

Our guest columnist this month is Berna Welch, one of my mentors. Berna is a successful Golden Retriever breeder with great insight and a wonderful teacher. I have been fortunate to have a friend like Berna who is willing to share her knowledge with me. Everyone starting out in dogs would do well to seek out a successful breeder as a mentor.

Objectivity—The Way to Success

I consider myself very fortunate to have been mentored by wonderful breeders. They were members of their breed club's education committees and worked tirelessly in the development of their breed's standard. They impressed on me the importance of a breed standard and why it is the foundation for any successful breeding program. Did these breeders love their dogs? Absolutely! Yet they had the ability to look at them with great objectivity.

Breed standards are objective descriptions of breed type, including function. We often struggle with objectivity when evaluating our own breeding stock. Looking critically at our dogs is understandably difficult because most are beloved family members. But objective evaluation is not just about finding fault with a dog. We must learn to recognize virtues as well as weaknesses. This aids in selection and increases the possibility of success.

How do we learn to become more objective?

Read the standard. If your breed has an illustrated standard, it will be an invaluable tool. Study the history of your breed as its origins play an important role in understanding type.

Educate your eye. Develop an image of the ideal for your breed. Find the ideal outline then break down the parts. Understanding how the parts fit together helps in understanding the whole dog.

Educate your hands. Ask permission to go over dogs you have interest in. See as many litters as possible. Most breeders are happy to show off their puppies.

Try to see litters with pedigrees similar to your own as well as litters with different bloodlines. Put your hands on the pups. Observe them on the ground and at play to see how they use their bodies. View their physical attributes with appreciation, not just criticism!

Attend field events. Take a copy of the standard along. Learn what is required of the dog and apply it to the standard. There must always be a strong relationship between form and function. Now evaluate your own dogs. Are they constructed to do the job? And also importantly, would they *want* to do the job? Retaining natural ability and desire in our breeding programs helps protect breed purpose.

Attend your breed's national specialty. Here you will find a large cross-section of breeders and dogs of different bloodlines.

Ask questions. Knowledge is power! Good breeders will point out what is right about a dog, even if it isn't of their breeding. A good breeder practices what i call "ego suppression." they enjoy their success but understand they must continue to learn and strive for improvement. They understand that all dogs are the product of two imperfect dogs and realize they will suffer setbacks along the way. When evaluating breeding stock they keep their minds open and their emotional attachments in check. Selection must be based on objectivity or it is counter productive.

With continued study this accumulation of information will begin to make sense. You'll learn to see a dog's virtues instead of simply finding its faults. It is exhilarating to see a dog that has so much quality you recognize it immediately. In your minds eye you can picture that dog doing its job like a well-oiled machine! Now you are evaluating dogs objectively and you are on your way to success. — B.W.

Thank you, Berna, for this informative column. Please visit the APC website at www.americanpointerclub.com for information on our wonderful breed. —Helyne E. Medeiros, Marstons Mills, Mass.; seasydehm@aol.com