**How Many Dogs DO You Have, Anyway?**



**and other no-win questions**

    If you're anything like I was, you enter the world of showing & breeding dogs with a naive, passionate enthusiasm. Your first dog shows are breathtaking and addictive; the people seem larger than life and are so knowledgeable. You join dog clubs, start figuring out who will talk to you and who will look down their nose at you, begin taking classes to learn to handle, and spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out how to groom for the ring. As in any large group, you find people you "click" with and you find people you really don't like. Hopefully you make friends with the right people when you first start out, but you probably won't. If you're lucky you'll find a few people that are supportive and help you along. I can assure you, however that you will also discover people who for some unknown reason are just itching to knock you down. I guess that's true in any social group, but it becomes pretty extreme in dogs.

    There are questions these folks will ask you -- questions that have no "correct" answer but can be used to damage your reputation. One of my favorites is...

**Just How Many Dogs Do You Have, Anyway?**

    Believe me, there is no correct answer to this. If you have one or two dogs, some people will scoff at you as if you are some kind of dilettante. *Obviously you can't be serious about building a breeding program if you have one dog and one bitch.* If you have 10+ dogs, you can be accused of being a puppy mill or a hoarder. *There is no way he can possibly take proper care of all those dogs!* Maybe if you have exactly five dogs you're in a "difficult-to-condemn" zone, but if you are actively breeding dogs that is a very hard number to maintain at all times. Either you place every bitch you own as soon as you are through breeding her (which doesn't sit too well with me) or you stop breeding, or you place every puppy, which kind of negates the reason you bred the litter in the first place. You really can't win with this one.

    A wise person once told me that this is the best way to address it. When someone asks, "How many dogs do you have?" respond with the single word, "Enough." If they push it, ask them why they want to know. That generally sends the negative nancies off to scuttlebutt about it.

    My feeling about how many dogs a person should own is, "as many as they can handle responsibly." Responsibly means the basics (food, water, housing, exercise, grooming and love). It doesn't mean dogs that are actively being shown or trained or advertised; it means cared for as any valued pet would be. I have seen people with 20 dogs that do an *amazing* job of it, living on acreage, piling them all in a van to go to the beach, etc. I have also seen people with one dog that should not have even that one -- stuck in an exercise pen in the garage 24/7, spinning in circles and not knowing how to behave at all. If I was a dog (no comments from the peanut gallery!) I would rather live with 19 of my closest friends, playing and having fun all day, occasionally quarreling over a toy, and curled up together for naps. Please deliver me from a cold garage and a 4' x 4' cage. That's just no way to live.

    A few years back, there was a horrific scandal in the Golden Retriever community about one of our own who had too many dogs. Honestly, I figured that this was the "politically correct" on the rampage again, and I actually defended her, many times. People would say, "Nobody is saying she abuses her dogs; but she has too many dogs to handle properly." Every time I had seen her at a show, she was presenting well-groomed, fairly well-trained animals that looked absolutely fine, so I figured someone had decided to "do her in." Boy, was I wrong.

    As it turns out she really did have some type of mental illness that prevents a person from making good choices. I think it's kind of an obsessive-compulsive disorder that makes people hoard things. In some people you see that they can't throw out their trash and they live in filth. In her case, it was all aimed at dogs, and although nobody knew for sure how many she had, it was well over a hundred according to the most accurate accounts. There were many horror stories associated with this person that I won't go into, but suffice to say there was a mass outcry which eventually led to her disappearing from dog shows altogether.

This is NOT the kind of thing I'm referring to, as most of us don't have anywhere near this many dogs, and of course it is not acceptable. For the most part, though, the number of dogs a person owns really doesn't tell you anything about how those dogs are taken care of or what their quality of life is.

    I think it's a question we all need to remove from our conversations, but that's just me. You'd be better off asking, "How long has it been since all your dogs' ears were cleaned?" At least you'd find out how important the dogs' general health means to their owner.

*Deborah Blair*