

## In Search of the Perfect Stud Dog

I bought my first show dog in 1971. He became a Champion and attained his CD. He sired two litters. Ttttthat's all folks! Many years later, I remember when my breeding partner and I started to x-ray our breeding stock for Hip Dysplasia. Our finished bitch was x-rayed by the local vet. "It's fine", he told us. "No need to send it in. It's just a waste of money." About two years later, I was devastated when our promising young male pick of the litter was diagnosed with hip dysplasia. My partner, however, was in denial. She was sure that this was not genetic. Both his parents had been x-rayed. After all, he did fall off the grooming table that time when he was a pup. The fall must have caused this problem. I was not so easily dissuaded and insisted that we x-ray his littermates. More than one pup turned out to be dysplastic. I bought a copy of Fred Lanting's first book on Canine Hip Dysplasia and insisted on a second opinion on the dam's x-rays. Yup, she was dysplastic, too. I had learned a lesson in the value of testing AND the importance of good information. What I did not know and could never have foreseen was how dramatically the world of responsible dog breeding was to change.

Thirty years after those initial experiences in trying to avoid genetic disease in dogs, we are still struggling with the difficulties related to producing quality, healthy dogs. The challenges we face selecting stud dogs are enormous and complex. Thankfully, we have a lot of help. Besides, the authors of ground-breaking works on canine disease like Fred Lanting, Malcolm Willis and George Padgett, we had another hero in John Merrill Olin. Olin was many things including an industrialist, a philanthropist and a conservationist. Lucky for us, he was an avid outdoorsman and dedicated breeder and field trialer of Labrador Retrievers. In 1963, he was the chair of the Labrador Retriever Club of America's Canine Hip Dysplasia committee. By 1966, with assistance from the Golden Retriever Club of America and the German Shepherd Dog Club of America along with other interested parties, Olin was the motivating force in the formation of the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals. The initial mission statement for OFA was "To provide radiographic evaluation, data management and genetic counseling for canine hip dysplasia." The Orthopedic Foundation for Animals has grown and matured. The mission statement has been revised to reflect the broader goals of a growing organization. It now reads, "To improve the health and well-being of companion animals through a reduction in the incidence of genetic disease." OFA, along with the AKC Canine Health Foundation and the Canine Health Information Center as well as many other organizations are working hard to understand more about the inheritance of canine disease and to make that information available to breeders.

Many of us hoped for a magic bullet. We hoped for a couple of quick tests that would help us to breed perfectly healthy dogs. We now know it is not anywhere near that easy. As responsible breeders, we have to balance the competing demands of breeding healthy dogs with our requirements for excellent specimens of the breed and important aspects of temperament, including instinctive abilities (relating to field work, stock sense and other historical purposes) and appropriate dog-dog and human-dog skills. The longer I breed and the more I know, the more difficult responsible stud dog selection becomes. I would like to share three ideas that help me to organize my thought processes.

First, understand that you are not breeding to a single dog. Each dog that we consider for our lovely bitches is a package made up of multiple influences. When we research a potential stud dog, our job is to identify or uncover all the information we possibly can about the dog, his ancestors, his relatives and his human partners. The first and most common way try to understand more about what went into

making a dog what we see in front of us is to look at the names and titles on a traditional pedigree. The value of this perspective is limited by the knowledge of the person's information about the dogs contained in that pedigree. More than once, I have seen the pedigrees of pet shop puppies and backyard breeders touting "champion lines". That might mean two red CHs in the third generation. That does not mean that the rest of those dogs were not good dogs. It means that they were not tested against the objective standard of the show ring, field trial or other competition. The real benefit of the traditional pedigree occurs when there is actual knowledge of attributes and deficits attached to the name of each individual dog by someone with the experience and expertise to make an accurate assessment. For those of us who have been in dogs a million years, we may have first-hand knowledge of dogs as far back as six to ten generations in a pedigree. Tidbits of information about distant ancestors can be utilized with a good computer database and pedigree analysis program. Breeders who are newer in the sport will need to spend some time picking the brains of mentors and other breeders who have actually known the dogs further back in the pedigree. We hope to see the consistent presence of attributes that we highly value and a lower than breed average incidence of serious health problems in the pedigrees of animals that we might consider.

I changed breeds in 1985. I bred my first litter and went to the national specialty in search of a stud dog for my almost two year old bitch. I found him and I fell head over heels in love. He was the living picture of the standard and everything I wanted to produce. I approached his owner and she graciously invited me back to the room to visit and spend more time with Mr. Wonderful. I am eternally grateful for her honesty that day. She told me, "Joe is the only dog in his litter of five that does not seizure." Wow! That hit me like a ton of bricks. I think I managed to hold it together while we visited some more, but I got back to my own room and wept.

One difficulty that analyzing a traditional pedigree presents is that it only looks at the depth of the pedigree, and only dogs that were a direct ancestor of our candidate stud dog. Breadth of the pedigree entails finding information about the siblings of our potential stud dog and siblings of his ancestors. WARNING- If you are not willing to balance competing desires and able to maintain appropriate perspective on risk versus pay offs, do not do this. There are no perfect dogs and if you do a good job thoroughly researching your candidates, you will find things you don't like and don't want. Welcome to dog breeding. Onward- the good news is that if you do your job well, you will be knowledgeable about the issues in the wood pile that you should be aware of and more able to avoid the ones that are unacceptable to you. Like Mr. Wonderful in my illustration above, you will find dogs that have qualities that you fiercely desire along with ones that you feel strongly about avoiding. There is no right or wrong answer to Mr. Wonderful. Only that you are honest with others about the potential for positives and negatives within a particular breeding.

The Mr. Wonderful story leads me to my second tool for organizing or categorizing information; strive to understand the motivation, perspective and integrity of the people responsible for the dog. Mr. Wonderful's owner is, almost thirty years later, one of the people I respect most in dogs. I so admire her strength of character. She gave me information that I needed to make an informed decision when very few people were willing to publicly address serious health problems in our dogs. When we begin in dogs, we are advised by all kinds of people to take notes and keep track of things. Usually, the first one is to make a file of judges and keep notes on what we perceive to be their likes and dislikes. Some people keep prolific notes and pictures of various dogs in their breeds of interest. Should we decide to hire someone to show our dogs, watch the professional handlers carefully and keep track of who takes

good care of the dogs, we are advised. I am going to suggest that one of the most important things a breeder can keep track of is the integrity of other fanciers. Mr. Wonderful's owner is at the top of my list of people in my breed who are honest and forthcoming. She is joined by others who have proven over the years that there is no stigma attached to producing any particular problem in your breeding program. I have found the oft quoted "breed long enough and you will produce one of everything" to be absolutely true. Producing problems does clearly define a breeder's character. Those of strong personal integrity go on one list. The other list includes people who lie or omit important information about health and temperament issues, color dogs, fix bites and tails or just bury their problems in a pet home. Our gene pools in purebred dogs are de facto inbred populations. Being knowledgeable about the common health problems in a breed is crucial to the production of healthy animals. Being knowledgeable about aspects of phenotype and temperament all contribute to our ability to produce quality dogs. A stud dog owner who is unable and/or unwilling to have complete, open and informative discussion about the health, temperament and phenotypic characteristics their dog is likely to produce significantly increases our chances of finding unpleasant surprises in the whelping box.

The last tool I have to share with you is to consciously focus on fostering genetic diversity within your own breeding stock. This actually requires a whole new paradigm. Back in the dark ages, I was taught that a good breeder always keeps the best pup (or pups, maybe a boy and girl). If there happens to be another "good" one, it can be sold into a show home and the rest of the pups were destined for pet homes to be spayed and neutered at six months of age. From the over pet population problem in the 1970s to the shrinking registrations and participation in dog sports over the last couple of decades, we have come dangerously close to spaying and neutering our gene pools beyond the point of no return. It is critical to the continuance of purebred dogs that we learn to appreciate and actively foster genetic variation in our individual breeding programs for the health of our entire breed. We need to consider that our "best" puppies may grow up to be the best show dog (or not), but littermates with excellent temperament, lovely herding or hunting ability and with better health and longevity have things to contribute to the gene pool. My contract used to require spaying and neutering of those pet pups. Now, I beg people to keep them intact and every apparently "decent" male pup has a contract that allows me to use and/or collect the dog after the age of three years and completion of the required CHIC tests. There is no reason that multiple quality dogs out of a litter should not be bred. It may mean more work for us in terms of mentoring and supporting those interested in learning the art and science of breeding excellent dogs, but the pay-off for our gene pools could be enormous. It can also require a little nerve and risk-taking to breed to the unknown dog rather than the "popular" sire. Although we think we know more about Mr. Popular Stud Dog, the truth is that it may be generations before the real impact of any particular stud dog is realized. If it is good, that's great. But if the appearance of an unexpected and truly deleterious recessive is discovered, the gene pool of the breed you love may suffer mightily.

Now I will admit to struggling with the tools being recommended for strengthening the diversity in our gene pools. We are blessed with PCs, tablets and phones that are more powerful than computers that occupied their own air conditioned rooms just a few decades ago. Multiple pedigree programs that can calculate coefficients of inbreeding and coefficients of relationship are readily available and remarkably inexpensive. There are databases with pictures and all sorts of information. Lists of top producing sires (measured by titled offspring) abound. In this cacophony of "information", remember that the output from the computer is only as good as the input. Numbers of titled offspring say as much about the

dedication and resources of the owners and breeders as it does about the overall quality of the animal itself. Coefficients of inbreeding vary from breed to breed depending on number of founders and other factors. My personal experience flies in the face of what we are taught about computerized pedigree analysis. My dog devastated by immune-mediated gastrointestinal disease has a COI of 4%, while my healthiest dogs have COIs between 10 and 14%. Popular stud dogs have also been a mixed bag. More than one particularly noteworthy dog produced an exceptionally high number of seizuring offspring. Two others, the opposite, producing almost no known seizuring offspring. It is critical to keep the computerized information in the appropriate perspective. It does not provide answers. It provides information of varying reliability based on the integrity of the people involved in supplying that information and it gives us clues as to where more research is appropriate. My good friend Libbye Miller DVM says the following about databases and websites with “negative” health information- “It does not mean that those families of dogs have any more or less health problems than any other line. It means that we know a lot about them and their breeders and owners are forthcoming with important information.”

There are no easy answers and no magic bullet tests. In the end, we have our dedication to and love of our breed that motivates us to sort through all the information, ask the hard questions and then make the best possible decision about the (almost) perfect stud dog for our (of course) perfect bitch!

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