

Evaluating Your Puppies Part I

by Dr. Alvin Grossman

If you're going to be a successful breeder you must be able to assess properly your puppies and quickly sell those who don't qualify as top show-quality stock. If you cannot do this, you become bogged down with a group of "could've been" puppies. Your costs for maintaining them rises and their salability goes down as they lose their cuteness and appeal to the pet-buying public. You must also learn the basics of salesmanship and merchandising so you can move those cute and cuddly puppies early. You must also combine your evaluation talents with your salesmanship skills to sell those show prospects to the right show homes. If you can do this, you will have completed the ring of all things necessary to become a winner -- go for it! Most breeders, after years of breeding within one bloodline, are reasonably able to predict the development and outcome of each puppy in a litter.

Typically, they can estimate a puppy's ultimate size, when a puppy will go through its awkward stage of development, and whether or not the puppy can be considered show quality. Most of the time, breeders base their predictions both on gut feeling as well as many years of experience. However, there is a way to assess each puppy's potential without having had many years of dog-breeding experience.

By maintaining careful records of their puppies' developmental stages, breeders can quickly begin to understand the maturation process of their own bloodline. For example, they may discover that most of their puppies go through an awkward stage between three and eight months of age, or they may find that their puppies generally reach adult height at 10 months.

However, no system is foolproof. Puppies that start off looking like excellent show prospects may end up being only pet quality. Or a puppy may be sold as pet quality, and then end up as a top winner in the show ring. It is impossible to predict the future of each puppy with 100% accuracy. But, by maintaining accurate, detailed records, a breeder can substantially improve the odds.

To assist in predicting the puppies' potentials, breeders should record accurately the weights and measurements of each puppy in every litter. including weight, height (floor to wither, and floor to elbow), and length (withers to tailset, point of shoulder to end of buttocks, etc.. These measurements should be taken at birth, two weeks, four weeks, and then every four weeks until maturity is reached.

Also, notes on head development, heaviness of bone, and personality should be recorded, as well as any other features the breeder may wish to track. Typical comments should be like this:

5 1/2 weeks:

At this age, all four puppies in litter #6A look like peas in a pod...great heads and good coats...neck and shoulders are good and all appear shortbacked ... Such A Corker's head piece is outstanding ...looks like it may be an all champion litter ... which one is best? Only time will tell.

7 weeks:

All still appear outstanding.

At this stage **Such a Corker** seems to be the pick of the litter. He is beautifully marked as a B/T, has good bone and substance and his conformation, except for a slight steepness of shoulder, is excellent...he has a plush head with very good ear set.. his coat is full and thick...measures one inch shorter down the back than his height at the withers.

Such Class is a thick heavy set puppy with a massive head that has potential, but seems to lack chiseling... an excellent coat, neck and shoulders are good but a bit heavy ...short backed and very strong, well developed thighs... overall, he has good balance, one part blending well with the others... just seems to be "too much".. measures 1 1/2 inches shorter down the back than his height at the withers.

Such Brass is a substantial dog, less thick throughout than **Such Class**, but excellent bone & substance... poorly marked for a B/T but markings are in all the right places... thick and luxurious coat...head is plush with excellent chiseling...measured the same down the back as his height at the withers.

Such Charm, a lovely headed black bitch ... her bone and substance are in proportion to her size.. she appears somewhat on the small side but plush looking with less coat than her three brothers...the best neck and shoulders of the litter...she measures 3/4 inches shorter down the back than her height at the withers. **Such a Corker** rated #1, **Such Class** a close #2. **Such Brass** very promising but does not seem all together yet.

12 Weeks:

The tide has taken a definite turn...

Such Brass's markings are much clearer and he has knit together... when on the ground, he handles himself like a master hunter... light on his feet and seems very assured.. his coat is thick and luxurious and his head has become what breeders dream about. Back now measures 1 inch shorter than height at withers.

Such Class has also come into his own... he is now better chiseled and has grown into his thick square frame...an excellent topline and still the great bone and substance... on the ground, he too seems to move with grace.

Such A Corker stayed where he had been at 7 weeks... still good but the other two males have passed him... on the ground he seemed awkward in comparison with the others... his gait is more plodding while they seem to float... length to height ratio remains the same.

Such Charm is not going to make it as a show dog...her head is still beautiful but she is beginning to show signs of greater body length and no apparent improvement in coat.

6 months:

We have two flyers: **Such Class** and **Such Brass**.

Such a Corker is finishable but compared to the other two he is a plodder. **Such Charm** sold as a pet. Her coat did not come in and her length of back was excessive. This was a fault in the line we wished to eliminate.

7 months:

Such Brass, other than a full coat, looking totally mature. Entered in Open class at a very large

Specialty show... went Winners Dog for a 5 point major... Finished at 10 months of age with four majors... Went on to win 100 Best of Breeds, numerous BIS and Specialty BOB and sired 37 champions.

10 months:

Such Class, having been sold at 6 months of age, went BOB at his first Specialty show...placed in the group three times enroute to finishing with four majors, losing only once when he went reserve. He was never specialied.

Such A Corker finished his championship a 2 1/2 years of age. He had a modest show career.

The changes we saw as the puppies matured was a marked increase in chiseling and head development of **Such Class** and **Such Brass**. They never went through the classical awkward stages like their other two littermates. **Corker** and **Charm** lost their chiseling and lengthened in back as they went from 12 weeks to 6 months. They looked like gangly teenagers while the other two looked sleek and suave.

Our experience tables, upon reflection, indicated that **Such Class** would turn out much the way he did. Other puppies from similar breedings had followed that pattern and were early champions. How good he would be was not evident until 7 months of age. **Such Charm** followed the mold exactly. We knew she wasn't going to make it early on. **Such Brass** was a sleeper. His measurements led us to believe he would conform to our norms and be a good dog. However, at 12 weeks he magically began to emerge, especially when one watched him on the ground playing with the other puppies. He was fearless as was **Such Class**. **Such A Corker** was definitely a follower while **Such Charm** just chased along.

Here are some questions that you need to ascertain from your own breeding program. They will stand you in good stead when it comes to making predictions about selecting the best puppies:

1. At what age will this puppy attain ultimate size?
2. At what age will the puppy attain ultimate development?
3. Can ultimate size be predicted by size at birth?
4. Do all puppies in this bloodline go through growth spurts?
5. When will the growth spurt most likely occur?
6. Will one part of the body develop sooner than another part?
7. Will this puppy go through an awkward stage? If so, when?

The ability to answer questions such as these can help breeders predict the development of each puppy and determine which puppies can be considered the best show prospects. Development is always easier to predict if the breeder is dealing within one bloodline. When new bloodlines are added to the genetic maze, both development and outcome will probably be different from previous results.