

GENETIC HEALTH: THE THIRD RAIL OF PUREBRED BREEDING

RODNEY L. RUSSELL, *Orlando Dog Training Club*

GENETICS

The three-legged stool is often used to demonstrate the importance of *type*, *temperament*, and *genetic health* in breeding purebred dogs. Admittedly, it's a tired analogy, but it's easy to envision, especially if you've ever hand-milked a cow or goat. The theory goes that each of the three legs is equally important, and if you skimp on one, then the stool – or the bloodline – will topple over. Instead of a stool, however, I find the analogy of the rails of an electric-powered subway to be more apt. There are three rails on a subway; two which carry the wheels of the cars, just like any train, and between those two, there is the third rail, which carries the 600 or so volts of electricity that powers the train. That's one reason why it is wise not to walk along subway tracks.

There are more than a few purebred breeders who seem to have the same fear of genetic health as they do of the third rail of a subway. They think they can get along just fine, breeding for type and temperament and paying not much more than lip service to genetic health issues. Genetic health testing sometimes can really interfere with an otherwise successful breeding program. The problem for these breeders is that genetic health involves more than just testing. Testing usually is a simple, relatively non-invasive process. But once you get the results of a test, and the news is not good, what do you do? An example: imagine that the magnificent young male you are running on and have your kennel's future set on, has his eyes examined, and the ophthalmologist tells you the boy has corneal dystrophy. The

American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists (ACVO) recommends that for some breeds, dogs with corneal dystrophy not be bred. A tough call. For other breeds, the ACVO classifies the disorder as a "breeder option" -- sweet, that one.

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Let's say that this young dog is of a breed that ACVO recommends not be bred -- a breed in which corneal dystrophy usually results in partial blindness and cannot be treated. What to do? You see, for some highly competitive breeders, with a lot invested in their dogs, facing the prospect of following a non-breeding protocol makes genetic health tests very risky. Why voluntarily touch that third rail? After all, it's a lot easier to breed champions when health testing and protocols are ignored.

How do we encourage breeders to include genetic health in their breeding programs?

Primary responsibility should lie with the Parent Clubs to educate breeders about genetic health disorders, screening tests, and breeding protocols. No one should

have a more vested interest in the improvement of the health of future generations of their breeds than the Parent Clubs' members. After all, AKC's Parent Clubs are charged with "the education of breed owners on the nuances of the breed, and overseeing the breed's health and welfare."

Here are some things each Parent Club can do:

- **List conspicuously on the Parent Club website the health disorders to which the breed is genetically predisposed.** Include a description of the disorder and give information about where to obtain more details. Several Parent Clubs do just this; notable examples are the Weimaraner Club of America, the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier Club of America, the Great Dane Club of America, and the English Springer Spaniel Field Trial Association.
- **Include health testing clinics at all of its Conformation shows, and encourage the breed's regional specialty clubs to do the same.** Of course, not all genetic disorders are easily testable, but DNA profiles should be offered by every club. Clubs which regularly conduct health clinics at their specialties include the American Whippet Club and the American Cavalier King Charles Spaniel Club, as do many of the regional Cavalier clubs.
- **If veterinary specialists recommend screening or breeding protocols, they should be conspicuously disclosed to breeders on the Parent Club website.** An excellent example is found

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on the website of the Golden Retriever Club of America. It includes statements as to which hereditary diseases should prevent a Golden from being bred. For some disorders, researchers also recommend that testing be conducted at specific minimum ages, such as 2 years for OFA hip x-rays, and, for the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, 2.5 years for mitral valve murmur exams and for syringomyelia MRIs. Parent Clubs should include in their disclosures these minimum ages for testing and breeding.

- **Emphasize genetic health testing and screening protocols in the Parent Club's code of breeding ethics.** Generalizations like "Only those dogs free of recognized genetic defects shall be used in a breeding program" are wholly inadequate.

Make them specific and make them enforceable. The American Rottweiler Club has one of my favorites. Here is a selection from its "Mandatory Practices": "Breed only AKC registered dogs and bitches which have OFA certified hips" and "Breed only bitches two years of age or older with OFA certified normal hips, in good health, free of communicable diseases, having none of the faults listed above in Section 2, to not more than one stud dog at any one season, and not more than two out of three consecutive seasons." Powerful stuff, just like a Rottie.

- **Encourage all breeders to join the Parent Club.** Oddly, several Parent Clubs have become very restrictive in accepting new members, even as non-voting members with no say about the breed standard. The best way to

gain jurisdiction over as many breeders as possible is to make them members of the club. After all, ethics codes only apply to club members. Membership encourages breeders to read the club's website and its newsletters, where they should find the genetic health information, health testing clinic schedules, and breeding protocols they need to know and abide by in order to become better breeders.

Or - will we allow breeders to continue to avoid walking on the hot third rail of responsibility for their breeding choices? It is easy to breed with no thought to genetic issues beyond phenotype; but concern about genotype is a necessary component of being the highly vaunted "responsible breeder" we all claim to value. 🐾

SHOWS

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