

Breeding for Beginners

By Mark Sheppard : Southbank Labrador Retrievers

First published May 2007
Modified December 2009

Author's Note: this article was originally written for the benefit of aspiring Labrador Retriever breeders. However the information and advice is of equal benefit to all breeders of Pedigreed, Registered dogs.

Before we head off along the "breeding" path with all of its twists and turns let me ask you this very simple but really quite complex question – why do you really want to become a breeder? If I were to put that seemingly straightforward question to 50 different Labrador owners I would probably get 50 different answers.

In my opinion there can only be one correct answer – one fundamental reason why a normally sane, well balanced, reasonably well adjusted person would even remotely consider becoming a breeder and that is "to better the breed". Just hold that thought for a minute – are you getting goose bumps? What an enormous responsibility. Do you really think that you have the potential within you to commit to such a task and to do it so well that the Labrador Retriever will be a better breed because of your efforts?

The ANKC (Australian National Kennel Council) code of ethics sets out very clear guidelines for breeders and in Section 2. c. it states "I shall breed only for the purpose of improving the standard of the breed and not specifically for the pet market or any other commercial purpose". It is a sad fact but we have the most popular breed of dog in the world – the Labrador Retriever has topped the list of registrations both here in Queensland and Nationally for many years and the same situation exists globally. Why sad – because with breed popularity comes the unscrupulous grab for cash. Pick up any weekend newspaper (especially around Christmas time) and have a look at the number of adverts for Labrador puppies – it's mind blowing.

Many are advertised as having "no papers" (this usually means that the puppies are of dubious background and have been produced by a backyard breeder using suspect or unverifiable parents). Puppies that are advertised as being CCCQ registered are often times bred by people who have never exhibited at a show, or competed at a retrieving trial or in obedience. These people rarely belong to a recognized Specialty Breed Club so the question must be asked – are they breeding for the betterment of the breed or just for the betterment of their bank balance?

Don't just take my word for it – pick up the phone and ring some of these people. Ask some specific questions about our breed (hips scores, elbow scores, eye clearances, sire and dam and who they were bred by). Ask them why they advertised their puppies as being golden or white or caramel when our breed standard only allows for 3 colours: Black, Yellow or Liver/Chocolate.

Ask them too many questions and guess what – not surprisingly they often hang up the telephone!

Now – lets get down to business. It is usually inevitable that newcomers to the Labrador Retriever breed, no matter what the discipline (show, obedience, trial) will eventually want to try their hand at breeding. I have always suggested that purchasing the very best quality bitch puppy that you can afford as a starting point might prove beneficial in the longer term. If you have achieved some level of success over the preceding 2-3 years then breeding from your young bitch may be an idea that has merit.

There are certain Controlling Body requirements that must be attended to beforehand: don't leave all of this until the last minute because you run the risk of not getting everything completed in time.

1. You must apply to the CCCQ for a registered breeding prefix: that is the "word" that appears in front of the name of every puppy that you will eventually breed. In our case our prefix is Southbank and every Labrador ever bred by us has Southbank at the beginning of its name.
2. A breeding prefix is not granted automatically – an application must be accompanied by a completed open book examination paper based upon the Guidelines for Breeders booklet.
3. It is also an ANKC requirement for all Labrador litters bred after 1st October 2003 that the parents of those litters must be hip and elbow scored.
4. If the sire or dam of a litter are not hip & elbow scored then the puppies will not be registered with the CCCQ. (The only exception to this rule is where a parent was whelped before 1st October 1997).

The word “scored” is very important – it means that the x-rays must have been read and assessed by a recognized accredited Veterinary body. (eg. Wyburn in W.A. or the AVA based in Sydney).

In addition to the aforementioned requirements there are also some moral obligations: these apply equally to a potential breeding bitch as it does to the selection and use of a suitable stud dog.

1. It is not a requirement that hip and elbow scores must be under a certain minimum but you do need to make a moral judgment based upon those scores. This can at times be a very difficult decision. If you are committed to the betterment of the breed then the potential of producing puppies with poor hips and elbows will be something that will keep you awake at night – and so it should!
2. This issue is something that really must be discussed with your mentor – either the breeder from which you originally purchased your bitch or a person whose advice you trust and respect.
3. I personally don't believe that breeding from a bitch whose hips are not a perfect 0:0 is a huge issue and I tend to apply a degree of common sense when accessing hip scores. When you consider that the current breed hip score average is 18 (9:9) then breeding from something with a score of say 2:2 or even 4:4 is not a fiasco. Where you may strike problems (in my opinion) is with an unbalanced or uneven score – something like 7:1.
4. At this point the scores of the selected stud dog plays a big part – I would never consider mating a bitch with higher than 5:5 hips to a dog with a high/higher score. Similarly, breeding a low scoring bitch to a dog that has 12:8 hips may also be asking for trouble – many of the resulting puppies could be sound but there is a risk that some won't be. Remember that you (as the breeder) are the one that will have to confront a devastated family with young kids whose beloved puppy has just been diagnosed by the vet as having unsound hips.
5. Quite the opposite though (again in my opinion) is the question of elbow scores. I personally won't entertain breeding from a dog or bitch without perfect 0:0 elbows. It takes a lot of skill and an intimate knowledge of bloodlines before this should ever be contemplated and it is not something that a novice should even consider.
6. DNA eye testing of breeding stock is now common place and it would be rare these days to find a reputable Labrador Retriever breeder incorporating dogs and bitches in a breeding program that do not have a perfect “Clear” result – at worst a “Carrier” result but never an “Affected” result.
7. You also need to judge temperament very carefully - is the temperament of your bitch suitable for breeding or is there a risk that some of her undesirable characteristics may be passed on to her puppies. Is she shy, uncertain around strangers or more particularly young children, has she ever had a “fit”, does she bark incessantly (and believe me this is a characteristic that can be passed down through families of dogs), is she a “one person” type of dog who gets jealous when other family members try to come between her and her Master. All of these things “will matter” according to the degree of severity – if you don't mind a barking dog that never shuts up then that may not be a big issue whereas a nasty bitch that flies at strangers is dangerous and should never be bred from.

If you have weighed up all of the variables and you are confident that including your bitch in a breeding program meets all of the important criteria then it is time to proceed. I won't even attempt to cover all of the options available to a breeder regarding methods of breeding to a genetic “type”. It is worth mentioning here that breeding livestock, any type of livestock whether it be dogs, horses, cattle, pigs or birds is really easy – all you need is a fertile male and female and nature will do the rest.

But beware of the Golden Rule. It is something that I read many year's ago and I believe every breeder should write it in bold letters on a piece of card and permanently display it in their kennels.

“MOTHER NATURE ALWAYS ERRS
ON THE SIDE OF MEDIOCRITY”

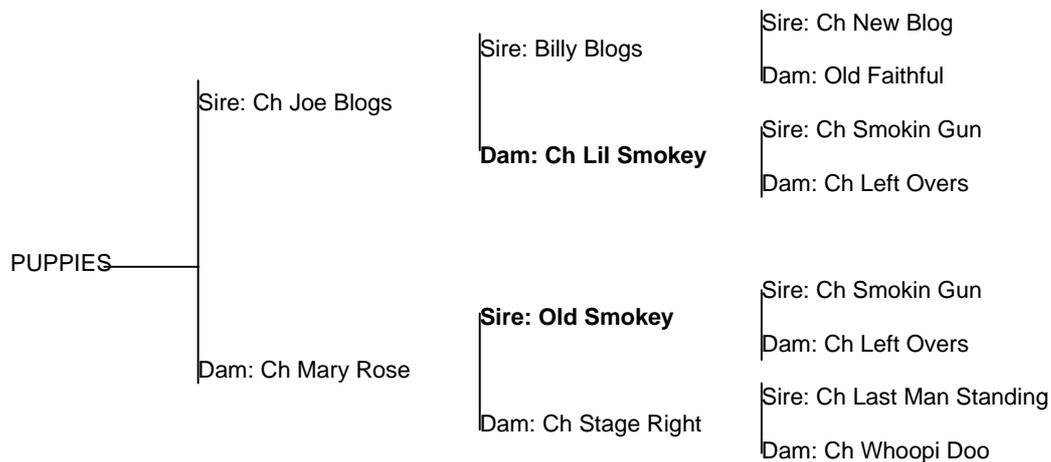
Put quite simply it means that no matter what we as breeders try to achieve Mother Nature will not tolerate extremes. Every chance that she gets Mother Nature will try to steer a course towards the moderate. As much as we all try to produce the most stunning Labradors imaginable this doesn't necessarily suit or match what is normal in nature.

What I will now endeavour to do is cover the three most common paths that breeders head down when breeding for the first time. Every breeder is using genetics whether he realizes it or not and how well you understand genetics could determine your future success. Successful breeding is all about striking a perfect balance between art and science. In this case art means having an “eye” for a dog, science means having the necessary knowledge and skills to apply the laws of heredity.

- Line Breeding – this method of selecting a suitable sire for a particular bitch is probably the most popular (and least understood) of all. Line breeding means that common ancestors are contained on both sides of the pedigree of a sire and dam. Where most novices fall foul of this method is through not understanding the impact of those common ancestors. Be very wary about the stud dog owner who simply says “your bitch and my stud dog have *Billy Bob* in their background – they would be a perfect match for each other”. WRONG – having one or even two ancestors in common rarely guarantees outstanding puppies.

Firstly, is *Billy Bob* regarded as a pre-potent sire that has had a significant influence on the breed and if the answer is yes then how “close up” is he – in other words if *Billy Bob* appears back in the 5th generation in both pedigrees then the likelihood of him having any influence on your puppies would be negligible. It is probably better explained mathematically – every individual dog or bitch has inherited genes from its ancestors. From the parents comes a 50:50 split of genes, from each of 4 Grandparents 25.0%, from each of 8 Great Grandparents 12.5%, from each of 16 GG Grandparents there is 6.25% and from each of the 32 GGG Grandparents only 3.12%.

When I plan a line-bred litter what I am really considering is a family of dogs, not just an individual. More importantly I try to determine the common thread running through the family. I prefer to plan a litter where the top line of the dam’s pedigree is very similar to the bottom line of the sire’s pedigree as follows.



Assume for a moment that you own the bitch Ch Mary Rose and you are considering using Ch Joe Blogs at stud. In this case Ch Lil Smokey and Old Smokey were litter brother and sister and this has the effect of creating a common thread through the centre of the pedigree with common ancestors “up close” – in this example in the second generation. If both Mary Rose and Joe Blogs are sound and generally are recognized as nice examples of the breed then this combination (at least on paper) has potential.

- Out crossing – this is probably the simplest of all the breeding methods to understand but the one with the least predictable outcomes. Out crossing means that there are no common ancestors on either side of the pedigree of the sire or dam. Out crossing can be very useful to a breeder if they wish to introduce (or remove) a particular trait: a fox brush tail is a really undesirable feature so let's use this as an example. By out crossing you can decide whether that particular trait was genetically dominant. If only some puppies sired by a dog with a fox brush tail had fox brush tails then it would suggest that fox brush tails were a dominant feature of that dog (the dog both has the visible fault and reproduces it). Your decision here could be to keep a puppy that has a normal tail that has also picked up some of the positive attributes from the sire that you were looking to introduce (maybe you were looking to produce better coats and nicer heads for example).
If, on the other hand all puppies sired by that dog actually had fox brush tails then it is fair to assume that your bitch (that visibly had a normal tail) was actually carrying a recessive gene for fox brush tails (recessive means that it is hidden and only appears when two similar genes meet). It is often the case that most breeders don't know what recessive genes their dogs carry – the only way to find out is to breed and be prepared for the consequences be they good or bad.
- Inbreeding – the final method that I will cover is what is commonly called inbreeding. When particular breeds were still in the “developmental stage” inbreeding offered an opportunity to cement a particular breed type. Traditionally inbred litters are the result of Father/Daughter, Mother/Son, Brother/Sister matings and the resultant puppies carry a strong genetic load. These days there would be very little reason to contemplate the mating of closely related dogs except under very special circumstances.
- Breeding for colour – generally speaking most Labrador breeders will experience first hand both Black and Yellow coat colour. A very small group of dedicated breeders will have experience of the Chocolate coat colour and full marks must go to them for working with such complex genetic issues. I won't attempt to go into the complexities of breeding Chocolate Labradors because I believe that it is a specialist field and not for the feint hearted.
- Breeding backwards – many breeders can fall into the trap of what I describe as trying to breed backwards. When studying pedigrees for future planned litters it is very easy to become overwhelmed with the prospect of “recreating” some past Champion dog or bitch. This is particularly the case with line bred litters because our eye is immediately drawn to common ancestry. We convince ourselves that by mating a certain bitch to a certain dog we have a chance of “recreating” a famous ancestor. No amount of genetic “jiggery pokery” will ever recreate an ancestor. Often times that ancestor is dead but even if a famous dog is available at stud it will only ever contribute 50% to the genetic makeup of his offspring. What we should be doing of course is breeding forward. Look to the future and plan to create that new breed record holder based upon the very best current day dogs.
- Beware the Big Winner – novices and middle range breeders alike are often “sucked in” to believing that by using the current top winning show dog that they will be assured of taking a quantum leap forward in their breeding program. Don't get me wrong, there are a lot of well-credentialed dogs around that contribute significantly to the quality of their offspring but there are just as many that don't. I would encourage newcomers to really do their homework because once you have puppies on the ground it is too late to change your mind. You must try to determine how (and why) the current big winner has been bred – was he the result of a well planned, line bred mating? If so then the dog may be of significant value particularly if he carries a similar family background to your bitch.

If however, the dog was the result of an “outcross” you need to look much closer. He may well carry in his background some ancestors that are shared with your bitch. Where the danger lies of course is in the ancestors that aren't shared. You run the risk of introducing something into your lines that was unexpected or unwanted. I would also encourage novices to weigh up the quality of a particular dog's progeny (his offspring). Has the owner of the current big winner kept any offspring from this dog or has any breeder that has used the dog kept or sold puppies that have gone on to bigger and better things?

Often times you will find that the owner of a current big winner is not the breeder of that particular dog that he exhibits every weekend – my advice would be to talk to the actual breeder of the dog and get your information first hand. The term “breeder” applies equally to the owner of a bitch as it does to the owner of a stud dog.

Both must subscribe to the improvement of the breed philosophy for the overall quality to improve.

- Stud fees – this is the amount that is charged by the owner of a stud dog for using his dog over eligible bitches. As a guide the amount that the owner of a stud dog charges is usually determined by the current market value of the puppies that the dog produces. At the time of writing this article the average price of a pedigreed, registered Labrador puppy in Queensland is around \$900 (give or take \$50). If a dog is standing at stud for a fee well in excess of this amount be very cautious. Don't be fooled into believing the “sales pitch” about the dog being a top winner, a record holder, the latest overseas import or that the dog is just about to leave for some far off overseas destination. Strip away all of the window dressing and be very clear in your mind whether the dog “actually suits your bitch”.
- Your rights – a stud fee is paid for the services of a stud dog over your bitch. It is not the amount that you pay for puppies to be produced. If a successful mating takes place (and most professional stud dog owners will allow two matings two days apart) you will be required to pay the stud fee at the time of the second mating. In return you will receive a signed service certificate that contains detailed information about the stud dog used, his owner's details and the date/s of mating. Don't lose this form because it also serves as a registration application for any puppies that are born. If no puppies are produced then most stud dog owners will allow a free return mating when your bitch next comes in to season – please confirm this arrangement at the time of mating and get it in writing from the stud dog owner. Always insist on sighting the original hip and elbow certificates (and the current eye clearances if these tests have been done): DO NOT take the stud dog owners' word that all is in order. Similarly, have the original copies of the hip and elbow certificates of your bitch ready to show the owner of the stud dog. Remember that there is not a Labrador breeder on this earth that hasn't experienced (at some time or another) problems with inherited defects – if you ever overhear a breeder or stud dog owner suggest otherwise they are lying!!!!
- My TOP 10 Pet Hates – this is a list of things that really irk me. The list is in no particular order of importance but it covers some of the things that you will be confronted with in your new role as a “breeder”. The list is drawn from my almost 30 years experience both as a stud dog owner and as a breeder dealing with new puppy owners. When they happen to you (and they will happen) they will therefore come as no surprise!
 1. I hate it when the owners of a bitch arrive for a mating and they bring the entire family (including little kids and grandparents) to witness the event. They come armed with folding chairs and popcorn and settle in for a great afternoons entertainment.
 2. I get really cranky when a successful mating has taken place and the owners of the bitch start to haggle over the already agreed stud fee.
 3. I get very annoyed when I hear of stud dog owners who just put their dog into a kennel run with an in season bitch and let nature take it's course. Irreversible damage can be caused to both dog and bitch when an unsupervised mating takes place. It is the responsibility of the stud dog owner to “manage” matings and ensure the safety of visiting bitches.
 4. I get tired of the regular phone calls enquiring about Golden Labrador puppies. After delivering the full spiel about black, yellow or chocolate Labrador Retrievers the caller then announces that they are looking for the “long coated” variety – I always have my list of reputable Golden Retriever breeders close by the phone.
 5. I become exasperated when I get phone calls about Labradoodles.
 6. I always book an appointment time for prospective new puppy owners to visit us - so why is it that very few of them know how to actually tell the time. And why is it that all of your booked appointments arrive at once!
 7. There is always the smart Alec who wants to show off his puppy selection skills to his family. I once had a fellow march in and tell me that if he was the one paying for the puppy then he would be the one selecting it. Oh Really!!! I took great delight in escorting him (and his family) to the gate.
 8. I run out of patience sometimes when a new puppy buyer asks me “how much will it be without papers”. My usual response is: DOUBLE !!
 9. I lose faith when I have to call another Labrador enthusiast and tell them that in my opinion their new puppy is not show quality and they don't believe me and want to argue the toss.

10. And finally – I sometimes want to give it all away when a client of 10 – 12 years ago rings me to tell me that dear old “Tessa, or Ben, or Tiffany” has just passed away – it makes you realise that nothing goes on forever.

In closing let me say that there is no more rewarding an experience than to plan, deliver, wet nurse and raise a top quality litter of Labrador retriever puppies. It’s even better when there is an outstanding puppy that has the quality and potential of making it in the show ring. Whilst the path to success is not easy you will be repaid tenfold if you stick with it and you are willing to listen and learn.

- Seek the advice of respected Labrador enthusiasts whose opinion you can rely upon and trust.
- Don’t be frightened to pick up the phone and ring the more “notable” Labrador breeders whether they are local, interstate or overseas – they too were beginners once and most are only too willing to help.
- Be prepared to suffer the disappointments because there will be plenty – it’s all part of the learning curve.
- Write down everything in a notebook (or record it in a computer file) – you will be amazed how often you will refer back to those notes as the years pass. If nothing else they make for a misty eyed trip down memory lane on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

