

KENNEL MANAGEMENT 101

No matter how long you have owned or run a breeding kennel, it is always a good idea to give things a little review just to see where you are headed with your bottom line. Heaven forbid that any of us should be thinking of profitability with today's political atmosphere and economic hard times. At the risk of being criticized for running our breeding kennels like any other business, let's take a look at some of the things you may not have considered.

What's that old saying, it's not work if you love what you do? If you are a professional breeder, breeding dogs can turn into just a really big hobby and an expensive one if you don't watch what you do along the way. Here's another old saying, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Everyone in the breeding kennel business really needs to take this one to heart. Kennels that are built with the ability to easily and frequently be well cleaned are a must. It's next to impossible to raise a healthy puppy in a dirty environment. Dams with pups need daily changing of whelping box materials. Parasites like coccidia and giardia abound in a dirty environment, not to mention many other health issues that can come into play. All kennel areas should have feces removed on a daily basis as well etc. etc. you know the drill.

Your kennel runs may be roomy enough for more than a few dogs in each, but considering the nature of dogs that are housed together and develop a pecking order, someone may be dominated to the extent that they can not hold their own if there are too many in a run. Even if you seldom have breeding bitches breaking out in fights, they can fuss at each other to where a male can not cover all the ladies in his run if you pen breed. Females that are housed together do frequently come into heat at the same time. Too many in heat at the same time in a pen can also mean someone is not covered.

I like to house my dogs in small family units of one male and two to three female at the most depending on the nature of the breed. Watch for the occasional alpha female who will not tolerate any other female being housed with her. Seldom do temperamental bitches refuse to get along with just a male. Although adult males can often be compatible when confined with only other males, I prefer to remove the possibility of adult males fighting simply by running them only with "their" girls and certainly never in a pen with both males and females.

Amazingly females that were housed together and got along fine for long periods can suddenly turn on each other for no apparent reason. Sometimes this is triggered by one if not all bitches in a pen coming into heat. Sometimes a bitch in advanced pregnancy can find herself at a disadvantage or a sick or injured animal can shift the pecking order in a pen. Always be on the lookout for any animal not doing well in their surroundings. Check your breeding records. Females that are not producing may just need to be moved to a different run where their pen mates are less dominant and they can move up in the pecking order. On occasion, moving her to a different male can make all the difference.

Frequently bitches may become territorial when you try and return a whelped female back to her old family unit or change someone's pen assignment for one reason or another. We find that moving everyone in a new family unit into a new pen usually nips this in the bud. If it isn't possible to move the whole family around, we frequently take both the females that will be new roommates for a little cart ride. They almost always seem to forget who was there first when they get back. Distraction and changing their focus is the key here.

With few exceptions, breeding a dam less than one year of age is comparable to having a teenage pregnancy. Therefore we breed starting at one year of age for the dam. I favor early retirement for all of my dams for several reasons. Older dams are likely to be problematic, more c-section prone, not to mention a general decline in litter size and the ability to raise all the puppies in a litter. I like to retire everyone on or before 7 years of age because it is easier to find a good home for retirees if they are on the younger side of life. This also applies to my males for the same reason. No matter what your kennel size, recognize that the space and labor it takes to house and care for a dog properly has a value. Milking the last few litters out of an older dam is generally not a good kennel management practice if you take into consideration all of these factors.

Now you can do some numbers crunching. If you wish to keep your breeding program at an optimum you would simply need to take the number of dogs you have in that program and divide by the number of years you consider it feasible on average for them to remain in that program. That is approximately the number of outgoing retirees and the number of incoming dogs you should be welcoming into your program on an annual basis.

Of course not every dog in a breeding program is meant to be a good mama or papa. Considering that purebred dogs especially can lend themselves to breeding problems, I generally consider the three strikes you're out a good rule for young dogs. Exceptions always abound, a bitch that never gets pregnant in the first place, bitches who harm their own pups or hardly ever raise a pup, a dam who really goes down hard on her first c-section or the vet informs you is simply not a good breeding candidate for some health reason or another, etc. These would make up your early retiree list and you wouldn't want to give them three chances to get there. Don't forget the boys either. You may find early retirees among them as well in males that do not have viable sperm, are lazy, or do not have the desire to breed for whatever reason.

It may seem obvious, but frequent grooming can be just as important in a breeding facility as anything else. It's amazing how fast some long hair breeds can grow a hair coat. Health issues can arise if hair coats get too long and matted and nails are not kept trimmed. A male may not be able to service a female if they are too overgrown. It is easier to keep dams, puppies, and the whelping box clean if she is well groomed. Make it easier for puppies to nurse by shaving or trimming the belly area on the dam. Puppies of long hair breeds can become easily impacted and adults can do the same so keep up on those sanitary cuts.

Sooner or later you will find a puppy that needs a different momma. Good prospective foster dams are those who are close in size to the breed the adoptee is, have or will have puppies that are close in age to the new adoptee, have plenty of milk, and not too many puppies of their own that would make crowding an issue for the newcomer. If you have a good prospect at hand there are some basics for successful adoption. The closer to the whelp time and birth date of a foster mother's own litter the adoptee can be introduced, the better. Placing the adoptee with its foster mother during her actual birthing process is usually most ideal. If that isn't an option, start by removing all of the foster mother's own puppies from her sight. I usually take out the whole whelping box with her puppies in it. Place the adoptee in with its new siblings. Dams quickly identify their own puppies from another by smell, so mask the difference by powdering everyone with some form of scented bath powder, including the adoptee. Wipe the rectal area of all puppies with rubbing alcohol and further distort the bitch's sense of smell with just a little touch of rubbing alcohol near her nose. Once again, I like to use distraction to accomplish the goal. Right after I give the bitch a nice tasty bowl of food and let her get started chowing down, I give her back the whelping box with all the puppies in it. Usually she is so distracted by the goodies that the newbie is the least of her concerns. Almost always she polishes off the dish, turns around and sniffs the puppies and goes back to business as usual. Don't get in a hurry to leave her unattended at this point, but hang around long enough to satisfy yourself that all is going well with the adoption process. Sometimes you just can't fool Mother Nature.

Health screen all incoming puppies and adults you bring into your facility. Isolate any newcomers and act like they have the plague until you have satisfied yourself and or your vet that all is well with them. A clean kennel is no insurance against brucellosis or a ringworm outbreak or a new strain of kennel cough. Nine times out of ten we bring in our worst problems. Once again, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Developing a good worming and immunization schedule for puppies with your vet is imperative. Remember that vaccines should be started early enough and be consistent enough to cover any lapse in the immunity a puppy receives from the dam, eventually allowing the puppy to develop its own immunity. Booster shots are important because like the name implies, a booster shot can up the immunity to a puppy tenfold or more than the initial shot. Good puppy shot programs should include boosters being given well before the puppy leaves the kennel since it may take several days for puppies to develop immunity. Don't wait until a puppy is going out the door to be putting a shot in it. Once again, check with your vet about these issues, and more importantly, once you develop a good immunization and worming program, faithfully apply it. No matter how you market your puppies, no one is likely to become your repeat customer if your hand them a problem. Adults need to have a good worming and immunization program as well.

Remember that you and your kennel are consumers also. Once you decide on the dog food that will fit your needs, have you really shopped around to see who can give you the best deal on pricing? Contact the dog food rep in your area to see if they offer any kind of bulk pricing incentives, UPC, or coupon redemption programs. Do you have access to warehouse type stores that can offer you savings on cleaning supplies or whatever you need to run your business? Are your vaccines and wormers being brought to you at the best price? It pays to periodically shop around as I recently did. After years of dealing with the same vaccine and drug company, I heard through a fellow breeder about a company that not only was significantly cheaper, but also offered free shipping. My savings on this alone were huge, and the company proved to be as good if not better than the old one. Building supplies can also vary greatly, check around, ask others in your breeder community where they got the best price on such and such.

To me nothing is as thrilling as owning my own business and doing something that I truly enjoy at the same time. I am always in awe of the endless variety of sizes, shapes and colors that my puppies come in. It is a constant wonder to see the little personalities that bloom right before my eyes. I never tire of seeing the joy that lights up the face of a customer as they reach for their new puppy, people just melt.

It takes a lot of effort to be on top of any breeding program these days. The more you can streamline your kennel, the nicer your facility, the better your health program, the more money you save just by being a good consumer the better. I think you owe it to your dogs to keep yourself in the black because only then are you likely to be able to afford the things that add to the health and well being of a good breeding kennel. That's my bottom line.