

**“Your kennel is in your bitches.” – Mrs. Florence Nagle**

*Tom Coen and his wife, Nioma, from Alford, Massachusetts, have been breeding Shetland Sheepdogs for decades under the Macdega banner. They were the 2004 AKC Breeder of the Year Herding Group recipients.*

## **Grand Dams**

**A top Shetland Sheepdog breeder reviews the key role played by dogdom's leading lady, the foundation bitch.**

**By Tom Coen**

**My advice to others over the years has always been to look to the dams of the stud dogs. Tail-male charts are interesting, but they leave out a very important element of the story: the bitch.**

**It is the bitch who provides the complement to the sire and determines the distinction among his offspring, both in quality and producing ability.**

**Breeding dogs is a creative process that combines the eye of the artist with the laws of nature. Add to that a large measure of common sense. Breeding dogs is a process of building generation after generation, of constantly gaining in one area and losing in another. The breeder is like a juggler trying to keep the pins for correct type, stable temperament, and good health in the air at the same time.**

**The bitch is the building block utilized in the process of creative breeding. When selecting a foundation bitch or planning a breeding, there is one principal that I have witnessed as law: What ye sow, ye shall reap. If you don't want something to show up, don't start with it or add it to the gene pool. Recessive problems will slip by due to lack of information, but to knowingly add a serious problem to your program shows no common sense. You may try to close your eyes to something, but Mother Nature will provide a wake-up call somewhere up the road.**

## **Healthy Litters, Naturally**

**When evaluating a bitch for breeding, there are key areas to consider: health, temperament, physical quality (phenotype), and pedigree (genotype).**

**The ideal bitch should be an easy keeper and a good doer. A hearty appetite that keeps her in good flesh with no coaxing is of great importance. A bitch who won't eat, especially when she has a new litter of puppies depending on her, is not well suited to motherhood and can make your life miserable. Avoid bitches from families who require medication and supplementation to maintain their condition and fertility. The goal is to produce good-sized, healthy litters to provide selection within a creative breeding program and to keep the process as natural as possible.**

**We are living in a time when veterinary medicine has become quite sophisticated in the area of reproduction. Thyroid medication and hormone therapy make it possible for bitches that**

would not ordinarily come in season to do so and produce litters. There are tests to monitor silent or irregular seasons so that ovulation can be pinpointed and problem bitches can conceive and produce offspring. Although it is impressive that we can overcome Mother Nature and produce litters out of such bitches, I question the benefit in the long run.

### In a Perfect World

Ideally, the bitch should be as free as possible from hereditary defects. To be genetically free of hereditary defects is not a possibility, but it is in this area that common sense must be employed. Don't breed bad eye checks, entropion, testicle problems, bad hips or other such problems unless you are willing to deal with more of the same. I repeat: What ye sow, ye shall reap.

The ideal bitch possesses a stable, sensible temperament with intelligence and trainability. The bitch is the role model for the puppies and in the area of temperament accounts for more than her genetic 50 percent. There is no excuse or place in the breeding program for a shy, flighty, or nervous bitch.

When selecting for physical quality in a bitch, it is important to keep in mind which qualities are most difficult to achieve and maintain. The purchase of a foundation bitch requires extensive study, followed by careful thought and selection. This, by the way, is not the time to become frugal. Go for the very best bitch you can find as she can save you years of disappointment, frustration, and time.

Head qualities are of great importance in the brood bitch. All will have some deficiencies, but the degree of fault is what must be considered. It is extremely difficult to correct severe lack of skull, snipey muzzle, depth of head, lippiness and certain bite problems. While on the subject of bites, be wary of a narrow underjaw, missing premolars, and inverted molars. The virtue of flat frontal bone, clean sides to the skull, tight lip line, and roundness of muzzle will definitely increase your chances of producing exceptional quality. The greater the degree of virtue your bitch possesses, the better your chances of producing a great one.

### Selection, Study, Judgment

It is almost impossible to radically change body type and structure in only a few generations.

Therefore, it is necessary to select and maintain bitches that approach your mental picture of the ideal as described by the breed standard.

Correct body type is a matter of the proportion and angles of the skeletal structure. Abundant coat is a real plus in a breeding program and can enhance a good outline, but it is still only the icing on the cake. It is what is under the coat that is important, i.e., arch of neck, a strong back, well-laid-back shoulders, long stifle, good definition of the hock joint, and sloping croup.

These are the qualities that your ideal bitch would possess and these are the qualities that create the picture of correct type, standing and in motion. It is these same qualities that make certain individuals stand out in the huge classes.

Since soundness and elegance are priorities in our program, we continually select for the

curvaceous and sweeping bodylines with deep angulation and more neck. Just as the head naturally reverts to commonness so does the body and outline.

Unless you have had firsthand experience with dogs in a pedigree, the document is of little more value than a list of names. With study, a pedigree becomes a valuable tool for creating and predicting quality. Nowhere on the pedigree does it tell which dogs were strong producers or which were producers of problems that still haunt us.

The title champion means very little when evaluating producing ability. It is our responsibility to study and research individuals and family lines and to choose the ones whose look appeals to you and whose shortcomings you can abide. The qualities that a bitch possesses should reflect the qualities of her ancestors. She should be the physical demonstration of the strength of her pedigree. Bitches who are the exception for a family rather than the rule cannot be counted on for predictability.

It is impossible to place a value on a bitch of extreme virtue and strength of a pedigree without taking into account breeder judgment. When utilized in a creative manner by an astute breeder, however, it would be fair to say her value is nothing less than the future of the breed.