

## *Breeder challenges:*

### **There is no Mapquest for breeding dogs**

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Anyone who has been breeding and competing in the show ring for a dozen years or so, knows the standard and understands its importance. However, there is a big difference between understanding the standard, being able to recognize it in the flesh and being able to create that vision in your own dog. Despite all of our changes in science and technology, there still is no Mapquest for breeding purebred dogs. But that doesn't mean there are no maps!

Before Mapquest and GPS were used, we didn't just ask a person for their address and then show up at their door. We asked for directions. Once we had our written directions, we often looked at a map to "visualize" the route. We looked for major landmarks, or clues that would assure us that we were headed in the right direction. Most of us planned the journey ahead of time and ask for directions from people who know how to get to the destination. If we got lost, we asked someone for directions (and then often questioned if they were right). And so it is with breeding. While we may know where we are going (the standard), most of us do not know the entire route to get there. To further complicate the directions, the route each of us will take will not be the same, because we are not starting at the same point, and unfortunately there are many wrong turns a breeder can take along the road.

For some breeders puppy selection is one of the most critical steps. The judge for instance, has the easy job of evaluating the dog on a particular day, whereas the breeder has to be able to predict how the puppy will turn out as an adult. A breeder must learn through trial and error which puppy to keep, but just like traveling to the same destination on multiple occasions, a breeder that has an established line knows more quickly which is the right puppy. Espen Engh, a Norwegian breeder of Greyhounds and international judge, stated, "In breeding, selection is the key! You can use any method; outcrossing, inbreeding, linebreeding- if you select for the right puppies you can breed successfully." Established breeders determine criteria to evaluate puppies. This is done over time and through experience. Many successful breeders keep good records such as photographs, growth charts and other data to help them reduce the likelihood of repeating the mistake

of selling the next “big winner” as a pet. They often maintain contact with pets they have sold to see if they sold the “next big winner”, or if they were correct in the early determination of “pet quality”. Because of the inability of many breeders to keep multiple puppies from one litter to “grow out”, selection indeed is key! If dogs in the show ring today are inferior, what may be happening is that having made a mistake of growing out the wrong puppies, breeders today maybe taking the attitude of “well I put this much time into raising the dog, I might as well finish it.”

When breeding a litter to improve a particular trait, many breeders make the common mistake of keeping the puppy that has the same fault they were attempting to correct because it is familiar to them. Engh states, “I see breeders making mistakes when selecting puppies from their outcrosses. They outcross, then pick the puppy that looks the most like the mother. Not only did that puppy not pick up what you wanted from the outcross; even worse, you have *diluted your line* (emphasis is mine) by breeding out and not keeping what you needed.” Establishing a line sets particular traits within that line and enables the breeder to more easily predict the outcome of the litter.

Barbara Curry stated in a 1981 article, “It falls back to the oft-asked question: Why is it that so few shelties breed true to type? Some do, you know, but they are in the distinct minority.” It has often been said that shelties are a “young” breed and although this has been used at times as an excuse for the difficulty of breeding consistency in the breed, there is some truth that greater the genetic diversity results in greater potential variations when breeding.

The “lack of breed type” issue is as old as our breed. Catherine Coleman Moore wrote of this concern in the 1930’s and others have written about it ever since. In Patricia Craige’s book, Born to Win, she states that all breeds experience improvements and setbacks over time. Clearly our breed has made progress since Ms. Moore’s time, but as all breeds eventually do, ours may be experiencing a “valley” in the “peaks and valleys” of breed improvement. Breeds are “lifted to a higher level” in two ways: 1) by talented breeders, and 2) influential dogs. Our breed has been lucky because in its short history we have had both talented breeders and great sires that had tremendous impacts on our breed.

Talented breeders “establish a line” and the rest of the fancy has the opportunity to benefit from the gains they make. An “established line” reflects the emphasis that breeder places on the standard and the line becomes dominant for those traits. This enables other breeders looking for those traits to use those dogs, thus incorporating those traits in to their line and in many cases raising the quality of their dogs. This natural progression in breeding is discussed in Charlotte Clem McGowan’s book, The Shetland Sheepdog in America regarding the different “generations” of breeders. McGowan writes, “After the initial establishment of the breed in the United States, a number of kennels came into being which remained in operation for decades and established their own strains of Shelties recognizable for their type points and quality.” Later in her book, regarding the next “generation of breeders” she writes, “Still, during this period (‘60’s and ‘70’s), some smaller kennels did develop what was a distinctive look reflecting the vision of the particular breeder. The talent of the breeders of this period was and is notable.” It was during this time period that breeders benefited from the great, well-bred influential, Ch. Halstor’s Peter Pumpkin, ROM aka “Peter”.

In a series of articles published in the AKC Gazette collectively called “The Greats, A Series On Dogs Who Made A Difference In Their Breed”, Patricia Trotter highlights stud dogs that have had lasting influence on their breed for many, many generations. “Peter” was one such dog and subsequently was featured in this series. In all of the articles, Trotter speaks of the importance of the pedigree and what combinations allowed these extraordinary phenomenons of breed dominance to occur. In Peter’s case it was the Ch. Nashcrest Golden Note/Ch. Shetlieland Kiltie O’Sea Isle cross that was credited as the key. Patricia Trotter suggests that to have successful family crosses, you must have established lines.

No matter what the breed, or the species, man has been attempting to manipulate genetics for some specific outcome for hundreds of years and has learned a lot along the way. In the effort to improve the overall quality of the Shetland Sheepdog the principles of breeding should be the starting point. Good books and magazine articles have been written by observant breeders and geneticists that document their attempts, successes, and failures. These are the roadmaps that we need. Although we might not always take the most direct route, learning to recognize the path to our ultimate destination is the key.

We cannot begin where we are and be transported to our destination without a little travel along the way. Traveling across unfamiliar ground may be a bit scary, but if we can read the road signs, and speak the same language, then we can always ask directions and we may arrive a bit sooner than if we had just “followed the sun”. Seminars hosted by the ASSA at our Nationals are a good place to talk with fellow breeders, ask directions, and head out again on the journey. The seminars on fundamental breeding principles, pedigree analysis, and puppy selection is akin to setting out on the journey with some pieces of the map. If you don’t know how to read a map, they are good places to learn, because even with a map in the car, if you don’t know how to use it, it is still possible to get lost. While it is important to know where you are going, just looking at the brochures of the destination won’t get you there any faster.

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