

Breeder Referral

By Gretchen Bernardi

Over the years I have written frequently about the essential role our parent clubs play in the larger world of pure-bred dogs in addition to the work they do for their specific breeds and how important their policies and initiatives are to the health of the sport in all areas. Five years ago I addressed the issue of rescue work, an obligation that the founders of our clubs could not have imagined, aside from the illness or other tragedy striking its members. I contacted the official rescue officers of many parent clubs in all seven AKC groups and they were virtually unanimous in several areas: all of the wrong people are having puppies; our parent club members are not producing the dogs that end up in rescue (except in rare cases of personal tragedy); breeders realize that there is a delicate balance between producing enough dogs for a healthy gene pool and producing too many dogs that end up in the wrong homes.

Rescue has become a time consuming and expensive part of all parent clubs' missions. Of course, rescue is a bigger job in clubs representing those breeds most frequently found in pet stores and other commercial entities. Yorkshire Terriers lead the list of breeds most commonly found in pet stores with Chihuahuas, Maltese, Shih Tzu, Boston Terriers and Pomeranians right up there at the top. In fact, ten breeds make up nearly 33 percent of all dogs sold in pet shops, with mixed/designer breeds comprising a shocking 21 percent. Question: what entity rescues mixed breed dogs?

But other, rarer breeds have or have had serious problems with dogs needing help. In *The New Rescue* in 2004, I wrote about Mary Price and the comprehensive rescue program for the Newfoundland Club of America. I wrote about the Bull Terrier Club of America and its proactive work with Target to help offset potential problems that might be caused by that company's use of the breed in its advertising campaign. The Italian Greyhound rescue program has been overwhelmed with dogs in need. The breed registered 1,417 dogs in 2003 and yet, at last count, the organization was rescuing about 500 IG's per year. The other registries were getting the registration money, but the AKC clubs were getting the rescues. But here's a reminder: no registry produces dogs, but registers the dogs produced by others.

It is not surprising that rescue work continues to be a major issue facing parent clubs and we should not overlook the work done by many regional breed-specific rescue groups. At my club's recent all-breed show, we provided booth space for the Gateway Yorkshire Terrier Club of St. Louis to hold a silent auction to help finance the rescue and placement of dogs taken in a recent puppy mill raid in Missouri. Can you imagine the problems faced by a rescue group in Missouri dedicated to one of the "money breeds"?

It could be said that many of the dogs that end up in pure-bred rescue represent a failure—the failure of sufficiently educating the consumer about the best place and the best way to purchase a puppy; the failure of placing the right puppy with the right home, something only the most responsible breeders can and will do and the failure of our clubs to get the puppy buyer in touch with those responsible breeders. The debatable question is who or what entity is responsible for the education, for the puppy placement, for the breeder referral, all of which just might lower the numbers coming into rescue and help mitigate that impact.

Undoubtedly every parent club would claim at least some portion of that responsibility, but how seriously clubs take that responsibility varies widely as do their approaches to the challenge. Some clubs have the entire membership on their web pages with contact information, or at least those members who agree to be included. Some clubs have divided the country into geographic areas with a few members listed in each area. Some clubs want to include everyone. Some clubs only want to include those breeders that the officers like or whose breeding practices they approve of. Some clubs, I am told, only include breeders whose puppy-selling success does not compete with that of its officers. Some clubs, very few, charge a fee to breeders for puppy referral listings and others charge a small fee to people who want a list of breeders mailed to them.

If parent clubs want to keep the potential puppy buyer out of the pet stores and away from other outlets where commercially bred dogs are sold, and we must presume they do, then puppy referral programs should be one of the most aggressive components of a parent club's activities, since so much depends on the success of that program.

It may come as a surprise that one club with the most aggressive and original approach to puppy referral is the Clumber Spaniel Club of America, since the breed is not generally considered a breed popular enough to have much of a problem with rescue, ranking as it does 115th out of 156 of all AKC breeds in registrations. As Kathy McGriff, club member and former officer, related to me, things got out of hand pretty quickly a few years ago. "Our breed," she writes, "being a rare-breed, can point with some accuracy to a single unfortunate event...in our case the importation of a litter from the Czech Republic into bad hands in Oklahoma...as being the beginning of our trouble. Many of those Clumbers ended up at auction to find their way into still more bad hands. Our rescue operation is the busiest it ever has been with Clumbers which have been raised in confinement with no socialization. An increasing number of these Clumbers can't recognize a food bowl, much less a toy. Some we were prepared to accept into rescue were put down after testing positive for brucellosis."

Not all parent clubs are forthright about their position on the commercial breeding of dogs in general or of their own breed, but the CSCA makes its attitude crystal clear on its web site:

"The Clumber Spaniel Club of America applauds recent efforts by celebrities and the mainstream media to expose the abuses of commercial pet producers and auctions. Unfortunately, these abuses often carry over to smaller operations which, at first glance, may appear to be caring and family-oriented but which, in fact, are only breeding to sell puppies with little, if any, attention to the health and temperament of either their breeding stock or their puppies. If you have decided you want a Clumber Spaniel, please do not buy from someone who is simply producing puppies for sale. Talk to and buy from responsible, ethical breeders who continuously study pedigrees, do health checks and participate in organizations and activities to increase their knowledge of the breed and of their dogs. They will not just take your money but will help you confirm that a Clumber Spaniel is the right breed for you, and if you do add a Clumber Spaniel to your family, will be there to answer your many questions and serve as your mentor for the life of your dog."

And further: "The CSCA, its Rescue organization, its Auction Oversight arm and its Breeder Referral operation are painfully aware that many Clumber Spaniels have fallen into hands of producers and auction houses which do not share the CSCA's commitment to breed welfare, or to the individual dogs such commercial concerns casually process for personal gain."

The CSCA doesn't just say it is serious about its philosophy, it means it and, more importantly, it acts on that philosophy. The club formed the CSCA Public Education Subcommittee, which recently submitted its

report to the membership and it is a model of determination and in the employment of creative thinking to solve the problem. Chaired by Phyllis Potterfield, it included board liaison Kathy McGriff, Education Committee Chair Donna Starr and committee members Tracy Ferris, Diana Jensen, Norma Simpson and John Woodlief.

Here is a very abbreviated account of that committee's activities:

- Encouraged all CSCA members to include the club's logo on their websites with the goal of having the logo become a visual means of "setting CSCA members apart from commercial pet producers".
- Placed and monitored advertisements with advice on learning about the breed before buying a puppy and to buy only from breeders who are CSCA members.
- Procured ownership of eight domain names through the generosity of members John and Naiza, to prevent commercial pet producers or backyard breeders from buying and using them.
- Distributed hundreds of club business cards reading "Buy or Adopt Responsibly".
- Encouraged members to participate and assisted them with printed material, etc. in activities such as Meet the Breeds, Pet Expos and Responsible Dog Owner events and to distribute brochures, additional handouts and the aforementioned business cards.
- Continued work on a series published in the club bulletin, encouraging and helping new owners of the breed to get started in various activities with their dogs, including agility, junior showmanship, therapy work, conformation, rally, obedience, hunting and tracking.
- Worked closely with the Breeder Referral Subcommittee "to direct persons looking into owning a Clumber to good information about the breed, to match them with Clumber families nearby where they can meet a "real" Clumber and to direct them away from pet producers/pupymillers and toward CSCA breeders".
- Monitored the various chat groups and made plans to effectively use Facebook, Twitter, etc. in the future.

According to club members and officers, the general philosophy and accompanying activities have been very well-received by the membership. Clumbers are a rare breed and most of them want to keep it that way, plus the reputable breeders in the club do not want to be lumped together with mere "producers." Pride of membership is a good thing to keep in mind for any organization that believes in welcoming new members.

The activities and the commitment to success that this club, this committee and its members have demonstrated are remarkable and should give officers of all parent clubs new ideas on how to put into practice additional activities that will more efficiently direct puppy buyers to committed breeders of the AKC breed they represent. Parent clubs are engaged in many important projects: standard revision, judges' education, breeder education, membership work. Guiding potential puppy buyers to the best breeders, our parent club members, should be high on these clubs' project lists. Doing so is simply the right thing to do for our breeds, our parent clubs, our sport and for the AKC that oversees it all. It is responsibility in action.
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