

Problems?

Part IV

I feel quite sure that in recent months most readers will have seen programmes on television and heard on the radio about the dreadful way dog breeding is going on today. To viewers and listeners they were not nice programmes; in fact many people were extremely upset. However, I am glad that they were produced so that the general public, especially the canine fraternity, is made aware of what is and has been going on for some time.

I well remember hearing of a veterinary seminar held somewhere in the UK about forty years ago, when the subject of bad breeding was addressed. They took for example the British Bulldog. Putting the dog through a very simple walking test, after about one hundred metres it could not proceed any further. Why? It had severe breathing difficulties, How had that come about? Quite simply, it was because breeders had been keen to breed that particular breed with a shorter and shorter nose, which, for some reason or other, judges decided was desirable. How foolish. Members of the Veterinary Association pointed the finger fairly and squarely at the judges who were setting the trend. The breeders exhibiting the dogs felt that they must abide by this and breed dogs with shorter noses if they were to stand any chance of winning in the show ring. No thought was given as to how it would adversely affect the dogs breathing. In my opinion, the veterinarians were absolutely right in their findings and boldly announced their professional opinions.

Now as many would know, I am not a breeder and perhaps that is a good thing that I am not. I am a dog trainer and instructor and to have those two roles you have to have a very good knowledge of animal behaviour, which is a fascinating subject to study. True, I have shown dogs, usually for other people, and I have worked dogs in the obedience rings in the UK and Victoria. Over the six decades in which I have trained working dogs and helped thousands of dog owners train their companion dogs, I have seen things improve, but also decline as I mentioned before in Part 1 of this series of articles.

When dogs are badly bred and their characteristics are quite different from what the breed standard was originally, the dogs produced are not just affected physically, but also temperamentally. And if the dog's temperament is not good, then its training and working ability will also suffer. It has a chain effect and the British Bulldog is a classic example of this.

Let me take another example — the German Shepherd Dog. And what I have to say will, hopefully, be of great interest to German Shepherd enthusiasts in particular. I have had a lot of experience with this great breed in the UK, not only in training police dog work and as guide dogs for the blind, but also in dog training clubs. When I came to Australia in 1967 and was invited to the training ground of the German Shepherd Dog Club of Victoria at Kooyong, I was so disappointed in what I saw generally in the breed. There had been a crazy importation ban placed on the breed by the Federal Government since 1929, so breeders could only breed from what limited strains they had. I guess they did a pretty good job with no new blood lines allowed into the country. So a few years later, the German Shepherd Dog Club of Victoria and the Kamarn Breeders Foundation approached the Federal Government with submissions to have the importation ban lifted. I was very happy to write submissions for both those organisations.

In 1973 the late Mr Don Chipp, Minister for Customs, courageously had the ban lifted for a trial period of one year. That was extended when the whole project was proven to be a success. People with the money purchased very good breeding stock from overseas and the results were most encouraging. It was not long before police dog training schools were set up in South Australia and Victoria, which have since gone from strength to strength throughout Australia. They were closely followed by the drug detection dog schools and we all know what a great job they are doing as well.

A few years later, John Holmes, well known dog trainer and author of several books, a man I had known since the early 1950s, visited Australia with his wife for several weeks. Just prior to their return to the UK, he said to me, "Michael, outside Germany, in my opinion Australia has some of the best German Shepherds in the world. No doubt having had that forty-four year importation ban was probably a blessing in disguise. From 1973 only the best breeding stock came into the country and consequently it was able to produce good sound working stock." I, for one, valued his kind and honest remarks, especially as he had come from the other side of the world and was looking in from the outside.

Then a few years later I was shocked to see so many German Shepherds, which came to me for training and others which I saw at dog shows and in clubs, had all sorts of things wrong with them. Most noticeable were the dogs with sloping backs. Some of them were so bad that I would ask the handlers, "Where are your dogs' back legs?" That raised a few eye brows. The dimensions of many were far from what they should be. Their temperament was not good and their training ability inferior to what I had known in the past. Quite frankly, it upsets me to say the least, when I view many of this breed today. I knew also that everyone I had visited at the police dog schools and customs dog schools in Germany and Sweden would have been horrified to see such poorly bred specimens.

As we all know, crossbreeds are flooding the market. Many are called Labradoodles, Spoodles, Cavadoodles, Groodles and various other oodles. What people don't realise is that when you cross two pure breeds it is anyone's guess as to how the offspring will turn out. Whereas with careful breeding within a pure breed, you can predict with a fairly high degree of accuracy as to how well they will turn out. I had much experience with this when I was a guide dog trainer. The breeding department worked closely with the trainers to produce stock with the ideal temperament and physique for the work they were selected to do.

In the late 1950s it was decided, purely as an experiment, to cross an excellent brood bitch Labrador with a first rate German Shepherd dog. When the pups returned from the Puppy Walking Scheme, we were all very disappointed. Only two graduated as guide dogs and only just. They proved to be extremely difficult to train. They would not have passed today's standards.

A similar experiment was carried out in Victoria in the early 1970s but on a much larger scale using various combinations of pure breeds. Naturally, I gave full warning as to what was likely to happen, but the scheme went ahead. Once again, the results were disastrous. At least I had proved my point, or, rather they had found out eventually that the project had been a waste of valuable time and money.

About two months ago a lady brought a two-year-old Bulldog to me for a temperamental assessment because it was challenging her in the home and she feared for her children's safety.

Upon arrival I could see that it had chronic breathing difficulties. It was the worst case I had ever seen. In consequence its temperament was most unstable. Sad as it was, after much discussion and viewing its behaviour, I agreed with her that she should have the dog painlessly destroyed. Actually, the owner felt this all along in her own mind, but still wanted a professional opinion. Well, that is why we and veterinarians are ready to give the appropriate and best advice in cases such as these. It does at least help the owners to feel that they have not had to make the decision alone.

In conclusion, all I can do is to appeal to all breeders to produce good sound stock and, once again, RE-THINK what you are doing. With respect, I wish to convey my message to judges who appear to be setting the standards. Much careful thought is required.

Finally, I wish to take this opportunity in wishing the president and staff of DOGS Victoria and all its members a very Happy Christmas and all good fortune for the New Year. Enjoy your dogs.

Michael Tucker