibit their dogs and/or who live in far-removed geographic areas from those they help.

If you are facing such a situation, however, the key is to know yourself well enough to decide whether or not you can handle such a loss with grace. If you can't, don't set yourself up to fail. Take ownership of how you feel and make a plan to deal with it, whether that means avoiding direct competition or at the least discussing the issue with your student ahead of time. One of my favorite fellow competitors readily admits he is a poor loser and, after leaving the ring after a loss, will often be heard to remark, "Give me a couple of minutes I need to cool off." He is open and honest about the fact that he is a poor loser, regardless of whom he loses to. He separates himself from the situation in order to prevent himself from saying things he might regret, and consequently those he competes against can both predict and handle his response.

Regardless of how this problem is addressed, though, it is important to recognize the potential for such a situation before it takes place.