



Mentors and Mentees

By Lisa Dubé Forman

The very definition of mentor is a person who advises or person who aids another in achieving a goal. It is the process of passing on one's knowledge to someone you deem worthy. The definition is fairly simple and it would appear at the outset that such an action would be commonplace; however in the art of breeding dogs the process is rare -- amazingly rare. Why?

Well that's the \$64,000 question! I will add that perhaps a portion of the readers will have no clue as to what I am alluding to when using this catch phrase. That's alright because it goes along with the theme of this topic and they can go look up the phrase and in the process they will be educating themselves and, gasp, learning! So I ponder why breeder mentoring is so uncommon?

I believe it begins with our society's priorities and goals being vastly divergent. We live in a society of instant gratification. The desire for relatively quick or immediate satisfaction and fulfillment is evident in many of today's sports. For instance, let us look at baseball and some of its players with their blatant disregard for the fact that millions of young children look to them as role models. We the public are frequently informed via the media of alleged performance enhancing drug use by the players: illegal steroids or other banned substances used to provide outstanding statistics. This is also the case in track & field events. Many are not alleged uses but are confessions by the players themselves owning up to their wrongdoings. Another example is the sport of kings – horse racing. Here we have the wide usage of Lasix which is used when the horse is bleeding in the lungs due to the stress of running. Those knowledgeable on the subject believe one of the causes for this widespread epidemic is due to the overwhelming indiscriminate breeding to fulfill the demand for faster and faster racing stock. There

are also a myriad of substances that allow a horse to work and race through their pain via anti-inflammatory drugs, specific steroids, and pain relievers. There supposedly exists a Racing Consortium created in 2002 to oversee and address the issues; despite this there remain widespread offenses. Why? Because racing enthusiasts and fans want faster and faster horses. They want to see more excitement at the track and, therefore, the breeders and trainers indulge the screaming public by breeding unsound stock that once had an incredibly quick turn of the foot but broke down due to unsoundness. It is all about the win. In today's society we measure success by the wins.

The above provides a “quick dip of the toe into the pool” as to what motivates people today and has in the past several decades. Lets face it, times and people have changed and no one can argue with that. I have read several interesting articles on mentoring over the years but the topic remains still very much unexplored. So here we go.

We start with the need. Breed mentoring is incredibly important. It provides the novice or protégé (the pupil or apprentice or student) an opportunity. We all know the saying, “when opportunity comes knocking” and we are told to recognize it when it does. Canine breeding is a bailiwick in which a protégé can study and ask numerous questions and your mentor will answer with clarity, soundness and, if fortunate enough, a historical accounting to warrant their answers or reasons.

Many of today's breeders did not mature under the guidance of an established and distinguished breeder or judge. I suspect one of the reasons why is because many view the process as an imposition. To be mentored may entail developing under the guidance of a breeder or judge who lives a significant distance from the mentee. The mentee cites



MENTORS AND MENTEES

that it is not possible to visit and learn under the guidance of a mentor due to reasons such as airline expense, little to no free time, conflicting work and/or dog show schedules, and family commitments. Many times the mentee deems it unnecessary to do this anyway and would not consider partaking in such a time consuming procedure. Many of them feel that having attended dog shows for a length of time, having memorable win records, and sitting and watching their breed judging has equipped them with enough knowledge that they are qualified to become a breeder. I have often said that many of these breeders could not point out nor explain many parts of the canine anatomy and even how such specific parts interact with the rest of the framework on the dog in front of them. If they had the privilege and opportunity to learn alongside a notable, qualified mentor with excessive hands-on training, going over lots of dogs and observing movement then they would be able to discuss the anatomy and its interdependence with the muscle physiology vis-à-vis that particular breed's ideal skeletal construction. Lacking the basic fundamental principles can, and already has had, a damaging effect on many breeds observed today in the breed show ring.

Allow me to say that I am not without sympathy for those who do desire to be mentored but state they cannot afford to fly here and there or have the luxury to take time off work to study under their chosen mentor. I understand all too well the expenses incurred for such travel as I have journeyed a great distance to my mentors who were located nearly 1000 miles across the country. Via car it was a minimum of 16 hours each way without an overnight stop, or if flying, four airplanes, round trip, not including my drive of 4 hours to and from the airport. I know that justifying the time and expense to fulfill this obligation to yourself can be hard to explain to a spouse, especially one who does not partake in the sport of purebred dogs. But the question that presents itself immediately is that if you do not have the time to take off from work or the disposable income to develop under a renowned breeder or judge then what time and money will you have to raise a litter of puppies that are properly reared and socialized? How much time will you have if there is an emergency and your bitch requires a C-section or, perish the thought, dies during or after birthing and you have to hand-raise a litter of pups on a bottle -- unless you are fortunate enough to find a surrogate bitch who is experiencing a false pregnancy and letting down milk? If time or expense is an issue then the next scenario must also be considered. Are you prepared to keep all the pups in your litter if there are no suitable homes for the pups to be placed in? Consider the number of new mouths to feed and their veterinarian care and add up the numbers. Can you financially absorb the expenses without sacrificing the well-being and care of your dogs? Remember, these dogs did not ask to be born.

And if you are fortunate enough to have the disposable income to have assistants whelp and raise your pups then the next immediate question is simple: why do you feel qualified to breed a litter when you have had no maturation under a respected, well-known and long-established breeder

or judge?

I have always viewed being a breeder as a solemn responsibility. A breeder, a person who produces animals, should be as knowledgeable as possible because their actions have a cause and effect on not only our beloved dogs but on other



people as well. In breeding dogs typically there are multiple pups in one litter. Many of these pups are then placed or sold to pet homes. If a breeder has incomplete or limited knowledge of a great many important aspects related to canine breeding such as health concerns, basic genetics, canine anatomy, and muscle physiology their shortcomings can cause much avoidable heartache and turmoil in the pups' new homes. The pet owner's heartbreak and angst can quickly take over when their companion is diagnosed with hip dysplasia, epilepsy, retinal disease, progressive retinal atrophy, or diabetes just to name a few of the hundreds of genetic issues effecting dogs today. These people's lives are directly affected by the breeder's actions.

A well-informed mentee (breeder) would have had the opportunity to have learned from their mentors the importance of research: to become cognizant of basic genetic issues and modes of inheritance. This mentee/breeder would understand that genes are inherited not qualities. They would be familiar with the limited usefulness of the traditional pedigree and how the multigenerational collection of names is commonly mistaken as contributable heritable characteristics. This belief has led many to believe their litter will inherit all the desired qualities and that the multitiered ancestors will contribute to the progeny's quality. A well-learned mentee would have an understanding regarding the limitations of ancestral genetic contributions and that genetic material becomes heterogeneous through the generations.

Even if there were no inherited devastating health issues involved, a poorly informed, undiscerning breeder has an ef-

MENTORS AND MENTEES

fect on new pet owner's lives. This breeder may be cultivating a bloodline of dogs that are structurally unsound and incorrect, or that have congenital defects such as poor muscle development. Due in large part to their lack of schooling, this breeder is unaware of the importance of the musculoskeletal system. This, in turn, has an effect on the future dogs they breed and their quality of life. Incorrect angulation and poor assembly cause additional stress to tendons predisposing dogs to increased injuries to their bones. Inferior muscling or unbalanced muscling increases susceptibility to injury as well. As a result, in many of these cases the issues necessitate a need for pain relievers and anti-inflammatory medications over the course of a dog's lifespan. Let us consider the giant breeds wherein a proportion nowadays are overangulated, "overdone" stem to stern.

In many cases, as these giants mature over years, veteran breeders may agree that an overangulated giant which has a congenital defect of inferior to poor quality muscling may



experience a deterioration of its muscle physiology. Overangulation may put a dog more at risk for injury within the bones, joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments, and feet. Some attribute it as an engineering problem. A weakness in the hindquarters which powers the dog is observed and the dog can stumble often and the symptoms progress in severity. Many of us refer to it as "falling apart" and they can do this while in their young adult prime. In some cases these dogs are euthanized as they no longer can get around of their own accord. Dogs which are straight in the pasterns and typically goes hand in hand with incorrect steep shoulder assembly and/or stuck on fronts causes excessive stress placed on the tendons. All of these definitely have an effect on the pet owner who has helplessly fallen head over heels in love with their "best friend" and are heartbroken to either have to maintain their buddy on chemicals and medications for the

remainder of the animals life or, worse, euthanize a dog well before its time because the dog could no longer get up to defecate or urinate outside. Would a breeder who has never been mentored understand all of this having only gleaned their breeding knowledge from exhibiting at dog shows?

Let us face the facts. The time and expense to be mentored is recognized as the cost of doing business. This sacrifice will pay for itself down the road. The sport of dogs is an expensive passion and breed mentoring is just the tip of the financial iceberg. As a parenthetical point, let us consider for a moment the monetary expenses AKC judges have to absorb. I am using judges as an example because the process of becoming an AKC dog show judge is extremely costly depending on what region of the country you reside in.

When applying for additional breeds judges are expected to attend breed seminars, specialties, supported entries, study groups, and workshops or institutes for each breed being applied for. They are expected to have had mentoring/tutoring experience with each breed. The AKC defines it by stating that the judge selects and works with qualified mentors including but not limited to the following opportunities: a) tutoring and guiding the applicant (judge) in breed knowledge over a period of time continuing into the provisional and regular status periods, and b) ongoing continuous kennel visits characterized by hands-on experience with litters of various ages as well as adult dogs.

Judges are expected to have experience judging the breed(s) at futurities, sanctioned matches, sweepstakes assignments, or special attractions. Lastly, they are expected to have had ringside observations with a minimum of 3 ringside observations per breed, including 2 with major entries. As it typically turns out, most all the breed specific seminars/study groups/workshops/institutes and finally the breed(s) national specialties that judges require turn out to be located halfway or clear cross-country! Imagine the expenses, time, and effort incurred when applying for more than one breed at a time! It adds up into the tens of thousands of dollars. As an example, in 2009 I attended four (4) breed national specialties not including my own breed's regional specialties and other all-breed shows and, yes, it involved both air and long distance car travel. For those judges approved for only a few breeds the real financial setbacks come into play. After completion and AKC approval for the additional breed's application, the provisional process begins. This sometimes includes cross country travel to fulfill judging assignments in order to complete your provisional requirements. It is not uncommon for a judge who has judging privileges for just one or two breeds to have to fly 3,000 miles to complete one provisional assignment and then return home the next day.

The relationship between mentor and mentee cannot be underestimated. As I said earlier it is a process of maturation and development. Interestingly enough as I write this article my dogs provided me with an ideal example of mentoring. Here I sit at my computer and outside my window I am observing my two intact males wandering around. The young

MENTORS AND MENTEES

male who is 18 months of age is continuously following the 5-year old stud dog around the fenced yard as the older male investigates every tree and rock my bitches have been near. I have females in season and so the elder is teaching the young. As the stud dog does so does the yearling. The older male teaches the yearling by example or some may believe the yearling simply imitates the elder. But the result is the same: the yearling is learning by and from his mentor. So it goes with us. Whatever the breed, the process is the same. Yes, the learning aspect can be done via books and DVDs. Nevertheless I feel -- and I am certain that many experienced, long time breeders will concur -- these tools alone do not bring about a thorough understanding of a breed. Hands-on interaction with a number of dogs located at your mentor's cannot be duplicated at a show. How else will you learn the intrinsic details of your breed but to go over detail after detail on your mentor's dogs? These sessions are not limited to intrinsic details of your breed but may also be significant to a particular group of dogs such as, in my case, sighthounds. There are many nuances in learning about sighthounds that my mentors taught me extremely well and to this day we still discuss various constructs of a sighthound -- the essentials -- the non-negotiables of attempting to produce the ideal sighthound. In my opinion, this cannot be learned by only observing dogs at a show ring.

It can take years to absorb the many aspects of the canine musculoskeletal system and canine behavior and one accomplishes this by ongoing interaction with a veteran. As I said earlier, and it bears repeating, if a mentee had the privilege and opportunity to learn alongside a notable, qualified mentor with excessive hands-on training, going over lots of dogs and observing movement, the mentee would be able to discuss the anatomy and its interdependence with the muscle physiology vis-à-vis that particular breed's ideal skeletal construction.

The point is we never stop learning. I have often said and strongly feel that even AKC judges who have been approved for dozens of years should still attend breed specialties to keep apprized as to the evolution or devolution of the breeds. Yes, read whatever you can acquire on your breed. Look at presentation material from when your breed originated such as print material, antique photos, and old movie recordings, but you cannot stop there. Reaching out to a doyenne of your breed is critical to learning and interpretation. If you are lucky enough establish rapport with several veterans in order to learn various viewpoints as we are all human and typically do not agree on every point except the

fundamentals. The opportunity to learn at the knee of several mentors is extraordinary.

Respect: at the risk of sounding impudent, respect is not merely acquired based on how many blue ribbons are accumulated or the number of group and best in show wins. I personally feel that in today's dog show sporting events achievements such as these are largely viewed with cynicism, and rightly so. I will not digress at this point but I suggest reading my previous article titled *The Dog Show Game, Telling it Like it is*.

I believe respect is earned through accumulation of knowledge and how one applies this all-inclusive knowledge. In breeding I believe respect is attained by becoming as knowledgeable as possible regarding your breed with all the mentioned recommendations and then breeding with that hard earned knowledge, irrespective of harmful and oftentimes manipulating outside stimuli. The latter being what appears as current breed trends: as the breeds are being restyled and transfigured. Respect is earned by breeding to the criterion as originally set forth and being stubbornly fixed on your goals. To breed with consistency and with a vision is what earns one respect today in the dog show world -- even begrudgingly from those who criticize. I believe that many veterans would quickly concur that it is a compliment received when your line of dogs is repeatedly viewed as consistent -- when

another remarks that they can always recognize your bloodline at a show. To achieve such consistency comes from dedication, pursuit of one's vision and remaining steadfast to the overall shape, look, and presence of that particular breed. It does not come from the act of arbitrarily collecting specimens of various lines or breeding to them based on some of their dog show records or point accumulation. Respect that you garner from contemporaries and even protégées is fulfilling but the most valuable and meaningful is the respect you will have for yourself. This feeling is not achieved by going the shortest and easiest route or by taking shortcuts to fulfill a passion for being the best at what you do. After much studying and learning through hands-on mentoring experience, in addition to the unrestricted sacrifices made by yourself, you will have pride, dignity and respect that stand out even when you are not winning in the show ring.

Remember the often misquoted Grantland Rice, an American sportswriter who lived from 1880-1954, who once wrote, "For when the One Great Scorer comes, / To write against your name, / He marks - not that you won or lost - / But how you played the Game."



"To breed with consistency and with a vision is what earns one respect today in the dog show world -- even begrudgingly from those who criticize."
