

Are You a Progressive or Preservation Breeder?

Looking through old and new pedigrees, one can see two divergent ways of breeding dogs: Those who are continually trying to recreate a dog in the pedigree—the “preservationists”— and those who are moving forward step by step and trying to improve their dogs—“progressives.”

The term *preservation* means “to keep alive, intact, or free from decay,” while *progressive* means “favoring progress toward better conditions.” One approach looks in the rear-view mirror; the other looks forward down the road.

There are breeders and owners who look at a pedigree and point to the number of times a certain dog, now long gone, recurs in the pedigree, and then there are those who look at the combinations of dogs who have qualities they hope to improve in the next generations. In the case of the Borzoi, our breed’s standard is laid on a foundation that was started hundreds of years ago, and most of the other AKC breed standards are at least decades old. Others are still improving—and some, like that of the Scottish Deerhound, have changed little, if any, from their origin.

As breeders we need to be mindful of the past, but we must move beyond simple preservation and more toward progressive breeding to improve our dogs. Breeding to the standard is never as simple as breeding to the middle. We need to try to cover all parts of our standard in excellence, not just to a mediocre effort to just meet the standard. Breeding programs that outcross to lines just because they do not change the type or for so called “hybrid vigor” are often lost in translation a generation later. Many great breeders have had the courage to try something new to improve their lines—sometimes with great success, and sometimes with failure. When others see those results, you can just hear them say that they must have lost their mind. Maybe the first generation is less than expected, but the second generation is the “tell,” and the third is the trick.

Today we have excellent means of testing for hereditary diseases, and we can make educated decisions based on science, a luxury yesterday’s breeders never had. Trial-and-error was the better part of judgment. Many times the error was the larger part of the trial. Repeat breedings and concentrated breeding based on just one dog can have an undesired effect. Just because Boris is in the pedigree nine times doesn’t make the puppy better than Boris. As a matter of fact, if in each breeding of Boris we lost even just 10 percent of the quality of Boris, the puppy could end up only having only 38 percent of Boris’ attributes. And just how good was Boris to start with? Sometimes our memories work just the opposite and we remember Boris as being 235 percent better than he actually was in real life.

It is a great compliment to see a line that has been able to produce generation after generation of the same type. Other lines have continually followed a path of ebb and flow to get to a better dog down the road.

In the end every breeder should ask, *Are my dogs better today than they were years ago? Are they healthier, do they have better temperaments, and am I still breeding to exceed what the standard asks for?* Each of us must preserve the intention of our standards, but it doesn’t end there. We need to move progressively forward to take advantage of new tools, knowledge, and techniques to be sure we continue to improve our efforts and outcomes to fulfill the intent of our standards.

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