

Evaluating Your Puppies

Part II

by Dr. Alvin Grossman

Most puppies go through an awkward stage no matter the bloodline. Their bodies stop being cuddly as they take on an adolescent appearance, becoming gangly "teenagers." Fortunately, most puppies emerge unscathed from this stage, and eventually display most of their original promise. However, there are some who never live up to the desired potential.

Some puppies do not go through this phase: They maintain beauty, balance and proportion throughout their first year. These puppies are often called "flyers," outshine their gangly siblings. If one of these rare individuals comes your way, let's hope you will recognize and treasure it. Don't overlook their awkward littermates, however, for sometimes they can also develop into outstanding show dogs.

It is impossible to predict the exact timing of a puppy's awkward stage. It can start as early as eight weeks, but may not start until the puppy is three or four months old. Most puppies are out of the awkward phase by the time they are eight months old, but some puppies emerge from this metamorphosis as early as six or seven months.

Generally, the timing of the awkward stage is consistent within the same bloodlines. For example, from past experience with a particular bloodline, a breeder could determine that the progeny of that bloodline usually experience the awkward stage between three and seven months. Knowing when to expect its onset and how long it typically lasts can help reduce the anxiety level of the breeder. This breeder may mentally lock away this pup until he is seven months of age, and then pull him out for reevaluation.

The two main causes of the awkward stage in puppies are their rapid growth and dentition (the loss of their baby teeth). During this time, the puppy's head and body part company, and typically, may lose their previous beauty and balance.

Fortunately the head and body usually begin to improve as the puppy approaches maturity. Generally, the improvement becomes noticeable at about six months of age, and continues until the original lines and proportion have been restored.

If the head stays in balance during the awkward stage, the head in all likelihood will turn out nicely. If, however, the head loses its original balance, the puppy may not grow into a top-quality show dog. Some breeders have been able to abolish the awkward phase in their stock by selective breeding. Their puppies never go through this phase; their heads are good as little puppies and they remain that way.

The rapid rate growth during this time can cause many puppies to develop awkward uncoordinated bodies. To make matters worse, different parts of their bodies can develop at different rates. One puppy's legs may develop before his chest, giving him an "up-on-leg" look; he may walk around looking like he is on stilts for months before finally filling in. Another pup may develop his forechest early; this may cause a low- to- the ground and "dumpy" look until his legs catch up.

Usually the body parts even out by the time maturity is reached, but not always. Many a breeder's dreams have been shattered by a puppy whose development just never caught up with his early

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Because appetite and eating are important habits, the good eaters are one step ahead in developing their potential. On the other hand, the poor eater may be penalized through his own lack of effort. One of the most difficult tasks imaginable is to get a poor eater to develop properly. Any possible physical cause of a lack of a healthy appetite, such as infected tonsils, or worm infestation, should be investigated thoroughly. Unfortunately, there are some puppies that will never eat more than what is required for marginal subsistence. These will never be great show dogs.

A puppy who is a good eater will often be a bit chubby. Should this puppy go through the awkward stage, his awkwardness will be more pronounced than his slimmer littermates - the chubby puppy usually looks loaded at the shoulder and also looks soft, sloppy and cumbersome. The unknowing owner gives up on this specimen before a proper diet has a chance to work. It is important to note that extreme obesity can cause permanent structural damage in a puppy. This is especially true in the large breeds.

At the other extreme, the too thin puppy, while retaining a semblance of his original promise, often will never fill out enough to make a good show dog. This puppy will often appear frail - for lack of proper nutrition can have an adverse effect on physical well being. This puppy too, may be discarded as a potential show dog without the owner attempting to uncover the causes of his diminished appetite.

For Breeds in which an outgoing personality and good disposition are highly desirable, breeders must help to develop their dogs' personalities. A show specimen must have something more than physical beauty- the show dog must possess "heart." Without this extra spark, the most perfect specimen is nothing more than a shell. The responsibility for developing personality and disposition is just as important as providing proper food and medical care. The personality problems of most shy, snapping, wetting puppies can usually be traced to environmental factors rather than inherited ones.