

Master Breeders and the Difference

By Nikki Riggsbee

Under AKC rules, a breeder is the owner, or the lessee, of the dam on the date of a mating that results in a litter. This includes puppy mill breeders, backyard breeders, pet breeders, commercial breeders, occasional breeders, reputable breeders, and master breeders. Each has her own goals in breeding.

Most articles on breeding cover processes. How to write contracts. How to keep records. How to evaluate pedigrees. How to do the mating, either by natural or one of the artificial methods. How to whelp puppies. How to raise puppies. How to evaluate structure. Early puppy training. And lots, lots more.

Another type of article highlights top breeders. They are asked how they got started, the derivation of their kennel names, what they want judges to pay attention to or what the judges are missing. They are asked about the greatest dogs they have owned or bred, or that they didn't own or breed. They are asked who mentored them and whom they admire.

All of these articles are interesting. But what I really want to know is what the master breeders are doing differently from the rest of us - the breeders who are not producing as well as we would like to. What makes master breeders more successful? I couldn't find such an article, so I decided to write it.

This definitely took research. I've talked to a great many master breeders and questioned some of the most successful current Great Dane breeders. I asked what they were doing that made them produce better dogs than the rest of us.

First, let me define "master breeder" as it is used here. She is an expert. (I'm going to use "she" and "her" here for the most part, but male breeders are obviously included, too.) She produces top dogs generation after generation, year after year. "Top dogs" include those that win specialties and national specialties, groups and group placements, and bests in show. Her dogs finish their championships easily in good competition.

Not all breeds have even one master breeder. Some breeds are fortunate to have more than one. Those breeds that have master breeders are privileged, for others can use and build on their success.

In talking to master breeders, several characteristics became apparent. They are experts on their respective breeds. They have very high standards for quality. They keep only their best dogs. And they give credit to a lot of hard work and luck for their success.

Expert Knowledge

Expert breed knowledge is critical. Master breeders have a clear vision of the perfect dog in their breed. They can recognize the future stars, although this may be done at different ages with different breeds.

Without this knowledge and vision, less educated breeders are basically driving blind, making selections of what to breed and what to keep based on faulty or incomplete criteria.

Each of us, after a certain novice period, forms a mental picture of a perfect Great Dane. What we don't necessarily know is that this picture is imperfect, because we don't know as much as we think we do. Our picture of the perfect Dane is impacted by our breeders, mentors, friends, and the current popular dogs. Some of what we are taught will reflect the biases and limited knowledge of our teachers.

We can continually improve our understanding of the breed by looking at and evaluating many dogs, including those of other breeds and of other Dane breeders' puppies and dogs. Discuss the evaluations with those who know more than you and learn how they see the dogs and what they value.

We must select our mentors carefully, preferably among those who have been successful in Danes and whose dogs we like. Good teachers can expedite the learning process and add to our knowledge.



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We get tunnel vision looking at only our breed. Watch and study other breeds and see what looks good in them. What desirable qualities have they achieved that we should have in Danes? See what is appealing and what is distracting. Don't excuse faults in Danes just because they are Danes. We can bring the same way of looking at other breeds back to looking at Danes, and see them differently.

Expert breed knowledge does not come quickly. In *Outliers*, by Malcolm Gladwell, the author noticed that the true experts had 10,000 hours of deliberate practice in their fields. The expertise wasn't the result of a special in-born talent or skill. Master breeders have years and years of dog learning. They weren't born experts, and they are still learning. But as a result, they know what they are looking for and make the very good selections required to produce the best dogs.

What They Look For

Master breeders emphasize breed type and structure. They look at the whole dog, not just parts of a dog.

At one time, I thought that people who spoke of "the whole dog" were effectively saying that breed type, head, didn't matter; they wanted a generic dog. I was wrong. Head is very much a part of the whole dog. If the head is wrong, the whole dog is wrong. But even if the head is perfect, the rest of the dog must be excellent, too. A good head doesn't compensate if the overall dog isn't good enough. One master breeder commented that head hunters get bogged down in detail and miss the rest of the dog. Details are important, but breed type includes the entire dog.

To illustrate: The whole dog is important just as the whole head is important. One wouldn't say the head was excellent if only the muzzle was excellent, but the backskull was wide and cheeky. Even if the muzzle and skull were good, it wouldn't be a good head if the eyes were round, loose, and yellow. Even if the muzzle, skull, and expression are correct, it wouldn't be a good head if the bite were undershot. The whole head must be good to be a good head.

And so it is with the whole dog. The head and everything else must be good as well.

Balance and proportion are important to breed type in evaluating the whole dog. It is not just the front matching the rear and height relative to length, but also the balance of the head to the neck to the body to the bone. The balance of substance, size, and elegance. The parts have to be good, and they must all flow together and move together. The correct silhouette is required. The master breeders know what the excellent dog should look like and recognize it when they see it.

They want to see breed type when the dog is walking around on his own, not set up by a handler. Good handlers, and we have many in Great Danes, can mold most dogs into an acceptable shape standing still. But the correct shape must also be apparent when the dog is standing and moving on his own. The good dog has four good legs that are used correctly. The quality Dane is a unit and can stand and move as a one-piece dog.

One characteristic about which master breeders are uncompromising is temperament. They mentioned many components of temperament, not just not shyness or aggression. The dog has to have confidence, the "look at me," the "I want to win" attitude. They want the intelligent dog, tolerant of people and other dogs, and reliable. The dog should be happy, outgoing, and enjoy the show ring. They watch the puppies and

adolescents see a bird or hear a loud noise and strike a pose. The conformation must be there, but so must the temperament, attitude, and carriage.

Master breeders want very competitive dogs at the group and best in show level, so movement is a priority. The dog must move correctly for the breed. Dogs with movement faults that could keep them from winning are not kept.

I was surprised to learn that master breeders consider color even in breeds where color is supposed to be immaterial. Some colors and patterns win more, and they want the winning edge. One said she wanted the dog to sparkle, to which color and pattern contributed. Another said while any color was acceptable in the show ring, she only wanted to breed and keep the colors she liked to look at and was willing to feed.

Good Enough

Master breeders set very high standards for what they will keep, show, and breed. The dogs must be good enough to win specialties, groups, and bests in show. Just being able to finish is not good enough. One said the keepers had to be better than the dogs she already had.

Some master breeders don't breed all the dogs they finish. When comparing their finished stock, those not as good as the others are placed. Only those of the highest quality are good enough to breed.

Some of the breeders acquired good or very good stock early in their careers and built on it. Others started with lesser quality dogs, but bred to dogs that had what they needed. They kept the best from each litter, and built up to the quality they wanted. It takes longer to breed up from mediocre, of course.

Breeding

In order to keep the very best, master breeders must have enough dogs from which to choose.

In some circles, part of the definition of a "responsible breeder" is one who doesn't breed very often, perhaps a litter every two or three years. Master breeders have one or two to five or more litters per year. Depending on the quality, they usually keep one or two puppies from each litter. Even though they breed more than most, they are breeding for dogs for themselves, not primarily to sell puppies.

A successful Dane breeder once commented to me that numbers were needed for success. A breeder can have one litter a year for three years, or three litters in one year. If any one litter produces nothing worth keeping, then the breeder has lost that year. With three litters in one year, the breeder can keep the best of the group. It is like rolling the dice. With one litter, she is betting her future on one roll. With more litters per year, she is doubling or tripling her chances of getting a star.

Remember that all litters don't produce quality. There is no point in keeping even one puppy from a litter that didn't click.

Master breeders have much invested in each litter in time, effort, and money. They aren't in a hurry to get rid of the puppies – this is what they bred for. They watch the puppies grow and develop from the beginning. Obvious pets are placed as early as ten to thirteen weeks.

They keep the one or two most promising puppies from each litter to "grow out" – to let them develop and to see which are really the best. One master breeder said they might even keep a prospect for up to two years. They can tell many things at eight to ten weeks or even three months. Carriage, show temperament, and interaction with other dogs and people are seen later. To be certain they know which is best, they wait to see the dogs develop, to see which ones actually fulfill their potential. Puppies change as they grow and mature. There is no way to know for sure that the best puppy at eight or ten weeks will be the best adult.

Growing out multiple dogs from multiple litters requires the resources to accommodate a number of dogs. Yes, some of the master breeders have large or giant breed dogs. It isn't just the small-dog breeders who keep dogs into adolescence.

Some master breeders have kennels to accommodate the numbers. Many allow all the dogs to run together, although this is harder for breeds that have their ears taped. Other breeders have networks of friends who can help grow out possible keepers.

Growing out multiple puppies to six months or a year or longer is harder than picking one puppy at ten weeks and selling the rest. But how fruitless it is to do all the work and spend all the money to breed a litter, and not have the best from that effort to breed the next generation? To miss the star can be a major setback on all subsequent breeding. Which is more costly?

Other Breeding Practices

On breeding methods, the master breeders aren't significantly different from other breeders. Most linebreed. They will do a judicious outcross to get a feature they need. Some feel that exclusively linebreeding can get a breeder locked into a corner. So as they need to, they outcross to an exceptional dog who himself is linebred.

Several master breeders breed internationally, using excellent dogs from other countries. One uses dogs that are grandchildren or great-grandchildren of dogs from her own lines which she had sold overseas.

Master breeders keep the numbers under control by placing those adult dogs that are no longer being bred. They also place champions that they have decided not to breed. Some dogs are good enough to finish, but if better ones are available, they are not bred. By reducing the numbers of adults, they make room for promising puppies to be grown out.

One master breeder said that some of her show puppy people never have to purchase another dog from her. If the home has been successful with previous dogs, the people are easy to work with, and they take good care of the dogs, she will give them dogs on co-ownerships.

One expert who wrote a book on the subject said that once a year she evaluates her two to three years old dogs. She keeps the best two or three, and sells the rest to be shown and finished by others. This keeps her number of dogs under control.

When asked what errors the less successful breeders make, some master breeders think that others make decisions on which puppies to keep based on emotion rather than on the quality of the puppies. They fall in love and keep the wrong one.

Many master breeders said that less successful breeders may not be able or willing to do all the hard work involved in being a successful breeder. There is research to be done on dogs, their get, their siblings, their parents, and other relatives. There is physically caring for all the dogs and making sure they all get what they need. Training, socializing, and developing puppies take a great deal of time and effort.

One master breeder breeds his best bitch several times and keeps only the best of her offspring. The second best bitch is used to do an outcross breeding to produce a dog to which he breeds the best bitch. His resulting pedigree has only his best bitches in the bitch tail line.

Another master breeder places two of the most promising puppies to be raised by a family with children. When the dogs are one year old, she takes the best show prospect, and the family gets an excellent puppy to keep for their efforts.

Great Dane Breeders

The successful Great Dane breeders do several of the things that master breeders do. The two main differences are number of litters bred and length of time they keep puppies.

Few Great Dane breeders have more than one litter a year, and many do not have that many. Those that have more than one per year don't do so often. The culture in the Dane community doesn't encourage breeding multiple litters per year.

Second and even more strongly expressed, no Great Dane breeder keeps multiple puppies to grow out. They make their picks by three months or earlier and sell the rest as soon as buyers were available. Keeping more than one is too difficult. The siblings bond with each other rather than with the human family. It is harder to keep the ears taped when there is more than one. Fewer homes are interested in buying older Dane puppies.

Conclusions

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, each breeder determines her own goals and the level at which she wants to compete. Producing finishable dogs is a laudable aim. Being a master breeder is too much work for most breeders. For some who just want to compete in shows at the highest level, buying a good dog from a master breeder is much easier.

On the other hand, if you want to improve your breeding results, consider whether you can do so by making some of the master breeder concepts work for you.

Assess your own knowledge of breed type and ability to evaluate dogs. Aim to become more of an expert. Your knowledge can always be improved. If you can, offer to work for or help an expert with her dogs. Experts can mentor you, even help you evaluate your own dogs. Even if they have a different breed than yours; you can still learn much from them.

Evaluate your own dogs for their potential contribution to your future breeding program. Are they good enough? If not, can you acquire better stock? Excellent breeders whose lines you admire may be willing to co-own with you.

Consider reducing your current dog population to make room for growing out promising youngsters. Seniors have earned the right to stay, but younger retired dogs and those that didn't turn out to be stars can be rehomed. Obedience train them, maybe even get a CD title on them. Healthy trained adults past the chewing and housebreaking issues are valued as pets.

Plan to co-own or share some of your next litter with friends, receptive family members, and good puppy people who can share the work. Look at the puppies often to see how they are developing. Take pictures and video them stacked and moving. So much can change over time. As they develop, make certain the dogs are getting the training, care, and socialization they need. Put it all in writing so that everyone knows what is happening and expected.

If you cannot breed multiple litters in your home, perhaps you can partner with another person. You can each breed a litter and grow out the best from each. Teamwork.

If keeping puppies with ears in tapes is an issue, consider natural ears. Or run each puppy with adults who are less interested in the puppy's antics or ears.

Use your imagination to see how you can accomplish what the master breeders do to improve your dogs and your success in the show ring.

I'll look forward to seeing your results.

