Pick of the Litter: 
On the Art 
and Science 
of Puppy Selection

By: Ellen J. Myers

If, say, you were in the market for a show dog or the “ideal” female to correct a weakness in a bloodline, you might take a tip from Bill Shelton of Coventry, one of the finest breeders of Pembroke Welsh corgis in the country (Shelton’s Ch. Segni at Coventry AKA “Molly” is currently the top-winning representative of her breed).

“When I look at another breeder’s litter, especially if I’ve got my eye on a pup, I let the breeder do the talking,” says Shelton, who explains that if he’s patient enough, the breeder will eventually show his hand. “He may say, ‘I like this one.’ And when that happens, silently I’m going, thank God! I’m so glad you love that dog because I don’t. In fact, I want that other one! Many times I go home as happy as can be.”

Shelton’s experience illustrates an essential truth about picking the “pick of the litter”, one that neophytes find hard to grasp: Beauty, so to speak, is in the eye of the beholder. Or as Shelton puts it, “Everything depends on who is doing the picking.”

The great German shepherd breeder Jim Moses, who has won over a thousand Best in Shows and is a member of the Dog Show Hall of Fame, has a similar take on that vexed phrase, noting, “My first pick might be your third or fourth.”

Having bred Briards for over thirty years, I’ve long been interested in how others approached the art and science of puppy selection. Are there aspects to the process that are common to all breeders, regardless of breed? In talking to these experts, it soon became clear that when it comes to choosing a puppy, whether for show or reproductive purposes, there are few absolutes. In other words, all is relative — up to a point.

It takes years of experience, a deep intimacy with every aspect of one’s line, a sharp eye, and a good deal of common sense before a breeder can size up a young dog and consistently predict which traits will improve with age and which ones won’t.

The Siberian husky breeder Tommy Oelschlager, a five-time National Specialty winner, advises against what he calls “taking a
gamble on a puppy” in the hope that he’ll get better with age.

“Sometimes people will fall in love with a dog, no matter that he’s lacking in one way or another. For example, they might wish he had a better front and they tell themselves, Oh, he’ll grow into it,” says Oelschlager. “Well, that just doesn’t happen.” For Oelschlager, eight or nine weeks is the ideal age at which to evaluate a litter of Siberian huskies.

“Experience has taught me that what I see at that age is what I end up with. Have I ever let a great one get away? Quite honestly, if it was one of my own, I don’t think so.”

And there’s the rub. Whether you’re breeding Briards or Black Russian Terriers, it’s a lot easier to make your selection when the pups are your own. A conscientious breeder takes notes on every litter produced, thereby establishing benchmarks for the future.

“When you’re breeding a gene type you know, you can identify things that have reproduced themselves with results in your litter very quickly and very early on,” observes Bill Shelton. “But for that to happen, you must have a comparison standard. You have to say to yourself, hmmm, the last breeding I did that was similar to this gene type, I observed this when the pups were eight weeks and I saw that at twelve weeks, so things appear to be right on schedule.” Shelton adds, “One day you notice that they have similar angulation and their fronts are coming together at the same time. And that’s how you get to know a blood line.”

With such a depth of knowledge, the breeder has a clear advantage over any outside evaluator. “When you’re talking five generations deep,’ says Jim Moses, “well, you have a pretty good idea of their faults and virtues and what they’ll look like several years down the road. With animals you don’t have an involvement with it’s a lot more difficult,” he concedes.

By the same token, it’s important to realize that a breeder’s concept of what makes a ‘pick of the litter’ changes as his breeding program evolves and matures. Rarely is a dog chosen independent of the big picture. The right puppy can serve to affix certain qualities to another dog in a line or as a hedge against inherited disorders.

For Jim Moses, “Puppy selection is not only about correcting physical or hereditary defects but preserving the quality of the animal, the look that you think it should have and its beauty. And, of course, in the case of a German shepherd, it should be anatomically correct so that it can do what the breed was meant to do -- without forgetting that first and foremost it’s a family pet and a guardian.”

Moses goes on to explain that “There have been times when I’ve done a breeding to preserve or obtain a trait that I feel is absent from my line. That said, if that trait was the only thing I liked about the dog and I disliked other structural aspects, well, I wouldn’t pick that one. But if I was torn between several, then I’d choose the one that had the attribute I wanted to emphasize in that particular breeding.”

A breeder like John Buddie of Tartanside Collies, who has
produced 250 American and Canadian champions, has even been known to pass up a great potential show dog if another prospect was in keeping with the goals of his breeding program.

According to Buddie, “Sometimes we take two steps backwards to move forward, but that’s part of the challenge.” Buddie speaks of the less immediate but more lasting satisfaction of selecting a puppy who both embodies one’s vision and helps to improve one’s line.

But zeroing in on that rare dog requires a rare talent, and that’s where the breeder’s eye for detail and powers of observation come in. Yes, some claim to be able to choose a champion at birth, but those individuals are few and far between. And for every breeder who, like Oelschlager, considers eight weeks to be optimal, others like Buddie will wait as long as twelve weeks to conclude the vetting process.

In an email message, Buddie wrote, “I’ve been called a ‘slow’ observer of puppies, and it’s true. Balance, symmetry, and outline are important to me, and it can take a great deal of time before I pick up a puppy and scrutinize it for head details. In my breed, head detail is very important, but I only get to that after I’ve observed the dog running free and standing over its ground. I like to be several feet away from a litter of pups and see which ones capture my attention. Balance and symmetry come first. Does the head fit the body? Is the body in harmony with itself? Is the gait collected and effortless? Over the years I’ve learned the hard way how vital these two things are.”

Lynette Blue, whose Polar Mist Samoyards kennel has bred 300 champions, also assesses her litters at ten to twelve weeks. Although she wants “the entire package”, she keeps an eye out for “a sense of presence.” “By presence I mean the confident, effortless way in which the puppy carries itself and moves,” Blue says.

Yet regardless of when one actually makes that final selection, most breeders advise exercising patience and restraint. To wit, Oelschlager counsels against “forming strong opinions in the litter’s first six weeks.”

“It’s a very common failing among novice breeders to unconsciously hone in on one puppy to the exclusion of the other dogs in the litter,” he says. “If a breeder has really been working on developing a recognizable line, one would hope there would be three or four prospects.”

By extension, the better the line, the better the overall quality of the litter. And that’s why most experienced breeders shy away from the phrase ‘pick of the litter’. Not just because their ‘pick’ isn’t a fixed thing, but because a litter that’s the product of a mature line often yields more than one pup of equal excellence.

“When you have many generations of Best in Show winners, specialty winners and top producing sires and dams, there are times when every dog in the litter has champion potential,” says Lynette Blue.

Here’s another reason why veteran breeders use that phrase with reluctance: human error. As Blue reminds us, “There have been instances when your selection doesn’t turn out to be the best puppy. Sometimes a dog will surprise you by growing a little better than what you hoped and at other times he doesn’t meet expectations.”

And then there’s the human element. According to Bill Shelton, “You can sell someone a good puppy and they can make it into a great one. Another person, by contrast, will take your greatest puppy and only leave it as a good one. Some people just have a knack for selection.”

Speaking for myself, I’ve never thought in terms of designating any one puppy ‘pick of the litter’. Instead, I’ve endeavored to produce a litter of uniformly sound, beautiful puppies that conform as closely as possible to the breed standard and possess other typically Briard-like traits, some of which are so subtle they aren’t apparent at first glance.

The Briard is a shepherd breed which originated in France, and the French say that after all is said and done, a good breeder has “a nose” for a good sire. In the end, the art of selecting a puppy is that simple. But the science behind it is very complex.