

*The following article first appeared in two parts in the April and July 2011 issues of the AKC Gazette and is reproduced with permission.*

Our guest columnist this month is Linda Durham, of Renaissance Vizslas. Linda is new to the Pointer world, but she has been a very successful Vizsla breeder and a wonderful mentor to many.

### **Where Have All the Mentors Gone?**

I received a phone call a few weeks ago from a woman asking me for breeding advice. It seems she was attempting to breed her maiden bitch to a young male who is owned by a friend of mine. Apparently it wasn't going as planned, and at the request of the stud owner, she called me for help.

I asked her to explain the situation. "Well," she said, "we put the two dogs together, and the boy would not breed my girl. He wouldn't even play with her. What should I do?"

"Do you know if she has ovulated?" I asked.

"What?"

I replied, "Have you had her progesterone level tested?"

"What is that?" she asked, puzzled.

"OK," I said, "How long has your bitch been in season? When was the first day you saw any bleeding?"

"Three days ago." Her response astounded me.

And with that I wondered: *Where have all the mentors gone?* At first I thought this was just another example of today's new breeder, who purchases a bitch from anyone who will sell her one, shows her until she finally finishes, and then breeds her the first chance she gets. She doesn't learn what she needs to know (because she already knows everything), she breeds without thought, and she dismisses the knowledge of established breeders whom she should be learning from. But are such people entirely to blame?

And what about those established breeders? Is it not incumbent upon them to share their knowledge with their puppy buyers? Especially those to whom they have sold "show quality" puppies?

Today, it seems, established breeders are increasingly concerned (and justifiably so) not only with what they produce but with who the pups are sold to and where the descendants may end up two or three generations down the line. Consequently, in an attempt to protect their lines from exploitation or from "falling into the wrong hands," they begin going to extraordinary measures to control not only everything they produce but all that comes after—with onerous sales contracts, co-ownerships, and non-breeding agreements, all designed to limit the actions of those they choose to work with but whom they basically do not trust.

The reasons for these attitudes is a separate issue, but the impact on new breeders cannot be ignored. This leaves many newcomers in a precarious position that is unique to present-day breeders. Can you imagine, for example, where the Pointer breed might be if the large kennels of the 1930s and 1940s that produced what is regarded as today's foundation stock did not allow any of the dogs they sold to be bred? The breed would have definitely suffered a tremendous loss! Where would we be ourselves, as breeders, if no one had ever taken the leap of faith we call trust and shared their hard-learned lessons with us?

Today mentorships succeed or fail for a variety of reasons, and it is unfair for established breeders to place the blame at the feet of new fanciers without looking carefully and objectively at their own role in the relationship. In addition to the failings of new breeders commonly discussed—such as not accessing experienced breeders, not selecting good

breeding stock, not taking time to learn about the breed and its conformation and health or good breeding practices, and wanting something for nothing—the lack of foresight shown by students when entering into agreements regarding dogs and potential breeding stock is also of major concern. At the same time, failed relationships often find their root in weighted hierarchies, mistrust, control issues, lack of personal integrity, and superiority complexes supported and perpetuated by many of those established breeders.

Perhaps it is time for some serious reflection and introspection. In this fast-paced, instant-gratification world we live in, we need to remember that “once upon a time,” *we* didn’t know how to breed a bitch, either. It is our duty, as caretakers of our breed, to do all we can to teach the newcomers, as they are our future. What is the point of dedicating years to a breed, striving to protect and improve it, without also passing on to others what we have learned? Not only is that self-serving, it is the death of the breed.

Ribbons will fade and records will fall, but what will endure is the legacy we leave through the knowledge we impart to others. Trust me, there is no greater sense of satisfaction than in seeing a student of yours meet with her own success! Try it—you just might like it! —L.D.

Thank you, Linda, for this informative column.

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