Evaluating Your Puppies Part I
by Dr. Alvin Grossman

If you're going to be a successful breeder you must be able to assess properly your puppies and quickly sell those who don't qualify as top show-quality stock. If you cannot do this, you become bogged down with a group of could've been" puppies. Your costs for maintaining them rises and their salability goes down as they lose their cuteness and appeal to the pet-buying public. You must also learn the basics of salesmanship and merchandising so you can move those cute and cuddly puppies early. You must also combine your evaluation talents with your salesmanship skills to sell those show prospects to the right show homes. If you can do this, you will have completed the ring of all things necessary to become a winner -- go for it! Most breeders, after years of breeding within one bloodline, are reasonably able to predict the development and outcome of each puppy in a litter.

Typically, they can estimate a puppy's ultimate size, when a puppy will go through its awkward stage of development, and whether or not the puppy can be considered show quality. Most of the time, breeders base their predictions both on gut feeling as well as many years of experience. However, there is a way to assess each puppy's potential without having had many years of dog-breeding experience.

By maintaining careful records of their puppies' developmental stages, breeders can quickly begin to understand the maturation process of their own bloodline. For example, they may discover that most of their puppies go through an awkward stage between three and eight months of age, or they may find that their puppies generally reach adult height at 10 months.

However, no system is foolproof. Puppies that start off looking like excellent show prospects may end up being only pet quality. Or a puppy may be sold as pet quality, and then end up as a top winner in the show ring. It is impossible to predict the future of each puppy with 100% accuracy. But, by maintaining accurate, detailed records, a breeder can substantially improve the odds.

To assist in predicting the puppies' potentials, breeders should record accurately the weights and measurements of each puppy in every litter. including weight, height (floor to wither, and floor to elbow), and length (withers to tailset, point of shoulder to end of buttocks, etc.. These measurements should be taken at birth, two weeks, four weeks, and then every four weeks until maturity is reached.

Also, notes on head development, heaviness of bone, and personality should be recorded, as well as any other features the breeder may wish to track. Typical comments should be like this:

5 1/2 weeks:

At this age, all four puppies in litter #6A look like peas in a pod...great heads and good coats...neck and shoulders are good and all appear shortbacked ... Such A Corker's head piece is outstanding ...looks like it may be an all champion litter ... which one is best? Only time will tell.

7 weeks:

All still appear outstanding.

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Specialty show... went Winners Dog for a 5 point major... Finished at 10 months of age with four majors... Went on to win 100 Best of Breeds, numerous BIS and Specialty BOB and sired 37 champions.

10 months:

Such Class, having been sold at 6 months of age, went BOB at his first Specialty show...placed in the group three times enroute to finishing with four majors, losing only once when he went reserve. He was never specialed.

Such A Corker finished his championship a 2 1/2 years of age. He had a modest show career.

The changes we saw as the puppies matured was a marked increase in chiseling and head development of **Such Class** and **Such Brass**. They never went through the classical awkward stages like their other two littermates. **Corker** and **Charm** lost their chiseling and lengthened in back as they went from 12 weeks to 6 months. They looked like gangly teenagers while the other two looked sleek and suave.

Our experience tables, upon reflection, indicated that **Such Class** would turn out much the way he did. Other puppies from similar breedings had followed that pattern and were early champions. How good he would be was not evident until 7 months of age. **Such Charm** followed the mold exactly. We knew she wasn't going to make it early on. **Such Brass** was a sleeper. His measurements led us to believe he would conform to our norms and be a good dog. However, at 12 weeks he magically began to emerge, especially when one watched him on the ground playing with the other puppies. He was fearless as was **Such Class**. **Such A Corker** was definitely a follower while **Such Charm** just chased along.

Here are some questions that you need to ascertain from your own breeding program. They will stand you in good stead when it comes to making predictions about selecting the best puppies:

1. At what age will this puppy attain ultimate size?
2. At what age will the puppy attain ultimate development?
3. Can ultimate size be predicted by size at birth?
4. Do all puppies in this bloodline go through growth spurts?
5. When will the growth spurt most likely occur?
6. Will one part of the body develop sooner than another part?
7. Will this puppy go through an awkward stage? If so, when?

The ability to answer questions such as these can help breeders predict the development of each puppy and determine which puppies can be considered the best show prospects. Development is always easier to predict if the breeder is dealing within one bloodline. When new bloodlines are added to the genetic maze, both development and outcome will probably be different from previous results.