
Lessons in Lyrics for New Breeders

From Jagger to Joel

By Nancy P. Melone PhD



"Dutch" Photo: Barry Rinker MD

The other day I was helping a young breeder sort through possible stud dogs. She was getting frustrated because she could not find that elusive "perfect stud dog."

For some reason, the lyrics from several popular songs from my youth popped into my head. Strangely, any one of them might have served as a theme song for this or many other novice breeders.

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The first lyric was from a tune by Mick Jagger of The Rolling Stones, entitled, “You can’t always get what you want.” It goes something like this.

**“You can’t always get what you want
You can’t always get what you want
But if you try some time,
you might just find
You get what you need.”**

The second lyric that ran through my head was from Ricky Nelson’s hit, “Garden Party.” His words of wisdom are as compelling for beginner breeders as Jagger’s are.

**“You see,
you can’t please everyone
So, you got to please yourself.”**

The third lyric was one from Billy Joel’s deeply personal song, “Vienna.” Vienna is not really about a slow-moving city in Europe, but rather about how much time it takes to fully understand important things in life and the uncertainty one may experience along the way to attaining that understanding.

**“Though you can see when you’re wrong,
You know, you can’t always see
when you’re right.”**

So, what do lyrics have to do with breeding dogs?

Jagger reminds us of the importance of *prioritizing our breeding goals* and ultimately of *making informed trade-off decisions* because the *structure* of the breeding problem (a problem with *multiple* objectives and few, if any, *perfect* answers) does not

favor finding the ONE perfect solution. By definition, we must compromise because perfection is elusive and most of the time “you don’t always get what you want.” But, on the positive side, there are better and worse ways to “get what you need.”

One of the better ways to get what you need is to start with an *ordered list* of what you *must have* and what you are *willing to give up*. This simple tool, a priority list, makes trade-off decisions much easier to make. A second tool, offered by the late George A Padgett, DVM, who wrote *Control of Canine Genetic Diseases*, is *focus*. Padgett suggests focusing on one but never more than two flaws to improve with each breeding. This bit of advice points out the importance of maintaining your focus on what you are trying to improve so that you are sure “you get what you need.”

Ricky Nelson was tired of playing his old musical repertoire. He wanted to strike out and play new material. He did. It was a disaster because his audience wanted to hear the old familiar songs.

Nelson’s experience reminds us that you will have critics who will always second guess you or who will think you made the wrong decision on your choice of stud dog. They will waste no time telling you that you are wrong and that they would have made a different decision than you did. Nelson says, “you can’t please everyone,” so ignore those who have no stake in the game. Given the structure of the decision before you, there is no obvious single right answer, but there can be worse ones.

My economist husband often quotes the Latin phrase, *Degustibus non est disputandum*, or *de gustibus non disputandum est*. The approximate English meaning of this phrase goes something like this, “there is no accounting for taste.”

Taste is “the faculty of discerning with emotions of pleasure, beauty, grace, congruity, proportion, symmetry, order, or whatever constitutes excellence.” Once you throw “emotions” into the mix, you can see

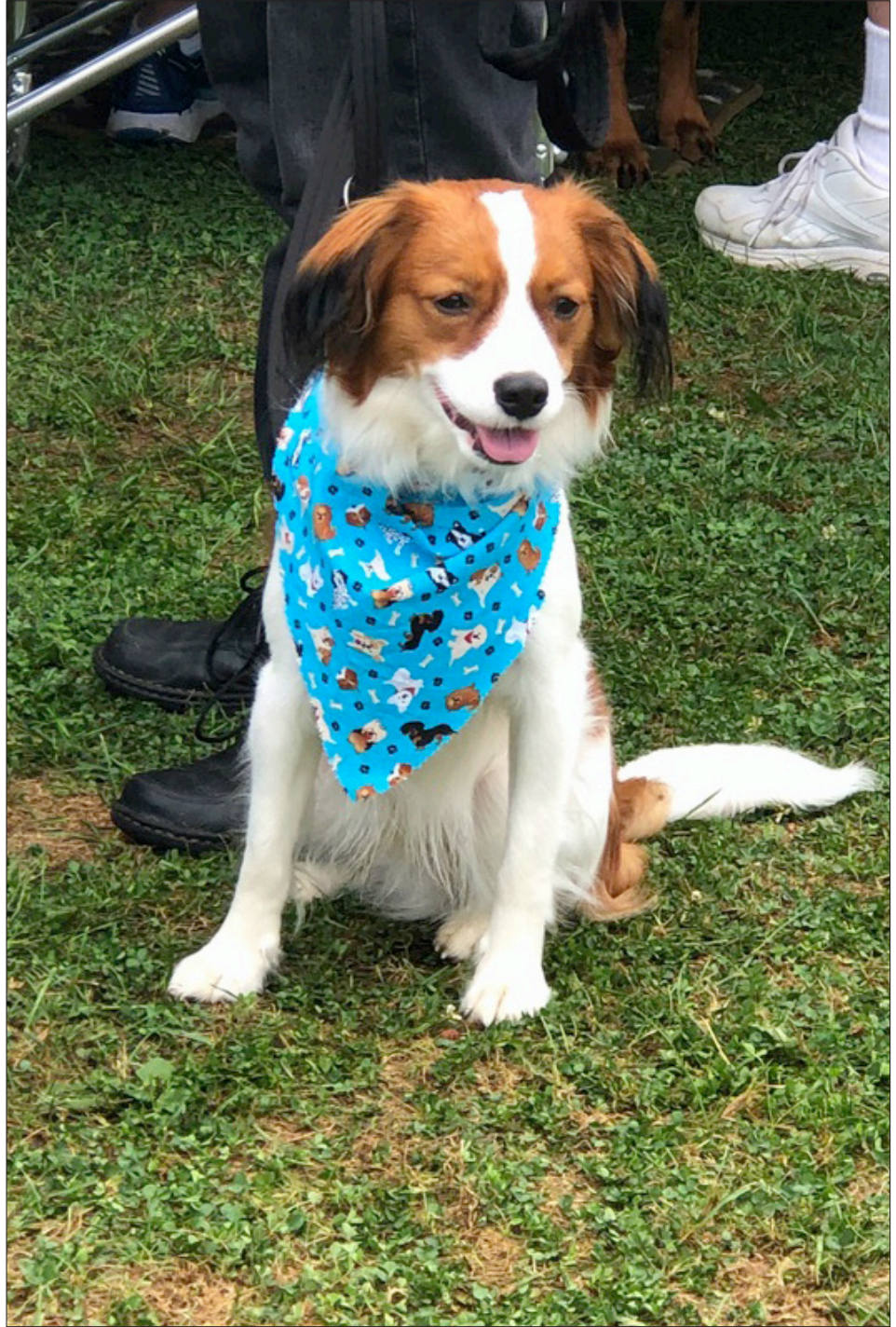
how the waters can quickly get a bit muddied. The phrase “one man’s art is another man’s trash” reflects the entangling of emotion in matters of taste and choice.

What does *taste* have to do with breeding dogs?

Plenty! You as a breeder can have a different set of preferences than others, order them in a different way, interpret the standard a bit differently, and ultimately make a different choice than your critics. What you do in these gray areas is a matter of *taste*, and “there is no accounting” for that.

This is where the *art of breeding* confronts the *science of breeding*. That you have a different view than someone else is okay as long as you can defend the process you used to make your decisions and acknowledge those areas that you cannot fully explain. Responsible breeders must respect the breed standard, but exactly how that standard is interpreted can be imbued with a significant taste component; and, as we know, taste allows for some latitude in interpretation.

It is not surprising that reasonable people can see different, otherwise acceptable, dogs as being more or less preferable as mates. If we think this is not so, just sit around a showing with a group of respected breed fancier



Unknown Puppy Photo: Nancy Melone

friends as the group of you debate the decisions made by judges.

Quoting a little more Latin, *ceteris paribus* (which means something like “all else equal”), Nelson

reminds us that in end, “you got to please yourself.”

Billy Joel makes the point that it is relatively easy for us to identify flaws and mistakes, but much



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harder to for us to anticipate and know how to overcome them. His advice is to take your time—what you may not understand well today, with some time, will come to you. At 23, Joel went to Vienna, Austria to see his father, who had left the family when Joel was just eight. He said, “When I wrote ‘Vienna waits for you’, I meant that it is a place where you close the circle. By going to Vienna, suddenly things started to make sense in the world for me.”

Joel’s lyric gives us additional insight into the breeder’s uncertain world, a world that requires you to make decisions even when you lack the information to make those decisions confidently. The lesson for the breeder is that breeding is a business that is laced with *ambiguity* and *uncertainty*, including the uncertainty of conception and pregnancy and breeding outcomes. While you can reduce some uncertainty with ultrasounds, pedigrees, x-rays, COIs, and genetic and phenotypic health testing, you can never eliminate it. By identifying ENM-clear stud dogs with which to breed your ENM clear bitch, you can prevent breeding ENM-affected puppies. However, experienced breeders know that what you can test for currently may not be what lurks beneath the surface (*e.g.*, various cancers, liver shunts, heart disorders, kidney disorders, seizures, cleft palates, megaesophagus, open fontanelles, limb or organ deformities, immune disorders).

Novice and new breeders must give their knowledge time to develop, to accept that knowledge acquisition takes time, and one may be called to act before there is complete knowledge or information. This accrued knowledge aids the seasoned breeder in knowing when and where to take risks and when not to take them.

A new breeder, indeed, all breeders must tolerate some uncertainty. Death is certain. Life is not.

The *lack of complete information* contributes to this uncertainty. You must learn to accept that you may never know everything you need to know—either because it is unknown/unknowable or someone did not collect it or someone does not want you to know about it.

While your goal in decision making is to reduce your uncertainty, you will likely never be able to eliminate it because we live in a world of probabilities, possibilities, and incomplete information. You may find a stud dog that comes very close to your idea of perfection, but even then you cannot completely control which alleles from the dam will pair with which alleles from the sire in the resultant puppies.

So, as Billy Joel tells us, the scary thing in life is that “you can’t always see when you’re right.” But alas, at some point you will still need to decide who your stud dog will be. So, what is the takeaway from the lyrics of Vienna? Knowledge acquisition is a slow process. Take your time. Get comfortable with some level of uncertainty/risk/ambiguity because it will always be looking over your shoulder.

The good news is that as you slowly wend your way through life as a breeder, you will better understand the meaning and underpinnings of both life and death. With that understanding you can see just what a miracle life is.

... So now,
write your own lyrics!