



SELECTING FOR VIGOR

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Thought on observing puppies during the crucial first days, and what should be considered when selecting breeding stock.

Suzanne Clothier

One way to determine the vigorousness of individual puppies during that relatively tranquil first week of life.

The first week of a puppy's life begins with the whelping. Once he's been dried off, weighed and checked for defects, the serious breeder begins the selection process which will eventually determine which puppies will be kept or sold as breeding/show stock, and which will be placed as pets. The first moments after delivery are an important time to begin this process. Unfortunately, many breeders are unaware of this, and cannot interpret the behavior of the newborn puppy as indicative of the future. A simple test will help you understand the great differences in newborns. Known as the biotinus test (Latin for "vigor of life"), it should be a routine part of each and every whelping, with results recorded right along with weights, overall condition and sex. Once the cord is cut, and the puppy is dried off, he is ready for his first meal. Place the puppy about two puppy lengths away from the bitch's nipples, heading away from her. Once placed in this position, time how long it takes the puppy to turn itself around, orient properly and get to its first meal.

The bitch should be allowed to carry on in the normal course, neither encouraged nor discouraged from dealing with her puppy as she sees fit. Human interference in any part of this will not reflect an accurate test of biotinus. The bitch's reactions, too, are part of the inheritance the puppy will receive from her. A bitch that interferes with her puppies to such an extent that they are not able to nurse unless assisted is a "self-limiting proposition." In a natural state, such behavior would result in her inability successfully to pass on her genes through her offspring. Careful thought should be given to the future use of such a bitch and/or her offspring.

Some puppies are amazingly fast to get to that first meal, while others are agonizingly slow to orient and nurse. Sit back and watch each puppy. This is how to learn about the innate vigor of each, thus beginning the process of knowing each puppy as an individual.

Value of the Test

Many breeders not only cut the cord themselves, dry the puppy off and in other ways deny the bitch her proper role as mother, but also take each puppy and place it in proper position for the first meal. Some wisely sit back until a puppy appears slower than usual to get started, but then without a second thought, move in with well-meaning human intervention. Why not? "He needed just a little extra help," is often the response. Most breeders have experienced a puppy with a problem. Even with the best of care under optimum conditions, sooner or later, there will be a puppy who seems to need a little help.

Whether a breeder realizes it or not, taking steps to assist such a puppy can have long-term implications for your breeding

program, unless vigor of life is assessed and included in the criteria for determining which puppy to keep. What are the implications of this widely accepted human interference in the course of nature? Breeders must be acutely aware of every possible variable that will ultimately affect a particular dog, his status as either pet or breeding stock, and therefore, the future of a breeding program.

Is it wise to interfere or assist with such procedures as supplemental feeding, or tubing, or even something as seemingly innocent as helping a puppy to a nipple? Perhaps doing so is denying that the dogs are not as vigorous as they should be. Granted, imposed on our dogs are a variety of unnatural situations, starting with their diet, housing, and even choosing their mate. This is the life of the domestic dog. However, when breeders look to past and future generations, they do so with an eye to making a long-term improvement, if not in the breed at large, at least in their own lines. Ideally, the best rule of thumb is, "In the wild, this puppy would survive without my intervention." That is, of course, in the ideal world. How then does a breeder make a decision to assist, or not interfere, when there is a problem?

Most breeders are quite reluctant to adopt the "let nature take its course" attitude, and watch a puppy die. No one likes having puppies die. I would like to suggest that assistance be given to whatever extent a breeder is comfortable with, but the fact that assistance was necessary should be noted and taken into consideration when the final decision on show/pet is made. Not too long ago, in German Shepherd Dogs, Rottweilers and other breeds in Germany, culling was done on a routine basis by breed wardens, with certain criteria employed to determine which puppies are fit to be registered, and used as breeding animals. Aside from obvious defects (cleft palate, limb abnormalities, etc.), the criteria used in culling include the vigor of each individual, as determined by biotinus at birth, and a weight gain (or lack of) by 48 hours. In America, this practice is almost unheard of. Instead most breeders tend to make the delineation between pet quality and breeding stock. Therefore, breeders must use other methods to insure that their breeding stock are truly vigorous animals that would survive in a natural or wild state.

Making Determinations

Use the results of the biotinus test combined with the progress in weight 48 hours after birth to determine a pup's degree of vigor. Many puppies remain at or lose slightly from their birth weight the first day, but should have regained and added to their birth weight after 48 hours. Breeders should note this in their records and weigh it carefully against other criteria such as movement, overall structure and temperament as the puppy matures.

Through my own litters and through knowledge of other

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breeders' experiences, I have learned a great deal about the importance of the initial determination of vigor of life. One bitch in particular is an excellent example. At birth, she was extremely small for her breed, and needed (and received) supplemental feeding for the first four days. With such human intervention, she progressed rapidly, and while always small, seemed an active, normal puppy. The breeder, when it came time to determine which bitch she would keep as her breeding prospect, chose this little bitch over a stronger (at birth) and more normal bitch based purely on sentiment, not taking into account the obvious initial lack of vigor. While diet, environment and genetics contributed to the reproductive history that follows, choosing a puppy with a more vigorous beginning might have spared both the bitch and her owner a good deal. Bred the first time, she produced, with some difficulty, five puppies. Her next season, she developed pyometra, and instead of being spayed, was treated hormonally to correct the problem. Bred again, she produced three puppies by C-section following uterine inertia. Two puppies were born dead. The third one was alive, but had some minor abnormalities in the hind limbs.

A year later, the bitch was bred again, this time placed on a natural diet and exercised properly. She produced, with no problems, seven healthy puppies. But, she developed gastroenteritis eight days after whelping, requiring emergency surgery. Although she survived, she lost all interest in her puppies and considerable effort was required to keep them alive. Her next breeding, one year later, produced eight puppies, four born by C-section after uterine inertia set in. (The bitch had not been fed or exercised as she was during her third litter.) During the C-section, it was determined that the condition of her uterus was sufficiently poor to warrant spaying, and she was spayed at that time.

What does this history mean? Perhaps, even if she had been a normally vigorous puppy at birth, her diet and environment would have produced the same results. But it is important to see this history as one in which a variable was ignored when making the selection of breeding stock. Since there certainly are enough problems already stacked against breeders, they cannot afford to ignore any criteria which will help to determine in which dogs they shall invest time, emotion, energy and money as breeding animals.

A glance through a copy of any breed magazine will show that dogs are dying too young, many of them top winning dogs who have already or may affect a breeding program. In addition to the common worries about hips and elbows, temperament and a host of ailments, breeders must also be greatly concerned that the animals they breed to and from are the most vigorous specimens they can produce. Breeders must always strive to maintain and improve the vigor of life in our puppies. The first week of life is a relatively quiet one for the puppy. But for the breeder, it is the time when the process of selecting the puppy to keep must begin.

Weeks from now, when puppies are gaiting across the yard, and the breeder's eyes irresistibly are drawn to that special bitch, or the big male with the gorgeous headpiece, she should consider also their initial "vigor of life." Perhaps with the spectacular, but less vigorous puppy, you could do a great deal of winning. But in the long run, would you have added or improved the vigor and vitality of your breeding program? The ideal balance of vigor, temperament and beauty is the hallmark of a truly correct dog.

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