

NOVICES INTERVIEWING BREEDERS

by Jill Swedlow

Much has been written about the relationship between breeders and those who purchase their puppies. However, precious little has appeared that assists the puppy buyer in knowing when he's found the right breeder. I'd hate to tell you how many times I've been approached by newcomers to our breed who have sad stories to tell. People who have purchased puppies from breeders whom they thought could be trusted and ended up with a puppy with serious health or temperament problems. Now these things can and do occur in the best of breedings. But the main complaint is that the breeder who was so helpful before they purchased the puppy, has either become unavailable or is blaming the owner for the problem now that the check has cleared!

So, for all of the novice people, hoping to buy a healthy puppy with a great temperament from a breeder who will guarantee their puppy and be there as a mentor, here are some of the things you must know and questions you must ask.

First of all, just because a breeder owns, breeds and heavily advertises winning dogs, don't assume that these are necessarily good dogs. Don't assume that these peoples dogs must have the best quality, health and temperament. On the other hand, don't assume that they don't either. The key will be in the questions you ask and the observations you make. When you first meet a breeder as a prospective puppy buyer, you should expect the breeder to question you heavily about such matters as how you plan to house the puppy, if you have a fenced yard, if you can afford a bloat surgery etceteras. If he doesn't, look elsewhere.

But in turn, you are not out of line to question the breeder.

The first thing I'd want to know about is what, if any, health screening tests have been performed on the parents of the litter. If you are told, 'Oh, I don't need to health check, my dogs don't have any problems', RUN don't walk to the nearest exit. I know this sounds ludicrous but trust me when I tell you that there are still a LOT of very well known breeders out there who don't even bother to do a hip x-ray on their breeding stock because they don't have any problems! They use all kinds of excuses such as 'I'd know by the movement if my dog had hip dysplasia'. This is simply not so! I've known 3 dogs personally who all were well known for their superior movement but could not pass their OFA evaluation. If you don't x-ray, you don't know, period! And what about the films that get sent to OFA and come back dysplastic the first time and normal the second? What about it? It happens. Mistakes can be made in all phases of endeavor. But hip x-ray is still the best defense we have and whether or not the films are actually sent to OFA, there should at least be a note verifying the evaluation by a board certified radiologist.

By now you've probably figured out that I consider hip evaluation a mandatory test to be done prior to breeding. If a breeder doesn't do this, go far away. The other test I feel is mandatory is thyroid testing. Besides certifying hips, OFA now certifies thyroid and has a protocol in place for doing this procedure. At the very least a screening thyroid should be done. Thyroid is a difficult function to test for and results should be sent to the labs that are properly set up for this. I believe that OFA has only a couple labs from which they'll accept results. It is important to test for thyroid function because not only is it too often found abnormal in Great Danes, the hormones from this organ control all of the endocrine system, thus affecting everything from skin condition to reproduction to autoimmune problems. At a minimum, a breeder should test for normal hips and thyroid. But there are other problems that are beginning to affect our breed too.

von Willibrands disease (vWD) is a blood disorder that greatly increases clotting time. Doberman Pinchers have a lot of it. It has also been diagnosed in Great Danes. It's a simple blood test and easy to screen. Many breeders are also testing for elbow dysplasia, cardiac soundness and juvenile cataracts. I personally test for all except for elbow dysplasia. (Guess I need to find out if you can 'see' it if they have it, huh?) Occasionally a Dane will be diagnosed with juvenile cataracts. Although in many breeds this is a serious health problem, often causing blindness, the question in Danes remains, 'do they live long enough to ever be bothered by it even if they have cataracts?' In any case, because it does occur in Danes, the only way we'll control it is to screen for it. Forewarned is forearmed (to be trite).

Although cardiomyopathy is a problem in the breed, it's a difficult condition to evaluate. Obviously if they are actually suffering from it, the test will show it. However, when I had one of my bitches checked, I was told that although she was healthy at the moment, she could show cardiomyopathy when tested in 6 more months! What I find really odd is that OFA will certify the heart with a one time test! Oh, well, we do the best we can I suppose.

So assuming that the breeder has at least done hip and thyroid screening, the next question is to ask for documentation. Anyone can say that their dogs have been screened. I know this probably really sounds harsh, but if a breeder is honest, they should have no problem with showing you the documents. If they hem and haw, beware. And this brings us to a really touchy question. They say they do the screening, they show you the documentation, can they prove that this documentation does, indeed reflect the results for that particular dog? In other words, does the dog have any kind of permanent identification? I must admit that I have only one dog that could fill all the above criteria. Until recently, it never occurred to me that someone might test a healthy ringer to substitute for the dog that had previously failed the testing. In talking to the veterinarians who have

done these screening tests, I've asked them how they verify that this is the actual dog it is purported to be. They've all told me that there is no way they can unless the dog is identified with either a tattoo or a microchip. Due to a personal experience with this kind of fakery, I plan to microchip and tattoo every future puppy I produce at cropping time. Every test I've performed on Skylark shows here microchip number on the documentation. I make the vets check her chip before the test. Hopefully the day will soon come when the AKC will require permanent identification PRIOR to registration. This will keep a whole lot of people a whole lot more honest! I'm certainly not trying to imply that those who fake test results are in the majority. Far from it, but it does happen and it's important to know this.

This brings us up to temperament. Basically our breed truly deserves its nick name of 'gentle giant'. Breeders have wrought miracles in temperament improvement from the first Danes imported from Germany into our country. Back then the breed was so vicious that they were banned from dog shows. But unfortunately the incidents of Danes biting children, their owners or handlers seem to be increasing. There are top show specimens with terrible temperaments continue to be bred. These are often dogs produced and used at stud by well known breeders. Why? I don't know. I've given up trying to figure it out. I've always hoped that one of these dogs would take a really BIG bite out of the people who continue to breed him/her.

You need to ask if a breeder will guarantee the temperament. You need to see the dam (away from her puppies, please) and the sire. You need to see them under circumstances other than being strung up in the show ring or ring side. Believe me, the handlers know well how to hide temperament problems.

However, there's a catch to this one. Temperament is not only a product of genetics, it is also heavily influenced by environment. An aggressive dog can be made more so by a timid owner who has no idea

how to cope with his pushiness. A submissive dog could be turned into a fear biter by an abusive owner. Conversely the aggressive dog can become a reliable family companion and guard in the right hands as can the shy dog be brought to it's best by a competent owner.

Because once the dog leaves the breeders, control is relinquished, I DO NOT guarantee temperament in writing. For instance, if I thought that the problem had been caused or aggravated by the way the dog was treated, there is no way I'd place another dog with that person. Instead I would refund half the money and send them on their way. In one circumstance when we had a temperament problem in a dog that I knew had been properly raised and nurtured, I replaced the dog from a puppy from another (unrelated) litter. I make it clear in my contract that I have the final say so in these cases. As a new buyer, you will need to go on your instinct here. If the breeder strikes you as being truly concerned with good temperament, then you're probably safe with them. Just don't fault them if they fail to unconditionally guarantee this trait.

A good breeder knows the potential temperament of her puppies. Rely on her to help you pick the best temperament for you situation. A family with small children will be best off with a puppy who is submissive enough to take direction willingly, but who is outgoing enough to romp and play happily with the kids. A dominant personality may best suit a single person or a family of adults only. A family that has the ability to properly train the dog and not the other way around! Ok, you've got the big stuff out of the way. The other questions are often dependent on exactly what 'quality' of puppy you want. If you're going to show, you want to be reasonably assured that you're getting a puppy of show quality. Ask the breeder about their recent success in the ring. Hopefully you're familiar with relatives of the litter and they're of good quality. Ask how many of the puppies are already reserved. This is important if you're serious about a good show prospect. If most are taken, perhaps you should consider waiting for

another litter, where you could perhaps get first or second choice puppy.

Another advantage to waiting for another litter is you have more time to become acquainted with the breeder. None of us want to take a chance on having our best show prospects go to someone who wants a 'show' puppy but has no intention of showing. Many people think that a 'pet' puppy is inferior. Not true. But don't be surprised if you have to prove your sincerity to the breeder.

Obviously you want to see a dog set up that is kept clean and that doesn't stink. Although puppies tend to mess up as quickly as we clean up, there's no excuse for a house that reeks of urine and feces. Pups should be clean, active and healthy looking. They should also readily approach you with interest and curiosity. If they hang back or slink away, this is not a good litter. Or it hasn't been properly socialized. In any case, you're wise not to buy one.

Ask if the breeder has a written contract. Read it thoroughly before you sign. Your puppy should come to you with the AKC registration application. Additionally the breeder should provide you with a 4-5 generation pedigree, a list of what the puppy has been eating plus a small supply of same to last a few days. You should also receive a record of any vaccines and wormings the puppy has had to date and what is due next.

The breeder should extend a minimum 48 hour health guarantee and take the puppy back if it should be found ill by a vet. Additionally a breeder should be willing to take the dog back at any age if you cannot keep it any longer. These innocent babies didn't ask to be born. The breeder is entirely responsible for it's existence and well being. A breeder who isn't willing to shoulder this responsibility shouldn't breed. The breeder should actively encourage you to ask questions, call at any hour with any size problem, and take an on going interest in the puppy

once he's living in your home. Most breeders will. Armed with the right questions, it's much easier to find the right breeder.

And to my fellow breeders out there, who are wondering; 'well, what about us, what about the times we've sold pups to people who seemed great who turned out terrible?' Yes, of course this works both ways but so often it really is the new person who gets turned off to our breed. Without the constant infusion of new blood into this sport, we cannot survive in the future. Let's help each and every sincere novice who comes wandering through our door excited by their love of Great Danes and full of the questions we've heard a million times!