

Mentors

Sherri Vendetti

The challenges facing a new participant in the breed can be daunting. Sometimes we hear the plea, “Why can’t the people who have already figured this out and become successful spend some time to share their expertise and help the new person out?”

In a utopian setting, one might imagine that veterans would be aware of the newcomer’s desire to learn and proffer their advice and assistance. In the real world, nothing comes your way on a silver platter. But if you are willing to work for it and earn it, help can be yours. You can make it happen. I have enjoyed this kind of mentoring for several years – long before I got my first dog with showing and breeding potential, and I continue to seek and enjoy the benefits of it now. You can enjoy it, too, but you must select a potential mentor and then work to convince that person that you are worth investing their time and energy in.

Choosing a First Mentor

I think an awful lot depends on whom you choose as your first mentor. In many ways, they will help to determine the entire course of your future within the fancy. While your immediate goal may be somewhat narrow, you will benefit greatly by choosing someone to learn from who has qualifications that extend beyond one area of interest. Here are some of the qualities that drew me to my first mentor:

- Breadth of involvement – someone who gives as well as takes, someone who volunteers to help out, someone who actively participates in BMD clubs and events beyond just paying entry fees and showing.
- Broad perspective – someone who gets out of their own backyard, who makes it a priority to attend specialties (even when they're not local), who has made the effort to know a lot of people and dogs around the country and beyond.
- Reputation – someone who is liked and respected by their peers, not just as a successful campaigner but also as a human being. No two breeders agree on everything, but that does not mean that they have to be perennially embroiled in spats, factional fighting, or backstabbing battles. There are people in the fancy who are perpetually fighting with others; they are not good mentor potential.
- Dedication to teaching and learning – someone who is pleased when their student has learned enough to develop an independent opinion and to support it with a credible argument.

- Openness – someone who does not take questions as an attack, who is comfortable explaining their decisions to you so that you can learn from them, someone who does not jump to the defensive at the first question or disagreement. Look for someone with whom you "can agree to disagree". Being defensive, as either teacher or student, is one of the greatest roadblocks to learning.
- Overall experience – someone who has not only pedigree knowledge, breeding and showing experience, but also an interest in obedience, draft, etc.

Expanding Beyond the Primary Mentor

Having a primary mentor with these qualities opens the door to a whole world of people who can and will help you learn more. I still have a close relationship with my first mentor, and I still turn to her for input when making decisions. But I've also enjoyed the mentoring and friendship of others, including some of the people who've been active in this breed the longest, as well as newer breeders who are not afraid to question traditional means and truisms. These are valuable relationships that you can only build over time, brick by brick. There are probably many ways of doing this, but here is how I did it.

I made a point of sitting in specific spots at the national specialty every year, not with my mentor. The national was my chance to take advantage of knowledgeable people that I would not normally have contact with. So it was a special chance not to be missed! I sat right in front of veterans of the breed who I wanted to get to know. The first year, I asked an occasional question. I made it clear that I would never repeat any off the cuff comments I happened to overhear, and I honored that oath! I sat in the same spot the following year, and the year after that.

Over time, these people got more and more comfortable with my presence. They knew that I was serious and that I was going to be around for a while, so they wouldn't be wasting their time by sharing their experience and insights with me. This is very important! The more that people know that you are in it for the long haul; the more they will choose to invest their time and energy on you.

Another requisite for expanding your mentoring circle is honoring what they share with you. The dog world can get very nasty. Things can be retold out of context and create needless friction and disputes.

Never, never, never – even when trying to educate someone else – betray a confidence and say something like "Well, I was talking with Mrs. Berner Bigwig and she said that CH Today's Big Winner USED to have a gay tail".

Understand that no one, even a mentor, is perfect. Accept the people whom you respect as they are. That does not mean you have to like and respect everyone.

It does mean that you can gain immeasurably by respecting someone for their knowledge of type, health issues, genetics, history, or whatever and by ignoring the fact that you think they are a flake or that you would not take a dog from them if your life depended on it. If someone has a well-grounded understanding of some facet of the breed or breeding, respect them for it. If they're willing to share it with you, consider yourself honored and treasure that relationship.

Open your ears, open your mind, pay attention, and **listen**. I probably should have put this first. It is incredibly important to listen and hear what people are trying to share with you. It is always tempting to talk, to offer your own opinion, to say “yes but...” or just not to pay total attention. But from the other side, there is nothing more frustrating, even angering, than their taking the time to educate you, only to have you ignore their input. You do not have to take everything as gospel, but keep quiet and listen! And then think over everything that you have been told, not just the bits that reinforce what you already thought. If the newest input does not make sense to you, ask questions. Often, the insight being offered is valuable but the person is having a hard time expressing it effectively.

Ringside...

The above are the important factors in being mentored. As for showing, always be a gracious winner when you win and a gracious loser when you do not. Remember that you are supposed to be doing this for fun and that the sun actually will rise again tomorrow – even if you lose to a lesser dog. If you can do that, and you ask questions and, again, actively listen to the answers, then you will find lots of ringside mentors and people who are happy to share your success.

When I finished my first show dog, I was certainly pleased about the 5-point major, but I was absolutely thrilled by how sincerely happy for us so many other people were! These were not breeder groupies, they were a mix of other breeders, handlers, people I had taken time to speak with in a “public ed” kind of way, pet owners, and many people who had offered a handling tip along the way. Good sportsmanship is not dead! Show it towards others and you will receive it in return.

The same carried over when we switched to the obedience ring. I had been around the training center long enough to get to know the teachers and the serious trainers. I would ask questions or chat now and again with people other than the one I was taking classes with.

When we entered our first trial, the teacher I had been taking classes with was on hand. She wasn't entered; she had come to help by cheering us on and coaching with last minute reminders. At successive trials, Granger had his own cheering section – four grandchildren one day, one of my customers from work and his family another. But at all three trials, my class instructor, one or two

other regulars from the training center, and a couple of Berner people were ringside offering suggestions and encouragement. When Granger got his final qualifying ribbon and we took the "New CD" photo, I felt like I should have a whole community in the shot because so many people had helped to get us there!

...And Beyond

The dog world can be a nasty, brutal, place or it can be a wonderful world of friends, ideas, and dogs. In my experience, what it is for you is what you make it. Have fun!

~ Sherri Venditti