

Dog Breeding: Being a Good Mentor

Taking a closer look at the roles mentors must fill.

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In the first column of this series we looked at the opportunities and challenges mentoring presents for both breeders and their students. In the end I concluded that, though the opportunity for many benefits exists, the road to a successful relationship is rocky and can be full of potholes. Foremost among these is the often awkward transition a student must at some point make from a receptacle of knowledge to an, if not equal, at least an autonomous breeder.

This month we take a closer look at the roles mentors must fill, as well as their responsibilities toward their students, their breed and the wider dog community.

Roadblocks While it is true that novice breeders must take some responsibility for their own learning and development, it is important to realize the tremendous task they face when entering the dog world. A friend recently passed on to me the comment that every longtime dog breeder should periodically have to go out and try to buy a quality dog of another breed. Not only does this exercise remind us of the supreme excitement involved in bringing that new puppy home, it also gives breeders a perspective on the difficulties associated with identifying good breeders from bad in an unfamiliar landscape, while also avoiding the roadblocks we breeders erect, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Established breeders, particularly in numerically smaller breeds, really do hold all of the cards when it comes to helping or hindering new fanciers. One word from an old-timer in some breeds can, for example, effectively blacklist a newbie, preventing him or her from acquiring the quality stock they need to get a good start and often relegating them to the slow climb up from obscurity, using substandard dogs as their foundation. After all, if no good breeders will work with you, whom does that leave? The process of choosing a breeder, establishing a relationship and then waiting for the right puppy is a long and complicated one it behooves us all to remember that.

With that in mind, one of the first steps to becoming a good mentor is making yourself available and obvious. Don't expect new breeders to find you. No matter how illustrious your record in your chosen breed, chances are an outsider won't have heard of you or, if he has, may be too intimidated to approach you.

Traditional Roles Once the new couple (puppy and buyer) are united, the breeder and the new owner move into their roles as mentor and student, complete with its opportunities and drawbacks.