

## Vickie's Big Question

This exchange appeared on Dr. Catherine Marley's breederslist/

October 12, 2007 Vickie started an intelligent, lively discussion with the following post.:

How about the general decline of interest in the breed and the decline in litters registered? What are clubs doing to promote the breed at various functions? What efforts are being made to encourage folks to show?

Vickie, et al

Leslie Baumann's response:

Hi Vickie,

I don't believe your questions can be answered with one or two happy face suggestions to make club meetings more fun. And it is not just Lhasas in decline. Many breeds are losing popularity. As a culture, purebreds are not in demand they way they once were. We've gone from Lassie, Big Red and Rin Tin Tin...noble purebreds al...to Benji...noble mutt...to Best In Show...satire that missed the mark as often as hit it...all topped off by the disgrace of Show Dog Moms and Dads. And the problem with the latter pop culture offering is that it was "reality!" We ALL know dog people just like those negative stereotypes profiled in that show: arrogant know-it-alls, clueless neophytes being taken advantage of, win at all cost moms who know just enough about the sport to be hideously negative towards their animals and their children. No mention of the lifelong friends that we make in this sport nor the passion for the art of breeding good dogs that we share. Just win at all costs and "diss" the competition when you lose.

Contrast the current negative image of the "dog show breeder" to that of the average puppy mill/designer dog producer who creates a website with cute puppy pictures and tells clients that their babies aren't like those high strung show dogs...plus they'll let them pick the puppy they want, take it home at six weeks and won't force clients to spay/neuter by a certain age. A friend told me a story about a co-worker who purchased a dog from a responsible breeder who said he would take back the dog if the new owner was not able to keep it. That was a real selling point, the new owner remarked to my friend adding, "When my son goes to college in five years, we can take the dog back to his breeder!" So much for responsible breeders fostering responsible dog ownership...

IMHO parent club members/responsible breeders of purebred dogs have done a horrible job marketing themselves. What are the differences between our dogs and mass produced puppy mill purebreds? Why are my puppies better than those produced by the backyard breeder in the town north of me? Are vets aware of the differences? If not, why not? What about Shelters? Rescuers? Performance dog people? Pet owners? I think you will find that "good breeders" are seen as the exception, if they exist at all in popular perception, not the rule. The California law that would make our passion, our life work, a crime is not dead...it is just resting. Meanwhile, we run around rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

Based on the emails I get from people seeking information on the whereabouts of the "breeder" of their pet store Lhasa, the differences between the responsible hobby breeders who make up the ALAC membership and the commercial puppy manufacturers are not apparent at all. This means either there are no perceivable differences (a depressing thought) or we are not publicizing what makes our dogs better. I don't mean what makes my line better than Lucy's line...I mean what makes

a dog show breeder's puppies, of any line, better than mass produced pet store/puppy mill puppies. If we can't come up with an "elevator speech" that explains the superiority of our product...and then get the word out in this media age...how do we attract newcomers to our sport?

In the 1970's and 1980's, we had two thriving privately published monthly and/or bi-monthly breed magazines. Those magazines were filled with photographs **and pedigrees**. Back then, I believe what attracted many of us to the sport was not just our love for dogs but also the challenge of developing a breeding program that would produce good ones. Thirty years later, Lhasa fanciers in this country are barely able to support three issues a year of a magazine, even though it is heavily subsidized by ALAC club dues. And we're lucky if folks bother to mention a sire and a dam in their ads. How do we encourage breeding better Lhasa Apsos if we hide our breeding programs? Or do we not have breeding programs anymore? That would go a long way towards explaining why it is so difficult to differentiate responsible hobby breeder/exhibitors from backyard breeders and millers, wouldn't it?

Keeping a dog in hair and trotting it around a ring on a leash does not make someone a breeder...it makes him a handler. If we wish to keep our breed strong, we need people to become breeders...and I don't mean for one or two litters...I mean breeders with a long term commitment to a breeding program. Step one in rejuvenating the idea that a breeder is something more than a producer of puppies would be to rediscover the importance of breeding programs and enhance the value of the art of breeding quality dogs. A first step towards this goal might be, IMHO, for all of us to start publishing pedigrees with the photos of our latest winners.

I'll share another pet peeve I have that is specific to Lhasas. As long as ALAC members without a litter don't take the time to return phone calls or answer emails to help prospective buyers find responsible breeders who DO have puppies for sale, people will buy from a different, less reputable source or they will choose a different breed that is easier to find. Now, perhaps some of these callers should not own a Lhasa but how do you know if you don't ever reply to their emails or calls? Why is answering an email or returning a phone call important? Besides being the professional, polite and classy thing to do, it is what will keep our breed alive. Without an ability to place puppies, breeders...particularly the most responsible ones...will curtail their breeding programs. So, how many Lhasa breeder/exhibitors of my generation and older have to stop breeding before we start losing genetic diversity? How far down in numbers do we have to go before we realize that we have to support each other, including even our most bitter rivals in the ring, in order to keep the breed alive? The next time you need an outcross, do you know the line you will go to? Most of us, dare I say all of us, can not maintain two separate strains to cross back and forth with because that would require a kennel of 50 or more dogs.

It is a fact of life these days that to develop a truly viable breeding program, breeders must form alliances, share a vision of what they want the breed to be and work together to realize that vision. Such groups may actually become more important than clubs to the future of a breed. (Clubs, IMHO, can do very little until the members decide it is in their self-interest to be collegial and welcoming...) The danger, of course, is that "group think" will result in the "Balkanization" of a breed with type degenerating into diverging "styles." This has happened in numerous sporting dogs where field and show lines might as well be two different breeds. "Balkanization" is happening in Border Collies where exaggeration of coat and bone in some show lines and lack of attention to soundness in some working lines are contributing to two very different looks. I don't mean to get on a tangent here but if there is one truly important thing for Specialty clubs to do, it is to include all "groups" and not allow any one group to "own" the club. Of course, this requires all group members to recognize that by sharing "power" within the club and treating each other respectfully, both in and out of the ring, they ultimately make themselves stronger not weaker.

Lhasa numbers originally grew in the 1960's and 1970's thanks in large part to people in other breeds (poodles, cockers, GSD) who switched to Lhasas while we were an up and coming fad breed. They wanted to make their mark as did the "newbies," like myself, who sought out one of the more experienced "pioneers" and fell in love with the breed. Well, we aren't a fad breed anymore...so, precisely how do we encourage experienced dog show people as well as newcomers to start breeding Lhasas instead of getting a Coton or Lowchen or Havanese? My belief is that we won't start getting "refugees" from other breeds until we demonstrate a great deal more professionalism, supportiveness and collegiality.

Which brings me back to the "circular firing squad" mentality that permeates our sport. Frankly, I don't think entries will increase or interest will grow in purebred dogs until dog show people stop competing with each other outside of the show ring. Think about it...when was the last time you didn't believe negative gossip about a competitor? (Not meaning you personally, Vickie...referring to a "generic you.") When did you last say something nice about the competition? To a friend? To a newbie seeking knowledge? Okay, forget saying it out loud...when was the last time you THOUGHT something nice about your competition? There are times the dog show world is so utterly Darwinian, we might as well be eating our young. Just ask the people who tried dog shows and quit. Most of them don't say it was too expensive or too time-consuming. Instead, they will tell you it was too political and they couldn't win. We know it is no fun when you don't win...ask any five year old who tries to beat their older sibling in Monopoly. Eventually, though, the younger sibling gains enough experience to compete on an even level. We don't tell them to give up because they will never be able to beat anyone; we help our children gain experience so one day they might even end up BETTER than we are. Newcomers to our sport are no different yet we often treat them so badly. Think about it...who taught newcomers to be so negative and pessimistic...to stop trying...if not the plethora of sore losers who have a habit of feeling successful not by honoring the success they have but rather by denigrating the success of others.

There is a Tibetan prayer flag that is specifically written to deflect negative thoughts away from the flag owner and back to the sender. That is because Buddhists understand it is difficult to be a positive person and easy to fall into a negative mind set. At one time or another, we all have made the mistake of being negative and succumbing to our baser selves. However, if we truly want to see our breed grow and flourish, we need to hold onto our prayer flags and start behaving, each and every one of us, with compassion for our fellow breeders, with grace whether we win or lose and...this is the hardest part for me...**forgiveness for past slights**. At the point the majority of us do that rather than persist in fighting over the deck chairs, newcomers will WANT to join us and share in our fun!

My two cents...thanks all for your kind words about John. Right now, he's heavily involved in reconciliation among the different tribes...hmmmm, it would appear the apple doesn't fall far from the tree? <vbg>

Regards,

"Pollyanna"

Cathy:

I have to agree with Leslie as far as she went. Leslie told us, quite correctly what was wrong with the Lhasa Fancy. I don't think she completely explained the "Why" (not that anyone really can) . And unless we understand "why", we can't fix it.

I think it has been a combination of several trends. I have been in

Apsos for 35 years and have witnessed the halcyon days and the decline, and think I have identified a few of these underlying influences.

1. The club has always been focussed on shows and competition. This is an unavoidable fact. The people willing to invest their time and passion in working for the club are those who are self selected for ambition: the competitive ones, the ones who have a need to influence others. Every club is this way. The majority of people are fairly passive and content to let the more aggressive and ambitious do all the heavy lifting. These worker bees are the hard core "show" people. Over 35 years I have seen the same hard core of people dominate the club and steer it's vision, We all know who they are.

There are some advantages to this: continuity and cohesion. Without it, a club just falls apart from sheer inertia. But there are disadvantages as well. There is a natural life cycle to such an organization - almost like an organism. In the beginning the core group is young, enthusiastic, and the organism grows from sheer youthful joi d'vivre. The enthusiasm infects newcomers. The breed swells with newbies. Then maturity sets in. The stature and solidarity of the core group intimidates the would- be show newbies. A few are accepted by the core cadre, but usually in secondary roles. They come and go. The core remains. Finally, old age sets in. No newbies - they are all scared off by the dinosaurial core. The breed declines. The showing of dogs becomes almost ritualized - the same (old) faces doing the same (old) thing, - winning as usual. (I am not criticizing the core workers. Without them the club would have withered away long ago.)

But perhaps the problem emanates from the club's guiding principle - DOG SHOWS. What happened to the DOGS? What were we showing them for? WHO were we showing them for. Why were we showing them? What have we missed in our pursuit of dogshows? Is the premise of the club and the resulting evolution from that first principle actually causing the demise of the breed as expressed by litter numbers and dog show entries?

2. The society is, as Leslie mentioned, increasingly anti dog, and anti breeder. Parodies, such as the ones mentioned are, like Al Gore's opus, basically political statements with a definite societal agenda. While we concern ourselves with who is the top special in the country, and who is educating judges to appreciate what style of dog, the society is lobbying legislation to stop us dead in our tracks, and encouraging the commercial breeding of mutts. Is this because we have ignored the DOGS? We hold ourselves as the only reputable sources of this purebred animal, (and we are) but we don't really act that way. We look to the public, and (face it) to ourselves that we are interested in the WIN, not the DOG.

I have found that the internet is a powerful if somewhat limited instrument of change. Most people are smarter than they seem, and they CAN tell when the truth is being presented. Those that respond to my website are not confused about the difference between the cockapoo breeder and myself. I am firmly convinced by the responses I read every day, that focussing on the dog, it's importance to biology, culture, history, well-being of people, and the importance of breeding them for health, beauty, and a host of other attributes is the way to increase interest in our breed.

3. One of the main problems with the organization of any club devoted to a special interest is a gradual loss of collegiality with newcomers. When the club was new - in the early 70's, new people were welcomed and

embraced. We went to a lot of matches. We had a lot of picnics at the showgrounds. I have seen a kind of renewal of that feeling on the apso list. People with pet apsos are feeling welcomed and are coming to shows. We need to focus on the dogs, and recognize that shows should not be the core purpose and focus of a club. The dogs and their owners are.

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Regards, Cathy Marley  
Vickie:

In a message dated 10/13/2007 6:26:31 P.M. Mountain Daylight Time, breeder@lhasa-apso.org writes:

I have to agree with Leslie as far as she went. Leslie told us, quite correctly what was wrong with the Lhasa Fancy. I don't think she completely explained the "Why" (not that anyone really can) . And unless we understand "why", we can't fix it.

Great insights and observations by Leslie and Cathy. And then we get to the "how" of attempting a "fix" in addition to becoming civil amongst ourselves. My original questions: How about the general decline of interest in the breed and the decline in litters registered? What are clubs doing to promote the breed at various functions? What efforts are being made to encourage folks to show?

As Cathy so succinctly stated, "...People with pet apsos are feeling welcomed and are coming to shows. We need to focus on the dogs, and recognize that shows should not be the core purpose and focus of a club. The dogs and their owners are."

Focusing on dogs/owners, how do we get them to participate? Suggestions have been made for picnics, pet parades ... what about grooming and training seminars? How many of you contact your pet folks (people you've placed dogs with) ... and invite them to the "local" show and include directions/ring times in that invite? Rescue can get involved as well, hosting a "Rescue Reunion." When's the last time an educational booth was set up in conjunction with a show? What mediums are available for advertising Apso-related functions in a local area?

Sitting at the ever graying ringside, however, I still have to ponder the future of the breed. Junior handlers are rare as hens' teeth and one is hard pressed to find breeders under the age of 45-50. Who will carry on as the old guard ages out ... or will the breed merely vanish into the mists from whence it came?

Vickie, et al

Darby:

I have to reply to this one. I've been trying to keep a somewhat low profile because of the forthcoming National week. However, I feel that my area in Northern Calif is representative of the discussion going on here. The Lhasa Apso Club of Northern Calif. was one of the largest clubs in the country. Our entries at the Cow Palace in San Francisco was well over 100 Lhasas every year. We picnicked, had meetings, had educational forays to Davis, and we supported new people that loved our breed. All that went away when only a couple of people started using the club for personal gain. We still have people in the area that love Lhasas, but hate going to the shows because of these few unpleasant persons in our club. The club died. There were no entries or only one. With the sour apple gone from the breed, we have built an entirely new club again. Yes, this sour apple was involved in other breeds as well, and there entries went sideways.

We invite pet owners, show people, and any persons interested in the Lhasa Apso. It will take us (this new group) a year and a half to meet the requirements of AKC to reorganize. We are working hard towards this effort. We need to have two B's and one A match in order to have our specialties again. It is such a joy to once again see the interest in the Lhasa Apso. It broke my heart to attend a show and not see any Lhasas entered.

Nan Damberg in Portland Oregon has set the bar high in this specialty arena. She manages to hire judges that bring in entries. She plans after show parties where all Lhasa fanciers are invited and participate. I believe she is getting entries of around 40. We all have a wonderful time. I wouldn't miss it for the world. Winners and losers get along fine. I've heard compliments about nice dogs from all lines. Nan and Bob have worked tirelessly toward this effort, and they have succeeded. This coming year, all pet owners that wish to participate, will have a special class. Nan is planning to have a Lhasa coat maintenance demonstration by one of the best groomers I have had the privilege to know. The lady loves to groom, and she makes it easy. The trip is worth it. People, dogs and education are the focus here.

I also believe that breed numbers rise and fall due to fad. That doesn't mean that interest in the breed goes away. We must educate people to understand the history of the breed. The greatest number of Lhasa Apso owners are pet owners. The Apso list should make us all aware of this. The educated answers to problems that arise in any breed are presented here. At last, there is a forum to unite interest in the Lhasa Apso and their owners. I love to read the posts. There are the show people yes, but the majority of posts are from pet people that care about this breed. I have great faith that we will once again see healthy entries in Lhasas.

I pose a question to all Lhasa Apso breeders. Could you send the majority of our Lhasas back to Tibet, and could they survive in the environment from which they came? It is my opinion that most would not. This takes us back to why clubs should be teaching confirmation and maintenance. The new Lhasa Apso Club of Northern Calif will be focusing strongly in this area. Our board is mostly comprised of newer Lhasa exhibitors and pet owners. We will keep you posted on our progress.

Cheers,  
Darby