



◀ BG litter number 61359. Photo credit Nancy Melone.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE (WHELPING) BOX:

Learning from Successes and Failures

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Recently, a young breeder asked me to identify the most important lessons I had learned in my breeding career. I thought for a moment and then several things came to mind.

For me, like many young breeders starting out, the experience of breeding dogs introduced me to both the wonder and the fragility of life. It gave me real-life examples of risk, uncertainty and the challenges in managing both—practically and emotionally. Unlike most young breeders, I taught these decision science subjects at the university level, but the experience of breeding dogs gave me a steady stream of real-life examples and an opportunity to both put in practice and translate the theoretical concepts that I had learned and taught into practical decision-making advice for breeders.

Strategies for Making Hard Decisions

In breeding dogs, we confront things we may not want to confront about life and death, often earlier than we want to confront them. These were the kinds of decisions that as a young person I had never made. Yes, as a child, I had lost my old dogs, but they had all had good, long lives. In contrast, I had no experience making life and death decisions at the beginning of a puppy's life. My first intro-

duction was a male puppy born with a cleft palate. I have had only one cleft palate neonate in my life as a breeder, but I knew even as a novice breeder it might happen, and I needed to have a decision strategy in place for various contingencies that might confront me. As such I had decided a priori that I would not resuscitate a puppy with a full cleft palate but that I would consider resuscitating a pup with a minor cleft lip. According to my decision rule, I did not resuscitate the one cleft palate puppy that I had.

Situations involving these life and death decisions probably have no right or wrong answer. Different people will likely make different decisions. My point here is that one should decide how to handle such difficult decisions BEFORE being faced with them to ensure that the decision is based on a rational thought process and not the emotion of a tragic moment. Your vet will thank you, and while you will still feel pain, you will feel more confident about the soundness of your decision.

Scary or Tragic Moments are Opportunities to Learn: Make the Most of Them

Every tragedy can be an opportunity for learning. Learning from tragedy and writing about it helps me personally work through my own emotions and grief.

From this cleft palate experience I learned through my reading that giving folic acid prior to breeding a bitch and during the pregnancy may reduce the incidence of these midline facial defects. My breeding bitches all get folic acid now, and while I cannot attribute never having had another cleft palate puppy to only the folic acid, it may have contributed to it.

Looking backward, I can think of two categories of lessons that were most significant for me in my journey to become a better breeder:

1. Lessons about techniques that I found most useful (i.e., how to tube feed neonates and the Renz Hong or Jen Chung acupuncture-point stimulation technique for neonate resuscitation); and
2. Experiences that caused me to appreciate life, death and my own knowledge or lack of it (i.e., experiencing the loss of a litter to canine herpes virus).

Often emergencies force us out of necessity to learn things we did not know how to do. When I had a large

naturally at home by my grand champion Bente. Stella was the last pup to arrive – after I incorrectly thought the last pup had already been delivered based on the fetal X-ray count. (Another lesson is fetal X-rays can and often do under-count the total number of pups to expect, so watch your bitch after you think she has delivered her last pup.)

It was 3 a.m. (everything happens then). We were all tired. I had taken Bente out for a duty walk before we crashed. She barely came inside before out popped Stella – blue-gray and lifeless. I know now that she was a 0 on the Neonatal Viability Scoring System, a system I knew nothing about at the time. We went through the normal ritual of clearing the mouth and nose, rubbing vigorously with a warm dry towel, suctioning the nose and mouth, rubbing vigorously again, suctioning again, etc. Nothing was working and my friends looked at me to make the final pronouncement.

Then I remembered a breeder seminar taught by Dr. Greer I had attended at my first BMDCA National Specialty in (I think) 2000 in which everyone received a



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c-sectioned litter and mom had no milk for several days, I taught myself how to tube feed in the wee hours of the morning. I had a notebook labeled “important stuff” in which I had put a handout by Marty Greer D.V.M., J.D., a stranger to me then, but now a good friend, on how to tube feed. Fortunately, my reproduction veterinarian in Ohio, who was also a Shar-pei breeder, had sent me home to Pennsylvania with a feeding tube and supplies after she had given colostrum to my litter. I have been given permission by Dr. Greer to reproduce these instructions here. They might save your pups like they saved mine.

The second important lesson was learning an acupuncture technique that saved what turned out to be two of my best bitches when as neonates they refused to breathe. ThornCreeks Arwen Evenstar (Stella) was a pup from my first ThornCreek litter (Lord of the Rings). She was part of a larger litter that was delivered

25-gauge needle and a few words on a new acupuncture technique for resuscitation of cyanotic neonates. I had not bred anything other than Siamese cats at that time (nor was I thinking of breeding) and so when I got home, I tossed my needle in my kitchen junk drawer. I forgot about it . . . until 2011. I told my friends that before we gave up I wanted to try one more thing. I ran to the kitchen, dug through the drawer and found the needle, and ran back to the bedroom. I grabbed the blue neonate, placed the needle into her nasal philtrum and rotated it clockwise once the needle contacted the underlying maxillary bone. The pup took her first breath and began to pink up.



▲ Breeding is expensive. Consider the cost before you make the decision to whelp a litter. (BG litter number 61359). Photo by Nancy Melone.

I kept this pup, Stella, ThornCreeks Arwen Evenstar. She hated showing but produced several nice litters for me and in 2021 she crossed the rainbow bridge at almost 11 years old. My GCHS ThornCreeks Jane Austen, (Maggie May), born naturally from my GCH Bente, was also saved with the Jen Chung acupuncture point stimulation technique. Maggie is currently alive at over 11-1/2 years old.

Learning from Loss and Grief: The Devastation of Canine Herpes Virus

Perhaps my most memorable lesson was when I had to euthanize an entire litter of seven neonate puppies who caught canine herpes virus (CHV) from their mother, Stella, who caught it during a necessary stay for a c-section at the repro vet in another state. We discovered during her surgical insemination that Stella had a stricture (a scar from a previous c-section) in one of her uterine horns that would have prevented a natural delivery from that horn. I live two and a half hours away from my nearest repro vet and our local ER vets do not always see the urgency of an emergency c-section—you can't wait your turn. Ironically, I had delivered another litter at home at roughly the same time that survived because that mother, Maggie May, had been exposed to CHV at Westminster, well before her breeding and pregnancy. In retrospect, Maggie May catching CHV and her subsequent acquired immunity saved my second large litter.

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During this CHV experience I learned that a breeder can sometimes know more about breeding-related illnesses than a general practice or ER vet. The young ER vet who saw me (several times as I brought one puppy after another in for euthanasia) dismissed my diagnosis of CHV and instead insisted the pups had parvo. I told her that was not likely given the data. She persisted in saying I was wrong and insisted that she was right. Emotionally and physically exhausted, I gave up. Finally, after the euthanasia of puppies #6 and #7, I insisted on necropsies of the last two neonates at a well-respected vet school. (It should be mentioned that most general practice vets could probably confirm this diagnosis through a local necropsy as there are obvious tell-tale signs on the liver.)

The young vet never called me about the necropsy results, nor did she send me copies of the results. (This is professionally unacceptable according to my general practice veterinarian.) When I finally reached her several weeks later, she told me the results – positive for CHV, negative for parvo. Then she added that her pathologist vet student friend at the famous vet school told her that breeders should retire any CHV-recovered bitch or dog from any future breeding. By that time, I had read everything I could find on CHV, research studies as well as the practical veterinary and breeder literature. I had also talked with every repro vet I knew and even some I didn't.

CHV is ubiquitous. Close to 60-70% of our show dogs have likely had CHV and recovered with some immunity. A dog is never "cured" of CHV, but once the dog recovers, a healthy immune system holds it at bay. The virus is said to go dormant and, yes, there is a very, very small chance that the virus could resurface during the last three weeks of a bitch's pregnancy and the first three weeks after parturition, but this is not likely. If the bitch is healthy, isolated from other dogs three weeks before and after parturition, and not stressed, it is even less likely.

I pointed this out to the young ER vet, adding that if breeders retired all their show dogs who had recovered from CHV from further breeding, we would have virtually nothing left to breed, our inbreeding coefficients would skyrocket, fertility and life spans would go down, new diseases would likely surface, and there would be no health-tested purebred puppies for people who wanted them. To my utter amazement, she responded that

she would be “very happy” if there were no purebred dog breeders because there were “plenty of rescues to adopt.”

I briefly considered mentioning the dangers of economically rewarding bad breeder behaviors. Instead, I emphasized the positive behaviors of responsible breeders saying, “Breed clubs and responsible AKC breeders try their best to follow veterinary advice, they do health testing of their breeding stock, they support economically and with data many veterinary research studies that help not just purebreds, but also mixed breeds and rescues, and they also provide veterinary school student scholarships. Puppy millers and back yard breeders do none of that, yet they keep on breeding dogs that are abandoned, abused or must be rescued. Young veterinarians should think deeply about these differences.”

In describing the above encounter, it is important to remember that veterinarians deal with different types of breeders. Some are great people with all the right intentions. Others have different motivations for breeding dogs. There must be mutual respect, and both the breeder and veterinarian must work together to

Many people think only about what they believe to be a fun and glory-filled hobby that will make them famous and generate some money. They don't save to be prepared financially in the event of an emergency. They have no plan for the puppies that they cannot sell. The current trend seems to be to run to “Go Fund Me” expecting the public to pay for their sick animals. Caring for our animals financially when they are well or ill is part of being a responsible breeder.

No one wants to talk about money, but it is an important topic and can be a showstopper for any responsible person who wants to breed dogs. Owning dogs and breeding puppies is expensive. In my years as a breeder, I have considered myself fortunate when I broke even financially. I never took short cuts with my litters to make more money. My economist husband will attest that I don't breed to fund my dog owning or dog show habit. His advice to me is always, “Nance, just don't lose too much.”

The recent economy has made breeding and keeping dogs even more expensive. Post COVID, everyone's

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achieve positive outcomes. No veterinarian can be an expert in every breed. Breeders must help the veterinarian understand their breeds and need to create a true partnership.

Money Matters

I thought I was finished with this article until one of my breeder-AKC judge friends sent me this note after reading an earlier draft.

This is a good start, but you must add something about what experience has taught you about financing the breeding and keeping of dogs. The market is flooded with purebred dogs now, and yet we still have people who continue to breed, despite being unable to place all the puppies in their last litters.

veterinary and food costs skyrocketed. In the past, it was not unusual for Berner breeders to have puppy waitlists that were three years long. For the first time, my friends in this and other breeds and I have seen responsible breeders have difficulty placing all their puppies. We also have seen breeders who breed litter after litter and who show dogs every weekend who ask others to pay for their dogs' emergency veterinary care.

Without appearing to state the obvious, if one cannot afford to pay for veterinary care and food for all their dogs, then one should own fewer dogs. If one cannot place all their puppies, then one should not continue breeding more litters whose pups they cannot place and must keep. If you must resort to “Go Fund Me” campaigns to cover veterinary and food bills, you need to rethink your breeding program.

▼ BG Litter number 39243.
Photo by Beth Schmoeyer.





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What did these and other experiences teach me?

- Inform yourself about the topics under discussion. Read everything you can to be an informed consumer.
- Try to find smart vets who also have broad experience and good judgment. If you can find someone with breeding experience, all the better. Remember, there is a top of the vet school class and a bottom. Find the ones in the “sweet spot.”
- It is difficult to choose an ER vet in an emergency, but you can choose better ER clinics if you have the option. If you have a poor experience, document it in a well-reasoned way and report it to the clinic director. This might help the young vet improve, but it will certainly help the director deliver better client service.
- Work with veterinarians that you can respect AND who respect you. Breeders and veterinarians have different types of knowledge, but both types are needed to better care for breeding dogs and their puppies.
- Ask a lot of questions. If you don’t understand something, ask your vet to explain it in a simpler way. If they can’t or won’t, look for a new vet.
- If you think your vet might have missed an alternative diagnosis or an important symptom, bring it up. Give your vet a chance to tell you why they think your information is not relevant or your diagnosis is not the most likely.
- Challenge the experts when they say something without data to back it up or that does not make sense given your experience and the data you have. True scientists welcome the hard questions. They don’t run from them or seek to make the asker look stupid.
- Veterinary schools and dog clubs need to do a better job of educating veterinary students on what dog clubs do for the veterinary community – veterinary education, research funding and data contribution to continue developing genetic tests and continuing their research.
- While science is awesome, nature is a power worthy of your respect.
- Breeding dogs is expensive. If you can’t afford it without asking others to subsidize your kennel, don’t breed.
- Finally, and probably most importantly, trust your gut. If something feels wrong, it probably is.

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About the Author: Nancy Melone’s articles, published in several breed magazines and newsletters here and abroad, have won numerous Dog Writers Association of America (DWAA) Maxwell Medallions, a Morris Animal Foundation Advances in Canine Veterinary Medicine Award, and multiple American Kennel Club Publication Excellence Awards. She is Editor Emerita of *The Alpenhorn* and served on the boards of the Berner-Garde Foundation and Bernese Auction Rescue Coalition. Currently she serves on the board of the Nederlandse Kooikerhondje Club of the USA (NKCUSA) and chairs their health and genetics committee. Her Ph.D. is in Information and Decision Science from the University of Minnesota.

BG# 190014. Photo by ▶
Beth Schmoyer.



LESSONS LEARNED BY OTHER BREEDERS

Who are Willing to Share

After a heating pad control caught on fire and a heat lamp exploded, I bought a Whelping Nest – worth every penny. Health test but be humble. Breeding two champions does not necessarily make champions. Linda Baird,

Lynwood Cavalier King Charles

Don't expect that guard rails will protect pups in a large litter from getting squished – even when you are sleeping next to the whelping box. Put them in separate baskets.

Cindy Loflin, Alpen Daydream Bernese

Puppy buyers need not visit. Videos and photos are sufficient. If they don't like the pup you chose for them, they can refuse it. I allowed a buyer to visit my puppies and the entire litter got sick the week before they had been scheduled to go to new families. It delayed placement by a week which angered people who had taken vacation to welcome their puppies.

Sally Wolfgang, Mountain View Farms Bernese

Do your health testing, but Mother Nature is still in charge.

Deborah Reams, Rock Harbor Bernese

Smaller food dishes keep puppies cleaner than saucer bowls. You don't need to bathe puppies every day. Muffins pans work well.

Lecia Conroy, Devon's Bernese

Do your health testing, but Mother Nature is still in charge.

People lie. Always follow up on veterinarian references. I called to check on a PPO that stated the only dog they had just passed away. When I followed up with the vet reference, they told me about their deceased Labrador retriever and his care history. They also told me about their four Poodles, another Labrador, and a Golden that were being used for doodle breeding.

Tori Pinkas Harned, Valor Bernese

Be wary of self-promoters.

Sheryl Skidmore, Mileslip Cavalier King Charles

Get to know your buyers before you place your pups. Build a relationship with them (that lasts the lifetime of your pup).

Graham O'Neill, Theobear Bernese (UK)

Get a mentor.

Jerrie Wolfe, Rose Croft Terriers (Cairns & Biewers)

Learn to litter train your puppies. Much cleaner than using newspaper or towels. With larger litters create two pens at about 6.5 weeks – the quiet group and the rowdy ones. The differences subside at about 8 weeks, but the rowdy ones can be little sharks.

Daryl Cessna Larsen, Advent Bernese

