The Value of the Brood Bitch

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The Reverend Dr. Sawyer of Arkansas was a long time breeder and AKC judge. He was widely known for his study of genetics. He was well known for his foxhounds which were raised in his large kennel. This article reflects raising dogs within a kennel situation but also offers insights for those with just a few dogs.

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Most articles set forth the facts, than draw conclusions. That is the way I usually write; but for this article on the VALUE OF THE BROOD BITCH in a breeding kennel, I am turning things around, so to speak. I shall first give my conclusions and then give the reasons for these conclusions. These conclusions are very deep and positive since they represent my experience in breeding seventeen different breeds to championships over a period of more than forty years as well as a thorough study of genetics. Also, during these years, I have served as a consultant planning the breeding programs for about as many litters for my friends as I have for myself. Careful and detailed records have been kept both of my own litters and of those I have observed. From this study and experience, my conclusions are:

The success of every dog-breeding kennel centers primarily in the selection of the proper brood bitch. The foundation of all things must be strong and free from faults or the structure upon which we build will crumble. A single producing bitch may be, and has been, more often than not, the very cornerstone of a successful strain of any breed. No kennel is stronger than its brood bitches regardless of how many big name stud dogs they boast.

Why do I think your brood bitch is so important to your breeding kennel? What has been my experience with all kinds of brood bitches? Why do I think more careful research should be given in selecting your brood bitch than your stud dog? The length of this article precludes giving all the answers, but here are some.
Your BROOD BITCH IS A FIXTURE OF THE STRAIN. The bitch contributes one of the two haploid sets of chromosomes which determine every zygote; and at this point, she (genetically speaking) contributes exactly one half. The stud dog is through with the puppies at the break of the ‘tie’, but the bitch is not. Her over-all health and skin condition can affect the puppies. Her diet will affect the puppies – so will her parasites, her food, her general care; but most of all, her TYPE and TEMPERAMENT.

My experience tells me overwhelmingly that what we call ‘breed-type’ is more dependent upon the brood bitch than the stud dog. Above, I mentioned that I had kept seventeen different breeds; and for the past ten years, I have kept every catalog of every show and have checked and kept detailed breeding records of all the great winners of all breeds over the past ten years.

These records have corroborated and confirmed my kennel breeding records and conclusions. The one over-all fault I have observed with the majority (not all) of the top winning males of all breeds is that they have not been “dripping with breed-type”. “Breed-type” is a must with me for any breed.

To breed the average bitch and add a large number of top winning stud dogs in the columns of your pedigree is to get farther away from ‘breed-type’ in your puppies. My records show that it has been great brood bitches that have come through and saved what little ‘breed-type’ we have left in some breeds.

My records, my study and my experience tell me LOUD and CLEAR that the temperament of the puppies is more dependent upon the bitch than the stud dog. Oh yes, I realize that temperament is a genetic as well as environmental problem, but God deliver me, and may he deliver you, from ever breeding any more wild, crazy bitches.

The temperament of the bitch while she is carrying the puppies affects the puppies. Her temperament while she nurses them greatly affects them. Her temperament in a run next to them for the first three to four months of their lives just about fixes them for life. If your breed is one you actually hunt in the field, the habits your puppies learn from their mother in the field stay with them for life. Temperament is getting to be a problem in all breeds. It can be reduced more than one half if we recognize it for what it is – a brood bitch problem. Brood bitches are hidden from the public more than stud dogs. That helps the temperament problem leak in through the brood bitch.

Selecting a real top producing brood bitch is much more difficult than selecting a top producing stud. The main reason being that the brood bitch is capable of producing a much smaller number of offspring than is the stud. The largest number of puppies I ever got from one brood bitch was fifty. I kept records on one stud dog that produced over 1000 puppies. Suppose he did produce sixty champions and she produced two? That is not the test.

When I select a brood bitch for my kennels, this is how I go about it. I want a good full sized specimen of the breed. I want good rich color and perfect color pattern of the breed. Her whole conformation must be without SERIOUS fault. You don’t find absolute perfection, but not one SERIOUS conformation fault will I tolerate in a brood bitch. Her eyes must have proper color. Her mouth and bite must be perfect. She need not be a top
winner or a littermate to a top winner. Neither must her pedigree be full of unfamiliar dogs. She must be a good, free eater. These are the things I demand of the individual. Then, when I have found this individual that impresses me so much, I look “under the hood.”

First, I want to see her pedigree. One's ability to read and interpret a pedigree from a breeder’s viewpoint is absolutely essential. The word “pedigree” comes from a word that means literally “crane’s foot”. This is due to the resemblance of the long, spreading toes of the crane. The term “family tree” expresses the idea which I have in mind somewhat better. I want to analyze her “family tree”. I am not counting the number of big name stud dogs. I am studying her genetic “gene bank”.

Perhaps in a future article I can explain how to read a pedigree when researching a brood bitch. Space will not permit that here. Too many breeders, when reading the pedigree of a brood bitch, only see a “crane’s foot” with several big name stud dogs hanging on the toes.

In a five generation pedigree, I find sixty two individual dogs. Thirty one of them are stud dogs and thirty one are brood bitches. Those thirty one brood bitches are, genetically speaking, one half of the “gene bank” of the particular dog, but they could constitute too many bad genes in making up their mathematical one half. This study is more difficult than the research on the stud dog because the brood bitch does not have the number of offspring as does the stud dog from which to study.

Her pedigree must show that she comes from great producing families, not just a scattering of big names. The big names could have been made big with pen and ink and an advertising agent instead of actual performance.

Now, if she, as an individual, stands the test; that is if her pedigree is satisfactory, then I look for her progeny. What has she produced?

When I find this ideal specimen, with an ideal pedigree, and with a top producing record, I next check my “borrowing power” with my banker. Let’s go a little further here. There is more than meets the eye.

I know a friend; and against all my advice, he paid $5,000 for a big name stud dog. He then bought five bitches for $100 each and started a breeding program. Five years later, including his initial cost of his stud dog and brood bitches, feed, veterinary bills, travel expenses, entry fees, advertising, etc., he had spent $25,000, excluding time, work and worry. All he had produced was a kennel full of culls. Now, he has “retired” and has joined the “judge cussing” club. I understand that he is making more progress at this than producing great dogs. In fact, he is president of the club.

I have another friend who took my advice and paid $2,000 for a brood bitch and $200 for stud fees to a stud dog that would have cost him $10,000 if he had bought him. Five years later, this man has produced three litters of top, top specimens of his breed. His total expense has been around $10,000. He is happy and an inspiration to be around. That is not all – he has orders for puppies during 1980 that will repay his capital investment. But that is still not all – the best is yet to come.

This person has experienced the greatest thrill that can come to man in his association with dogs. Man can get a lot of pleasure from “possessing” a dog. He can get
a lot of pleasure from “campaigning” a dog, but the greatest thrill of all is the satisfaction that he has been able to create. This person has been, and is, a sculptor of living flesh. The joy in the dog game for the breeder is the satisfactions of seeing his scientific efforts succeed. Why don't you go out and get yourself a top, top brood bitch and start all over again. Just because you started wrong one time doesn't mean you must continue in that old bumpy rut. If you wait too long, you will probably wind up being a member of the above mentioned club.

It is my honest conviction that if we are ever to improve our breed-type and temperament, we must start ruthlessly culling in the brood bitch pen, not just sitting in the seat of the scornful.