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Health Testing : But It's Just a Working Dog

I was perusing the breed related groups on Facebook recently and came across a litter of pups that was just born. I was curious about them, so I made a comment asking for pedigree and health testing information.

Several days went by and the comment was never answered. I privately messaged the breeder and asked for the information, just in case the breeder did not want to answer those questions in a public forum. The response, when it finally came, was disheartening, but all too familiar.

'I don't know the pedigree – they're just working dogs.'

I asked if they were registered with the AKC. 'Yes,' was the answer, 'But I've never bothered getting a pedigree ... because they're just working dogs.'

Being a brave soul, or maybe just a glutton for punishment, I asked what health testing had been done on the parents. I would be willing to drive halfway across the country and pay good money for a dog from proven working parents who were also health tested.

'Oh, I haven't done any health testing. The oldest one is 13 years and she's still working, so they must be healthy.'

The question that kept going around in my mind was, 'But how can you know? If you choose not to test, how can you possibly know? You can look at a dog and surmise, based on physical clues, but without a radiograph, or blood draw, or cheek swab, you cannot know for certain that a dog has a particular condition, especially if it is a recessive trait. And if you do not know, you cannot take steps to breed away from it.'

I didn't get an answer. Truthfully, I didn't expect one at that point. But the question is still a valid one – how can you know without testing?

With some diseases, the answer will become obvious in time – the dog will go blind if it's affected by any number of eye diseases, or it will develop kidney disease and die, or a clotting factor disorder will seriously shorten the dog's lifespan, or it will become obvious that the dog is deaf, not stupid and willfully ignoring you, or it will drop dead from heart disease. It all depends on the breed and the diseases particular to it.

The thing is, there are tests for many of these maladies. These tests allow you to plan for the worst, and make choices that allow you to breed for the best, with dogs that aren't perfect, but have a lot to offer the futures of their breeds.

The gene tests allow you to pick a breeding partner for your dog, who for argument's sake we will say is a carrier of a recessive trait for a particular disease, so that you can lower the risk of adding affected animals to the gene pool.

For diseases like hip and elbow dysplasia, where we don't yet (and may never, due to their complicated genetic nature) have a gene test, there are screening tests for the parents that allow you substantially lessen the likelihood of producing affected offspring by breeding parents that you know do not exhibit the disorder. We do not have to willfully choose ignorance, just because it's a working dog.

In an ideal world, all the dogs that a breeder produces, whether they are bred from and add to the gene pool, or they never enter the gene pool and are kept solely as companions (or are just working dogs), would be tested and the results from all their testing would be added to a public database. This is expensive, but it is a best case scenario that we all should strive for.

Several years ago the Anatolian Shepherd Dog Club of America made the decision to partner with the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals' Canine Health Information Center (OFA-CHIC) program for open health testing and reporting. With this partnership, the parent club chooses the health tests they feel are most important for the breed – in our instance hip and elbow dysplasia testing – and those breeders/owners who agree to report their dogs' test results in the OFA's open database will be given a CHIC number for each dog that is tested and reported. **Dogs do not have to have a passing result to get a CHIC number, they must only have permanent identification verified by the vet performing the health testing, have the requisite tests performed, and have the results, regardless of outcome, posted in the public database.** The intent is to have breeders be open with test results in the hope that open testing results will benefit the breed overall, and allow breeders to make informed choices regarding the animals they choose to use in their breeding programs.

Imagine, for a moment, what it would be like if we, as dog people, were to use the information in an open database not to tear each other down, but to build one another up, to build up our beloved breeds. Imagine what we could do if we looked at test results not as 'Oh, his dog failed its hips, or her dog came back as a carrier for PRA', but rather as 'I like what he got in terms of type from that particular breeding, but my dog has bad elbows, so I will have to use a different bitch to try and replicate his good type results'. Imagine the wonderful dogs that we could produce.

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