

“Culling...A Look Back”

by Denise Flaim, RRCUS Historian

Today, culling – in its strictest sense, the euthanasia of puppies because they deviate from the standard, which in the case of Ridgebacks is usually ridge related – is pretty much a non-issue.

Though some breeders still maintain this longtime practice, they do so in increasing silence, as they are swimming upstream of mainstream social mores. Most vets are opposed to the idea of euthanizing cosmetically challenged, but otherwise healthy puppies. Animal rightists have made what was once considered a matter-of-fact part of husbandry a cause for public scrutiny and social activism, as our British counterparts found out recently when a BBC documentary noted the culling requirement in their club’s code of ethics. (It has since been removed.) And with large kennel-based breeders a dying breed themselves, breeders who whelp in their kitchens and consider their dogs part of the family are less inclined to off any of their “grandpups.”

But things were not always so. A half-century ago, culling was *de rigueur*. So much so that when the first president of RRCUS, Col. Morrie DePass of Swahili Ridgebacks in Mississippi, wrote his “swan song” message in the club newsletter at the end of his term, it focused almost exclusively on culling, which he called one of the “three greatest problems for Ridgeback owners at this time,” along with heartworm and dysplasia.

“In my culling of Ridgeback litters, it is inexcusable to keep a puppy without a ridge or one with an evident faulty ridge,” he wrote in January 1959. “Some people feel that they have culled the litter by keeping such puppies and giving them to a ‘good home’ but without ‘papers.’ Nothing, I feel, could be more unfair to the breed. True, the people who provide a ‘good home’ will love the animal, but their friends who see it, a Ridgeback without a ridge or worse still one with a poor crown or multiple crowns, are most apt to think more than twice before buying a Ridgeback ‘sight unseen.’

“... The more rigidly we cull, the better type Ridgeback will be bred, the greater will be the demand for the breed, and the sooner will the Ridgeback become the most popular dog in the United States and wherever else the influence of our Club might reach,” he concluded.

Ironically, Ridgeback popularity was on the rise when Col. DePass wrote those words. Since the breed was recognized by the American Kennel Club in September 1955, it climbed in popularity from 112th place to 56th place in less than three years, a climb Col. DePass himself called “remarkable.” (Today the Ridgeback remains in that range, ranking #48 in 2008, up from # 53 the previous two years.)

Valid or not, this idea that a faulty-ridged Ridgeback would somehow turn off prospective owners – and leave breeders stuck with puppies -- persisted. In March 1958, Col. DePass wrote about his previous month’s visit to Westminster, where he heard exhibitors from other breeds bemoaning the slow market for dogs.

“This moves me to advocate the very closest culling of Ridgeback litters,” he wrote. “One fine Ridgeback might induce any number of people to become new Ridgeback owners; a poor Ridgeback, while hardly likely to win a single new owner, is more likely to turn more than one person away from the breed. So cull out any puppy with an apparent major fault or with several minor ones. ...”

DePass culled from birth until six weeks, and not just for bad ridges, which he considered even worse than ridgelessness: The former dog could be identified as a member of the breed, and therefore had the greater potential to hurt it.

“If any one puppy has a head much different from its litter-mates, study the Standards and you will probably discover that this puppy has one or more faults which will detract from the overall appearance of it as an adult Ridgeback,” he wrote. “Cull it.”

Part of the impetus for culling was also

to cut down on stress on the bitch. In the May 1958 issue of *The Ridgeback News*, Col. DePass penned this passage, chilling for its blitheness.

“If a litter numbers more than six ‘perfect’ puppies, unless you have good prospects of each one going to a good home, you would do well to shut your eyes, reach in and take out as many in excess of six that you have,” he wrote. “This is especially good advice for a first whelping. With only six to feed the chances are each one will do a bit better than if all ‘service’ stations had to operate; and there will be less wear and tear on mama, too.”

Col. DePass was hardly the only one with this view. Julia Minotto of Mission Kennels, who took over the RRCUS presidency from him, wrote the following in her message to club members in July 1959:

“Keep only healthy dogs and cull for perfection, keeping your breeding program without having to in-breed so closely that you destroy the good bloodlines with which you started. I know from personal experience how hard it is to have to put to sleep older pups because of hip dysplasia, or even cute little very young [sic] because of poor ridges or cysts, but then, if you stop to think that we want only the best dogs circulated because one bad one can produce a lot of bad ones quickly, we have done everyone a favor by our culling program.”

Admittedly, “the more puppies we have, the more callous we become,” said breeder Charlie Farr in his March 1960 column in the club newsletter. In his first litter, he kept all the bad ridges, and had difficulty even giving them away. His thinking evolved dramatically since then.

In a later litter, he had “two puppies with what I termed ‘smudgy swirls.’ Whereas the swirl on one side was indefinite – I kept them both to see what would happen. Neither one developed into a single clear swirl.” In the future, he noted, he would cull those, too.

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SUPPORTED SHOWS CALENDAR

July 25, 2009
Waukesha KC
Waukesha, WI
Sponsor: RRCOW (contact: Pat Ottaway)
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

July 26, 2009
Waukesha KC
Waukesha, WI
Sponsor: Pat Ottaway
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

August 8, 2009
Cook Inlet KC
Palmer, AK
Sponsor: Holly Lewis

August 15, 2009
Greeley KC
Greeley, CO
Sponsor: CRRRC (contact MaryLynn Elliott)
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

August 16, 2009
Greeley KC
Greeley, CO
Sponsor: MaryLynn Elliott
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

August 22, 2009
Lawrenceville KC
Atlanta, GA
Sponsor: RRAMA (contact Anne O'Mara)
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

August 23, 2009
Conyers KC
Atlanta, GA
Sponsor: RRAMA (contact Denise Price)
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

September 4, 2009
McKenzie Cascade Dog Fanciers
Eugene, OR
Sponsor: Gale Severson & Jillyn Myers
Puppy Sweepstakes

September 12, 2009
Wenatchee KC
Wenatchee, WA
Sponsor: ARR Kennel (Suzanne Metcalf)

September 13, 2009
Sir Francis Drake KC
San Rafael, CA
Sponsor: Tina Jones
Puppy Sweepstakes

September 13, 2009
Cape Cod KC
Falmouth, MA
Sponsor: NERRC
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

September 26, 2009
Finger Lakes KC
Romulus, NY
Sponsor: RRAWNY (contact Mike & Mary Teeling)
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

October 18, 2009
Del Valle Dog Club of Livermore
Pleasanton, CA
Sponsor: Tina Jones

October 19, 2009
Del Valle Dog Club of Livermore
Pleasanton, CA
Sponsor: Nancy Faville

November 7, 2009
Framingham District KC
Fitchburg, MA
Sponsor: Helen McCune & Lisa Keating
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

November 8, 2009
Souhegan KC
Fitchburg, MA
Sponsor: Susan Rexford & Diana Barrie
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

November 21, 2009
Windham County KC
Springfield, MA
Sponsor: NERRC (contact: Barbara Ferguson)
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

December 5, 2009
Forsyth KC
Winston-Salem, NC
Sponsor: Edith Mrak
Puppy & Veteran Sweepstakes

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From Africa came reinforcement. "The danger to the breed which lies with the reared pup with the imperfect ridge is the extraordinary prepotency of the ridge," wrote H.G. Mundy of Salisbury, Rhodesia, in a letter to the club written in mid-1960. "Mate a male or bitch Ridgeback with any other breed of dog that I know of and some of the pups will have ridges of sorts. Then the ill informed will often quite honestly believe that they own a Ridgeback."

Amid this persistent drumbeat for culling, there were voices of dissent. In February 1960, Loraine H. Grant of Batoka – soon to be Loraine Hulbert, the breed's longtime AKC Gazette columnist – wrote a letter to the club magazine not only advocating for not euthanizing faulty-ridged dogs,

but possibly breeding them, too.

"After putting four puppies of a litter of nine to sleep (three with cysts and one with no ridge), I reluctantly picked up a beautiful male which had three swirls in his ridge. I looked him over again – and put him back in the 'nest.' The only thoughts I had at the time were that this pup had no defect that would in any way injure his health, make him suffer or detract from his personality, he was a lovely dog, and why should someone, who didn't care about showing have the pleasure of his company? I did not put him to sleep, and I do believe he's going to be one of the nicest Ridgebacks I have ever seen. All of which led me to this kind of thinking – if, with careful breeding, and good ridges on both sides, we get that kind of a litter, what would be the results of breeding this dog, when he has everything else desirable in a Ridgeback except the

three swirls? Of course, the danger may lie in future generations, but when breeding good-ridge to good-ridge we often get rather unhappy results, wouldn't it be worth a try?"

Today, almost 50 years later, virtually every Ridgeback breeder would allow that puppy to live. But reproduce?

For all his forceful advocacy of culling, it should be noted that Col. DePass seemingly took a much softer line in private.

DePass' personal correspondence shows an exchange with Gene Freeland and Margaret Lowthian of Lamarde Perro Kennels in California, with whom he had a close friendship and often shared breeding stock. In July 1956, the Californians gave him a 3-month-old puppy named Lamarde Perro's Botha. Three days after they dropped him off, Col. DePass found not one, but two dermoids – one right over the withers and

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SUPPORTED SHOWS

Interested in sponsoring a supported show? Contact Pamela Anderegg at 817-297-3452 (before 8:00 PM CST) for more details.
An application can be downloaded from the RRCUS website.

The Supported Show Policy was amended in 2003. It is strongly recommended that members read the entire policy. If there are any questions, please contact Pam for clarification. Sponsors are urged to read ALL paperwork and instructions included in their medallion packet. Once a show has been completed, you have 15 days in which to forward the results to Pam.

RESULTS

Rockland County KC (NY)

February 21, 2009

Sponsored by: Phyllis Lia and Tammy Lynch

Number of Dogs in Competition: 31

Medallion Awarded

Sweepstakes Judge: Mr. Glenn Hoffman

BISweeps Puppy: Whirlaway's Charm

O: William & Christine Kitsch & Jennifer Lazowski

BOSweeps Puppy: Sunstone's Magic Man

O: Rhoda Springer

BISweeps Veteran: Tandive's Mason-Dixon

Belle, JC, O: Lou Ann Isenberg & Mary Bernie

Regular Judge: Ms. Helene Nietsch

WD/BOW: Assegai Calluna Golden Compass

O: Paula & James Smith, III

RWD: Ivy League's Dashiell Hammett

O: Danielle Sand, Andrea Lurie, and Nancy Rosen

WB: Pingora Surprise Girl Tsadania

O: Melloni Turpin Harrell & Darcy & Cynthia Willson

RWB: Ushamwari's Both Ends Burning, JC

O: John & Janice Paolicelli & Robert & Marie Valenti

BOS: Jesmyster's Red By Flash

O: Neil Ackerman, Stephanie Whidder, & K Laffleur

BOB: Ch. Of Afrikka Spring Valley Dorian

Gray, JC, O: Dr. Christina Wistrom & Sonnet McKinnon

High Scoring: Ch. Dimond's Regal Hall of

Fame, RA, O: G. James, S. Gordon, M. Cotton, & S. McKinnon

Trinity Valley RR Club of Texas

March 20, 2009

Sponsored by: TVRRCOT

Number of Dogs in Competition: 41

Medallion Awarded

Sweepstakes Judge: Mr. Mike Patterson

BISweeps Puppy: Juba Lee's Mardi Gras

King, O: Kathy & John Elmore & Kerry Williams

BOSweeps Puppy: Oddball's Ubuntu Fiesty

Fawn, O: Andrew Deaver & Erin Coogan

BISweeps Veteran: Ch. Wyndrunhr Dreamin

N Red Hot N Blu, O: Bill & Donna Lewis

BOSweeps Veteran: DC Kei River's

Roadrunner, SC

O: Marilyn & Gary Murray

Regular Judge: Ms. Dany Canino

WD/AOM: Triggerhill's Western Adventure, O:

John & Judy Kuplent & J&E Scattini

RWD: Calluna's Maxxwell D of Juba Lee

O: Nancy & Bud Henry & Kerry Williams

WB/BOW: Lamarde Perro Papa Wasa Juba

Lee, O: Kerry Williams

RWB: Cynara's All That Spicy Jazz

O: Ron Asbury & Elaine Hudson

AOM: Ch. Inkosi Inkulu, O: Jeanie Rance-

Marr

AOM: DC Ruvanda's Khalifa At Wayamba,

SC, O: Sharon Gardner

AOM: DC Kei River's Roadrunner, SC

O: Marilyn & Gary Murray

BOS: Ch. Sana's Tiger Lily In The Woods

O: Victoria Lindsay & Diane Young, DVM

BOB: Ch. Tji-Wara's Distant Drums

O: CL Well, KJ Rice & M Hatfield

High Scoring: DC Ruvanda's Khalifa At

Wayamba, SC, O: Sharon Garnder

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another about an inch and a half in front of it.

Col. DePass attended the two-hour surgery and described it in detail in a letter to "Margaret and Gene":

"Dr. Thrasher slipped a fine metal pipe into [the dermoids] and they were as open as a pipe. He injected dye into each and took xrays. ... Then he began to operate. The trick was not to cut even a thread of a large muscle which runs along the top of the neck and which controls the upward motion [of

the head. ... After the skin and flesh had been cut away, both sides of the muscle were exposed and as intact as if they were plastic. ... A wedge of meat about the size of the four fingers of my hand was removed. There were not roots or fingers on either of the cysts."

Less than a year later, in March 1957, Col. DePass got word that a bitch named Rosey owned by Lamarde Perro had been found to have a dermoid.

"If this is true and it is not too late, I would like to make a 'plea' for Rosey," he wrote, adding that Rosey could be sent to Dr. Thrasher for surgery and then conva-

lesce at Swahili. "You might want to have her spayed when the operation is performed and just keep her as a house pet," he suggested. "We are very happy that we did not put Botha to sleep. He is the sweetest Ridgeback we have and he just worships us; so I am sure that Rosey would more than repay you as a house guard and pet."

Col. DePass's private musings would be in lockstep with more modern attitudes about culling. It is impossible to imagine the pendulum swinging back yet again ... but one never knows. •