

## Changing Criteria

by Patricia Trotter

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My recent re-reading of *Snakefoot: The Making of a Champion*, by Robert G. Wehle, served as a refresher course in aspects of our continuing attempts, as breeders, to get it right. Not only was that much-loved gentleman a great breeder of Elhew Pointers, he also bred foxes, chickens, sheep, cattle, and Thoroughbred racehorses during a lifetime devoted to animals. His breeding success is legendary.

Wehle felt that the value of competition was that it provided the breeder a way to measure his stock against that of others. But prior to his death in 2005, after more than 60 years of breeding Pointers, Wehle saw changes that concerned him. Because certain judgment calls were not consistent with his concept of the correct pointing gundog, he began to question the system itself.

This was not about dog shows; this was about field trials. Although Wehle finished the championship title at bench shows on a few of his early dogs, his focus was always on field trials, which his dogs dominated for decades. Yet the criteria of the field trial in recent years strayed from what Wehle had always pursued - the breeding of a comfortable shooting dog.

How similar to what we hear today from many old-timers in the world of breeding and showing dogs! The winning criteria change as the years go by, and in many breeds the dog becomes something other than what it was bred to be. However painful this is to the purist, there is some comfort in the fact that expert breeders in other fields also share our concerns, which seem to be by-products of the modern lifestyle. Dairy cattlemen worry that their concentration on milk production has caused the deterioration of functional traits. (I agree with their belief that the deterioration of functional traits can happen *even when there is balanced breeding emphasizing selection for correct functionality.*) Racehorse breeders feel "they don't make 'em like they used to," and worry that modern stock is not as strong nor as durable as stock of the past.

Exactly why this happens is not clear. Some researchers believe there is an inevitable decline in the fitness of populations that are subject to artificial selection. With natural selection, incompetent predators do not hunt successfully enough to sustain their lives long enough to make their contribution to the gene pool. Neither do incompetent prey animals survive long enough to reproduce. It takes athletic, intelligent, able animals to survive in the wild.

The environment also contributes to the compromises facing modern mammals, whether wild or domesticated. The capability of an expert fertility veterinarian was not something one heard much about until recent years; now, even humans suffer declining fertility. Coping with these complex problems is the heavy responsibility of all who breed purebred dogs.

How much environment and nutrition contribute to waning well-being is difficult to estimate. Each breeder has to seek out the best information and techniques in the care and nurturing of breeding stock. Every dog good company claims to have the ultimate answer. So do the raw-diet pundits. And exactly what may be the long-term impact of the variety of chemicals our modern dogs are subjected to for parasite and disease control is anybody's guess. How then does the breeder proceed? This is a tough question, but it is certainly answerable if one has a good plan.

The first step in a good plan is to define the breeding goals. Determine your ideal model, picturing it only with functional anatomy as well as correct and beautiful type. But don't stop there, because health, fitness, and soundness of temperament as well as body are equally important. And breed character is *paramount*.

Next, one must evaluate the available breeding stock in the family, as well as the direction in which potential crosses with that existing stock may lead. Furthermore, future potential matings for the resulting stock must also be part of the equation.

Unfortunately, the lament we hear from *master breeders* of many breeds is that there are no dogs to breed to because the available dogs fall far short of satisfying the ideal they seek. Breeders have always had to deal with this problem due to the many trade-offs inherent in the breeding process. Yet my discussions with many breeders have led me to believe that in a number of breeds this problem is more acute today than in the past. It is most perplexing to have an excellent, useful bitch and be unable to find the "right" dog for her!

Develop your own personal grading system to help you determine the worth of your stock. View dog shows as the arena where you can indeed measure the quality of your stock against that of others to determine how your breeding program is proceeding. Always keep in mind the numerous complex variables that determine judgment calls at dog shows. The best breeding stock may not always be the winner.

If you aren't yet the best judge of your own breeding stock, make it your business to become the best judge. Don't just go to a show

for the win' go for the added knowledge that can benefit your breeding program. Let wise elders inspire you always to do the right thing in your decision-making, and make sure you understand that wisdom and kennel-blindness are not compatible.

Always keep in mind this quote from Wehle's book: "We are still breeding the original type of comfortable shooting dog we started out to breed and will continue to breed this type of dog if I have to stand completely alone." This comment came after six decades in his beloved breed. It serves as eternal inspiration for those whose breed means everything to them.