Inbreeding: Observations

By Peter Wax

As defined by Webster's online dictionary inbreeding is**:** The interbreeding of closely related individuals especially to preserve and fix desirable characters of and to eliminate unfavorable characters from a stock.

In a nutshell, if you are a fan of a particular breed of dog and like the breed because of its physical size, build, temperament and abilities, then by default you are a fan of inbreeding. All breeds are the product of decades and in some cases centuries of breeding closely related dogs with "like" and "desired" traits. The longer and more closely "inbred" the more dominant the desired traits become through the homogenizing of the gene pool.

There is some print on the deficiencies and risks of inbreeding. The majority of these texts are based on the anthropomorphizing of dogs. The theory is that when humans are randomly bred from an inferior homogeneous gene pool there is an increased probability of duplicating undesirable traits and genetically associated diseases so the same must also be true for dogs. However, this theory is flawed because in practice inbreeding is not a random mating of inferior or even average genetics, but a careful breeding of select canines possessing superior intelligence, function, form, and usually lacking in any identifiable genetic defects.

Done correctly, inbreeding not only increases the odds of producing dogs with the desired traits but also dogs with fewer genetic defects. All successful kennels inbreed to some extent, and some of the most successful kennels inbreed closely to produce the finest and genetically healthiest performance dogs in the United States and Europe.

The improvements in performance and reductions in genetic defects can be easily documented in the United States and Europe by studying the pedigrees of dogs measured and tested for these traits. Two examples of resources in the United States would be the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association and American Field, and one in Europe would be the Club de l'Epagenul Breton of France.

An extreme example of a successful inbreeding program is Robert Wehle and his Elhew Kennel. Robert Wehle's English Pointers are known for their intelligence, ease of training, field proficiency, and relatively rare occurrence of genetic diseases, orthopedic and otherwise. Over six decades Mr. Wehle inbred his foundation dog, Lexington Jake, first to actual dams and then to his offspring. In 1990, Mr. Wehle produced what he considered to be one of his finest dogs "Snakefoot" and yet Lexington Jake shows up in his ancestral pool 416 times in just 14 generations.

Another example would be the de Hameau du Sorny Kennel in France. They recently produced TR, ChA, ChCS, ChIB Vanille de Hameau du Sorny a fine field trialer Epagneul Breton dam with champion conformation and no identifiable genetic defects. In her sixty-two dog (six generation) pedigree, seven dogs show up at least twice and Ska de Saint Tugan is represented four times. His genetics weave a trail through her already heavily related pedigree that touch fourteen dogs (nine are seeded at least twice) and yet she is an excellent specimen of the breed in form and function.

Another benefit to inbreeding a homogeneous gene pool is producing dogs that breed similar offspring. An example of this would be Dr. James Rieser's Shooting Starr's kennels producing German Shorthair Pointers the likes of VC Shooting Starr's Heir Jordan. Besides being a force on the hunting, trial and testing grounds Jordan has produced like offspring as documented by his siring of 16 breeder's award litters, 105 qualified Natural Ability pups, 23 Utility dogs, 6 Versatile Champions, and 6 AKC Master Hunters.

By inbreeding intelligently, these kennels have reduced inconsistency in size, shape, temperament and running range. They have also increased the likelihood of genetically superior offspring and reduced the instances of genetic defects such as hip dysplasia.

While inbreeding has its advantages it is important to recognize that inbreeding is not a magic bullet. On the contrary, what is not chronicled in field trial results and stud books is the number of breeders utilizing inbreeding for convenience or to capitalize on a well known kennel prefix, or both, to sell puppies to the possible detriment of the breed.

Unfortunately, due to the economics of breeding, in order for a kennel to get an economically viable price for their puppies it needs a recognizable stud or kennel name in the pedigree to defend the ever present statement "from champion stock". In some kennels the solution is to purchase the services of a recognized stud or the offspring of a recognized stud and dam and breed them regardless of the genetic health or physical capabilities of the bitch or resulting offspring. Basically, breeding without evaluating the results on the x-ray table and in the trial and test fields is doing a disservice to the breed.

Too many, the idea of inbreeding carries some stigma such as mental retardation and physical deformities, but these are really associated with human lines that were not selected for above average physical form and intelligence. As a final thought on inbreeding, if you find the benefits of inbreeding desirable and you do not want to confirm the stigma of producing inferior offspring, only breed dogs that are within the breed standards, have good eyes and hips, and have been found to be superior in conformation, intelligence and performance through competitive evaluations.

With gratitude to Sandy Gunn and Butch Nelson for advice and review.