Choosing a Mentor

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Webster defines a mentor as a wise and faithful counselor. In the sport of dogs, the most sought after mentors are successful, established breeders with years of experience who realize the importance of passing the torch to younger breeders eager to carry on their valuable gene pool. Whether you desire to be an active breeder of Basset Hounds or an avid competitor in obedience or in the field, the mentors who give you your start will have a lasting impact on your future success. In fact, when you realize that most mentors are often the source of your foundation stock, the choice of a mentor can be as important as understanding your breed standard or learning to apply basic genetic principles to your breeding program.

ONE OF THE GREAT MENTORS: Mrs. Lynwood (Peg) Walton

For many fanciers, one of the great mentors in the sport of dogs in the 20th century is the famous Basset Hound breeder, Mrs. Lynwood (Peg) Walton of Lyn-Mar Acres Basset Hound Kennels. Beginning in the 1940’s, Peg Walton’s Lyn-Mar Acres Basset Hounds were to greatly influence the development of the Basset Hound in the United States as well as in numerous foreign countries. One has only to study the early pedigrees of many of the most famous Basset Hound kennels to see that Mrs. Walton was a mentor for several decades of Basset breeders.

TYPES OF MENTOR RELATIONSHIPS

Listed below are three types of mentor relationships as defined by Patricia Craige, well-known Norwegian elkhound breeder and the author of Born to Win: Breed to Succeed (1997).

1. SEEK THE GUIDANCE OF A SUCCESSFUL, ESTABLISHED BREEDER, WHO YOU RESPECT MORALLY AND INTELLECTUALLY.

   The best of these are established, long-time breeders and are dedicated individuals that you trust as people. They are clear, objective thinkers who have a plan and consistency in their breeding programs. Their dogs successfully compete at regional and national specialty levels as well as in the all-breed arena.
**Advantage:** Hooking up with one person such as this can put you on a "fast track" and speed up your success.

**Disadvantage:** Since you are putting all of your eggs in one basket, it is important to be certain that this is the right way to go.

2. **LEARN FROM AS MANY MASTER BREEDERS AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AS POSSIBLE.**

   Instead of committing to one mentor, work with several expert breeders and expose yourself to as many educational experiences as possible. Invaluable resources are books, breed publications and videos. Topics to study should include: your breed’s official standard and illustrated standard, basic principles of canine genetics, canine anatomy and movement, whelping and canine diseases. Attend specialties and seminars and ask for hands-on work with several respected mentor-breeders.

   **Advantage:** Gathering knowledge from more than one source can provide a more complete picture relative to your breed and help you make better informed decisions.

   **Disadvantage:** You expose yourself to scattered and contradictory opinions that can lead to confusion and indecision.

3. **COMBINE APPROACHES ONE AND TWO!**

   A third possibility is to combine the above two options, working very closely with one established breeder as you continue to expand your knowledge by exposing yourself to as many other educational sources a possible.

**LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP!**

One of the biggest mistakes new-comers to the breed can make is to impulsively hook up with the first breeder with whom they come in contact. Before they realize it, this person has become a self-appointed mentor. It may or may not have been the right choice. Other suggestions include:

- Attending as many specialties as possible as well as your breed’s national specialty show. These are the best places to meet some of the established breeders and see dogs they have bred.
- Reading! In the Basset Hound breed, refer to works by Mercedes Braun, Nicholas and Foy and Margaret Walton. These books include numerous photographs which show the style of Basset Hound produced by various kennels. Such information may help guide you in your choice of a mentor.
- Deciding what your goals are. Would-be mentors want to know what they are dealing with. Are you interested in just showing dogs to their championships or do you want to breed?

**ADDITIONAL TIPS**

Craig (1997) offers the following advice when choosing your mentor.

- "*Follow your head over your heart.*"
  
  Really liking someone does not mean that person would be the best mentor. It is especially important not to choose as a mentor someone who reinforces any already incorrect concepts that you might have. People with charismatic, winning personalities can easily sway others into their way of thinking. Be sure they are competent and knowledgeable.
• "Avoid negative personalities who trash everyone but themselves."
  Beware of the individual who never has a good word to say about other
  competitors or their dogs. Eventually this type of negativity will rub off on you and
  ultimately reflect badly on your dogs.

• "Seek out learned people who are upbeat and personable."
  The mentor/student relationship can be as emotional as a marriage. Avoid
  mentors who are overly sensitive and insecure. No matter how knowledgeable a
  person may be, the stress of walking on egg shells is not worth it.

• "Don't expect something for nothing."
  Mentors have devoted years of hard work and endured numerous setbacks
  to get where they are. Offer them your services whenever possible, whether it be
  helping care for dogs, assisting at shows or whelping litters.

WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE,
YOU ARE STILL BASICALLY ON YOUR OWN!

No matter how closely you work with a mentor, you are ultimately the one responsible for
your decisions and the day will come when you are on your own. Perhaps the shared experiences
and advice you receive from your teachers will prepare you to become one of your breed’s future
mentors.

REFERENCE: