

BREEDING - PLEASURE OR PAIN?

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I have been asked so many times "why do we breed", "how do you know what dogs to mate", "how much is the price of a puppy" and then "wow you must be rich". I am sure many breeders will be able to relate to the last statement very well. However the reality of all this money is just not so. The cost of planning, researching and providing the best care for your brood bitch pre and post delivery, your puppies and your stud dog is high and this is nothing compared to the stress and distress when things go wrong. Despite the best care possible sometimes things do go wrong and this fact can be very hard to come to terms with. However the absolute joy of successfully raising a healthy and happy brood of puppies is without equal.

In order for us to reduce the risk factors in any breeding that we are planning we have developed a set of principles that have helped us to objectively assess the viability of each breeding.

Firstly, when considering a breeding we ask ourselves are we looking to outcross or line breed, this is a very important first step as it defines where we go and what stud dog or bitch we are planning to use. I believe it is imperative to have a good combination of outcrossing and line breeding to maintain vigour and vitality in our lines. In order for us to work out if we are line breeding or outcrossing we use a pedigree analysis programme that gives us a percentage of similarity by combining the pedigrees of both parents. This then gives us an idea of the percentage of similarity but also tells us what percentage of difference there is in the pedigrees, the higher the percentage the closer the line breeding.

Once we have decided on pedigrees and what we are looking for in the way of structure, temperament and type we then proceed to assess both the stud dog and the brood bitch to identify their strengths and weakness and their phenotypical similarity to each other. This assists us by giving us an idea of what to expect in relation to the type of puppy that should be produced from this breeding. This stage can be done whether we are planning an outcrossing or a line breeding, even when we plan outcrosses we still endeavour to ensure we have phenotypical similarity in the dogs we are using.

So we have now identified the dogs we want to breed and we have researched our pedigrees and checked the lines for health issues we need to be aware of. Both dogs have had their hips, elbows, CHD numbers registered and CERF completed. Now we prepare both dogs for the upcoming mating by taking a routine blood test to check thyroid levels, and to ensure there is no sub clinical infection present in either dog. A cervical smear is taken from the brood bitch to ensure there is no infection present in the vagina or cervical opening and the stud dog's semen is checked for motility and viability. All vaccinations, worming and heartworm treatments have been attended to and updated if necessary. These tests are all done prior to the brood bitch coming into season.

Once the brood bitch has started her season we monitor her progression through to her most fertile time. We also utilise the service of our vet to monitor progesterone levels so we have a clear indicator of her most fertile period where we will have the optimal chance of success with the breeding.

We generally mate our brood bitches to our stud dog once every 36 hours for a total of three matings but this is our routine and I have heard and seen many variations to this practice. However we like to rest our stud dog between mating to ensure he is well rested and he has built up his sperm count between studs but in saying this there is no right or wrong practice, it is up to the individual breeder. We do not run our brood bitch or our stud dog together unsupervised at any time during their fertile period due to possible complications to both the bitch or the dog, all mating are supervised and assisted by us. For us it is imperative that both the brood bitch and the stud dog are kept in optimal condition throughout the breeding cycle. This usually includes a change to normal feeding regimes particularly for the stud dog as they can become quite preoccupied and may go off their regular food so we try to tempt them with special foods that they are usually very fond of. This helps in maintaining a healthy weight for the stud dog.

Now we wait until such time as pregnancy can be verified. Generally with experienced brood bitches and attentive owners you will see a change in the bitch's behaviour, she may become more clingy than usual (if that is possible) and may seek your attention more than usual. However maiden bitch's may be harder to predict as they are not as experienced in knowing the changes that are occurring within them. We tend to treat our mated bitch as being in pup rather than to wait until we have verification from the vet, so far we have not been incorrect. Usually our brood bitch is between four and five weeks along before we take her to the vets for an ultrasound. This is usually to give us an idea of how many pups she has as usually we have

noticed an increase in girth size and an increase in appetite by this time.

As the time is nearing the whelping box is prepared and the brood bitch tends to spend longer periods in there preparing for her pups. Usually when whelping is very near the bitch will give very clear indicators she is getting ready for her pups to be born. She maybe restless and panting, and finding it difficult to settle in one spot, she may wish you to be with her or near the whelping box to give her additional support. As each puppy is born it is weighed and checked for cleft palates, time of birth and sex is recorded but generally we do not interfere with the birthing process unless there appears to be a problem.

To experience the absolute joy of watching a litter of pups develop from little moles into bouncing bundles of fur with their own individuality and characteristics is just wonderful. We feel it is important to allow the dam to stay with her pup's throughout their growth as she has a very important role to play in their development and learning.

We have gained much insight from watching Twister teach her pups right and wrong and to see how she maintains order within her brood. We also encourage all other members of our pack to play a role in raising the pups. Mysty under the watchful eye of mum plays and cleans the pups and even dad (Senator) played with the pups and puppy sat while Twister had a doze in the sun. We feel these associations with other larger dogs like their aunty (well actually their half sister) and their dad helped them to relate to other larger dogs when they leave our pack to go to their respective homes. We also encourage our children to be actively involved with the raising of the pups as this helps them to bonds well to other children when the pups leave home.

The next big hurdle for us is placing our babies into suitable loving and caring home's, this is probably one of the most difficult jobs I have. We believe we have the reasonability to ensure our pups are healthy and well adjusted to take on their roles with their new families. Prior to our pups leaving home they are all vet checked, vaccinated, microchipped, wormed and eye checked, all puppies are registered with the Canine body in our state either on the main or the limited register. At between seven and a half and eight weeks the pups are all assessed using the Puppy Puzzle for structural and temperament soundness. Only those puppies that are assessed as optimal in both structure and temperament are identified as suitable as show/breeding dogs. To date no puppy we have raised has failed his or her temperament test. A full report of the assessment is provided to each owner whether the puppy is a show or a companion puppy and a reassessment is provided when the pup is two years old.

In order to reassure ourselves we are placing our puppies into healthy and loving environments we do home visits where possible and in some circumstances where this is not possible we seek references from people associated with the families wishing to adopt one of our puppies. All our pups are placed under a health contract that also provides a standard of care that must be provided, non show/breeding puppies are only placed as sterilised to ensure accidents do not occur. All puppies bred by us must be returned to us should the families they have been placed with not be able to care for them for whatever reason.

Even with some losses and the grief that goes with loosing any life I would have to say I think breeding is both an immeasurable pleasure mixed with some pain. The painful experiences have taught me to never take anything for granted and the pleasure is what keeps me wanting to breed another litter. The support and love I receive from the families that have adopted our puppies and my own family helps me to balance the joy and the sadness.