

I am writing to extend and clarify my remarks in the second quarter Newf Tide “Point of View” article regarding temperament. In the next issue, an article by Dr. Tamzin Rosenwasser appeared which in many ways was written as if in contrast to mine. It did not, however, accurately reflect my point of view. My article did not suggest, as Dr. Rosenwasser seems to imply, that temperament is of secondary importance or that there is any reason for not forming strategies for maintaining and improving the breed.

Dr. Rosenwasser goes on to suggest that my position is that temperament is “only” (her word) another strength or weakness to be considered in a breeding program. Yes, my point of view is that temperament should enter into the breeding equation in the same way as physical traits of great importance, but of modest heritability, i.e. we need to elevate our attention to temperament to at least that of major physical traits. Why should we ignore the hard won knowledge of the science of genetics and selective breeding and decide that because a trait is important (“a dog with a poor temperament is dangerous”)we should not treat it in our breeding program according to the same scientific principles that we bring to bear on other, physical traits? Wouldn’t they, in fact, be our best hope for success?

The selective pressure that we utilize, i.e., the proportion of animals we’re willing to breed, is an issue entirely different from the nature of the strategy used. In my opinion, we need to attend to much more than the acceptability of the dogs we are actually mating. We need to look at littermates, other close relatives, and more than anything we need to look at previous progeny when they are available. Dogs with good temperaments, but with temperamentally unsound littermates, are probably not good breeding candidates. They should, at the very least, be bred with caution only to dogs known to produce good temperament and with a very honest evaluation of the temperament of the offspring. We will not eliminate poor temperaments by attending only to the phenotypes of the dog being bred any more than we have eliminated hip dysplasia, a trait with probably about the same heritability. Some dogs with undeniably good temperaments may consistently produce offspring with poor temperaments, as is the case with many such traits inherited in this manner.

Further, we will have to recognize that temperament is not an “all or none” characteristic, but a graded one. Some dogs are closer to ideal than others. To approach it in an all or none manner in which the slightest hint of a problem eliminates the dog from the breeding pool will certainly exacerbate the tendency to kennel blindness, encourage rumor mongering, and discourage breeders from revealing any shortcomings at all. I know of several breedings right now of dogs with “acceptable” temperaments which would probably not have been done were temperaments approached as suggested in my first article, i.e. in the same way as physical traits with similar heritability. However, they certainly met the criteria suggested by Dr. Rosenwasser to “not breed dogs with poor temperaments” In other words, temperament is too important to approach in any way other than that we use for our most important physical traits.