

Agility

Performance Puppies

Part 1 - Picking your puppy

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So you have been competing with your first competition dog for a while. You are totally getting hooked, and decide to start looking for a new puppy to be your next star competition dog. Where do you start and what do you need to consider in their time as puppies, before they are ready to compete? This three part series will look at finding a litter and puppy, then your young puppy's development, and finally preparing your adolescent puppy for a performance lifestyle.

Regardless of the breed that you are looking at, there are a number of things that you need to consider if you would like your dog to be a happy, healthy pet and hopefully an amazing performance prospect!

Health

Of course with any animal, pet or performance prospect, we want our dogs to be in the best of health. To assess health risks when you are looking for your new puppy you should find out information about the most common health conditions associated with the breed, and then prospective parent dog's pedigree and the incidence of these conditions in both lines. Many of these health conditions can be tested for, by either DNA testing or physical testing of the parents.

Bear in mind that even a puppy from a perfectly healthy pedigree, from parents who pass all health testing with flying colours can still be affected by health issues. For example hip dysplasia can be found in puppies from parents with excellent hip scores. That's because there is evidence that the surface of the whelping pen, and the environment and exercise that the puppies get in their first few months can affect their hips, and in some cases contribute to hip dysplasia.

Of course if you are looking at a rescue dog, or a dog from unknown ancestry then using pedigree history is often not possible. In this situation then you can still look at the most appropriate health testing for the dog itself.

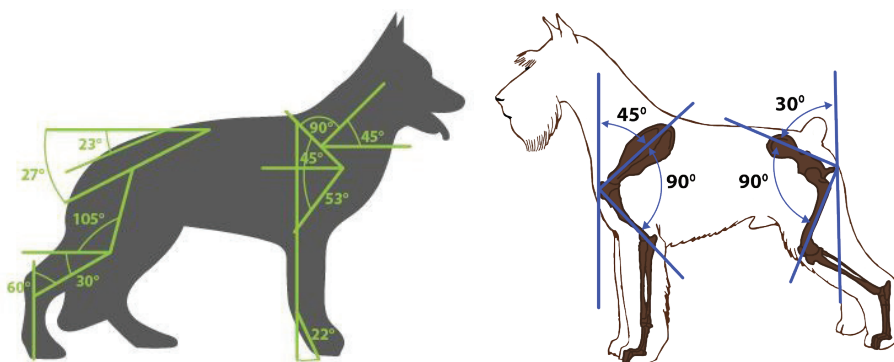


Structure

Regardless of breed standards a dog that is structurally balanced, with good angulation will be capable of better movement, muscle development, and is less likely to be injured. This is what we strive for in performance sports.

Unbalanced vs Balanced Structure

As the picture on the left is unbalanced, the right balanced.



Whilst differences in structure are expected within breed standards, in terms of performance in sports like agility what we strive for is a balanced structure, with no obvious faults that may negatively impact performance. This means that the angulation at the front, is similar to the angulation in the rear limbs. We also want a proportionally back length to leg length. Obvious faults that may inhibit sports performance include:

- Front or rear feet turned in, or out significantly
- Short legs in proportion to back length
- Topline (back) with issues such as roaching, or sway
- A short neck
- Weak or flat toes or carpals

Parents and puppy structure evaluation

Whilst it's not an exact science, much can be gained in predicting a puppy's adult structure from looking at the parents of the litter, and examining the puppies structure. Remember like all inherited characteristics children tend to be a mix of their parents traits. Puppies are best evaluated structurally at 8 weeks. This is agreed by most experts as being the age at which angulation and proportions are most similar to adult structure.

From the pictures top of next page you can see that the parents of the litter (Shiver and Rush) are similar structurally, and each of the puppies is similar to both parents. You can also see that the 7.5 week old puppy pictures are a good indication of the puppies adult structure.



*Top L: Rush, sire of the litter, Top R: Shiver, dam of the litter
Puppies pictured at 7.5 weeks, and as adults: second from top Evo,
second from bottom Moss, and bottom Hype.*

Temperament , work ethic and breed traits

Temperament testing unfortunately is not reliable in young puppies. This is because although aspects of behaviour are inheritable, the environment in which the puppy is raised in (both with the breeder, and new owner) has a huge influence on temperament, and personality.

To have an indication of the potential behavioural characteristics it is important to consider the breed characteristics, the parents and history in litter's lines, the snapshot that you see in the puppy at 7-8 weeks, and the home environment in which the puppy will be raised in.

In a performance dog it's recommended to avoid behaviour extremes - so the puppy that runs away from new people with their tail between their legs, the puppy that's monsterring all the other puppies and stealing every toy that another pup picks up, of the puppy that startles at every single noise and has no interest in toys or food. But in the end, if the lines, and structure of the litter are to your liking, then

because there are so many factors affecting the potential personality of your pup you might as well go by gut feeling.

Breeder puppy raising philosophy

Not only can your potential puppies neonatal environment potentially impact your dog's adult traits, but also the life history of both parents can impact a puppy's future. There is research that shows in several mammals that offspring can inherit their fathers fears. Maternal stress during gestation, as well as environmental exposure can not only impact the behaviour, but the physiology of puppies. Maternal care can significantly impact a dog's behaviour and physiology.



Once born the first 16 week's of a puppy's life is incredibly important in the dog's physical, and behavioural development.

During this period critical life skills and socialisation can positively, or negatively impact future behaviour. Programs like Puppy Culture can have a significant positive impact on the behavioural and cognitive development of puppies, and provide an excellent foundation for a performance puppy. These puppies often are less stressful, more confident problem solvers, less resource guarding, and very confident due to the carefully structured early socialisation. Because of programs like Puppy Culture it is becoming increasingly common for breeders to keep puppies until 10-12 weeks, to avoid significant stress at the typical 9 week fear period.

Other factors

There are some other factors that you may want to consider before picking your litter, and puppy.

- De sexing
- Dew claws / tail docking
- De-sexing contractual requirements
- Age that the puppies can leave

At the end of the day there is no perfect risk free puppy. There is no guaranteed champion. The best that you can do is try to have an objective list of pros and cons, and acknowledge the things that may not be as you would like. And then go with your gut. Because, in my experience, this often works really really well!

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