

Do I Need a Mentor?

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Have you ever wondered why some breeders are able to consistently produce outstanding dogs? The answers are many; however one of the major factors is that they had an outstanding mentor.

Breeding mediocre animals is easy.

Breeding animals of outstanding quality takes commitment. Breeders MUST be their own worst critic! And they must be brutally honest in their breeding program. Personal feelings must be put aside in the decision to breed only the best. Great breeders, like great mentors, will never criticize an outstanding or top winning dog...they know how hard they are to come by and appreciate the work involved in producing them and managing their show careers.

Those consistently producing top winning and producing dogs will attest that obtaining a Championship on a dog does not always mean that it is breeding quality. In our breed it is fairly easy to finish anything on four legs, however, that doesn't mean you necessarily need to breed it!

Here is where an outstanding mentor is able to help and guide you...provided you have found a good mentor to start with! So, who makes a good mentor?

The easy answer is a breeder who has been successful in the breed!

Here is a suggestion from Robert Oppenheimer in his world famous "20 Basic Breeding Principles"

3. Don't take advice from people who have always been unsuccessful breeders. If their opinions were worth having, they would have proved it by their successes.

So, what defines a good mentor? Webster defines a mentor as a wise and faithful counselor. In the sport of dogs, the most sought after mentors are successful, established breeders with years of experience who realize the importance of passing the torch to younger breeders eager to carry on their valuable gene pool. Whether you desire to be an active breeder or an avid competitor in obedience, the mentors who give you your start will have a lasting impact on your future success. In fact, when you realize that most mentors are often the source of your foundation stock, the choice of a mentor can be as important as understanding your breed standard or learning to apply basic genetic principles to your breeding program.

(Portions of "HOW TO CHOOSE A MENTOR" (below) reprinted with permission from Claudia Waller Orlandi Ph.D, <http://topsfieldbassets.com>)

HOW TO CHOOSE A MENTOR

References

Craige, P. 1997. Born to Win: Breed to Succeed.

TYPES OF MENTORS

1. SEEK THE GUIDANCE OF A SUCCESSFUL, ESTABLISHED BREEDER, WHO YOU RESPECT MORALLY AND INTELLECTUALLY

The best of these are established, long-time breeders and are dedicated individuals that you trust as people. They are clear, objective thinkers who have a plan and consistency in their breeding programs. Their dogs successfully compete at regional and national specialty levels as well as in the all-breed arena.

ADVANTAGE:

Hooking up with one person such as this can put you on a "fast track" and speed up your success.

DISADVANTAGE:

Since you are putting all of your eggs in one basket, it is important to be certain that this is the right way to go.

2. LEARN FROM AS MANY MASTER BREEDERS AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AS POSSIBLE

Instead of committing to one mentor, work with several expert breeders and expose yourself to as many educational experiences as possible. Invaluable resources are books, breed publications and videos. Topics to study should include: your breed's official standard and illustrated standard, basic principles of canine genetics, canine anatomy and movement, whelping and canine diseases. Attend specialties and seminars and ask for hands-on work with several respected mentor-breeders.

ADVANTAGE:

Gathering knowledge from more than one source can provide a more complete picture relative to your breed and help you make better informed decisions.

DISADVANTAGE:

You expose yourself to scattered and contradictory opinions that can lead to confusion and indecision.

COMBINE APPROACHES ONE AND TWO!

A third possibility is to combine the above two options, working very closely with one established breeder as you continue to expand your knowledge by exposing yourself to as many other educational sources as possible.

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP!

One of the biggest mistakes new-comers to the breed can make is to impulsively hook up with the first breeder with whom they come in contact. Before they realize it, this person has become a self-appointed mentor. It may or may not have been the right choice. Other suggestions include:

- Attending as many specialties as possible as well as your breed's national specialty show. These are the best places to meet some of the established breeders and see dogs they have bred.
- Reading! Anything having to do with schipperkes and dog structure, breeding and training in general. Such information may help guide you in your choice of a mentor. My mentor preached to me that you HAD to know D-O-G before you would ever learn TYPE!
- For the average dog person, it takes approximately 10 years to really learn breed type...sadly; some never do as type and soundness go hand in hand.
- Deciding what your goals are. Would-be mentors want to know what they are dealing with. Are you interested in just showing dogs to their championships or do you want to breed? Are you truly willing to take advice? Or do you just want to hear what you want to hear?
- Bear in mind that really good mentors have spent many, many years learning about the dog game. It is doubtful that you will know MORE than they do ... As good mentors and great breeders are constantly learning.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Craige (1997) offers the following advice when choosing your mentor.

- *"Follow your head over your heart."*

Really liking someone does not mean that person would be the best mentor. It is especially important not to choose as a mentor someone who reinforces any already incorrect concepts that you might have. People with charismatic, winning personalities can easily sway others into their way of thinking. Be sure they are competent and knowledgeable.

- *"Avoid negative personalities who trash everyone but themselves."*

Beware of the individual who never has a good word to say about other competitors or their dogs. Eventually this type of negativity will rub off on you and ultimately reflect badly on your dogs.

- *"Seek out learned people who are upbeat and personable."* The mentor/student relationship can be as emotional as a marriage. Avoid mentors who are overly sensitive and insecure. No matter how knowledgeable a person may be, the stress of walking on egg shells is not worth it.

- *"Don't expect something for nothing."*

Mentors have devoted years of hard work and endured numerous setbacks to get where they are. Offer them your services whenever possible, whether it is helping care for dogs, assisting at shows or whelping litters.

No matter how closely you work with a mentor, you are ultimately the one responsible for your decisions and the day will come when you are on your own. Perhaps the shared experiences and advice you receive from your teachers will prepare you to become one of your breed's future mentors.