

WHAT CHARACTERIZES A GOOD BREEDER?

By Carissa Kuehn

Looking for a German Shepherd puppy? It can be a daunting task; there are endless numbers of "breeders" out there with all sorts of claims to fame: "specializing in blacks and black sables", "top-rated show line dogs", "top-rated working dogs", "specializing in huge 'Old World' German Shepherds". How does one make sense of it all?

After spending a total of six years searching for and investigating my GSD breeder—and finally getting a puppy from her that I have since taken all the way from BH to IPO3 at the Regional and National championship levels as a first time handler—I have learned many things about good breeders that I wish to share. There are several key characteristics and attributes that set a GOOD BREEDER apart from all those other "breeders" out there. My hope is that this article helps guide you in selecting a good breeder who works tirelessly to produce good German Shepherd Dogs that are all a German Shepherd should be. I hope that it also helps you avoid those breeders who are either just in it for the money, or have no real knowledge about and experience in breeding **good** German Shepherd Dogs. Whether you want a stable, well-bred German Shepherd Dog for a companion, for IPO/Schutzhund, for herding, or for another competitive venue, take the time to search out a good breeder!



The author with "Axel", competing at the 2013 USCA GSD IPO3 National Championship (first National event as a first-time handler with her first GSD ever. A combination of a good breeder, a good dog, and a good training team!). Photo: Tamandra Michaels.

Good breeders of German Shepherds:

- **Work their own dogs and the progeny of their dogs in a venue that tests the working attributes and temperament of the breed.**

REASON: The GSD is a working breed that must have intelligence, strength, trainability, and excellent character. These things must be **objectively** determined somehow before the dog is bred, because simply saying "she's such a sweet dog at home" doesn't cut it. The dog's temperament must be **tested** and revealed *before* being bred. How are they with strange surfaces, with busy surroundings, with loud noises, with other dogs, with small animals, with other people at home and in public, in the car, in the crate? What is their toy drive like, their prey drive, their defensive drive, their fighting "drive", and how do you know this? Do they want to work with the handler, or are they more independent, and how do you know this? How do they respond to pressure from the handler, from the helper/someone threatening, and how do you know this? Are they a strong dog, and if so, how? Are they tough, handler hard, handler sensitive? How do you know? There is **NO WAY** these questions can be answered satisfactorily unless the dog is actually being trained, worked, and trialed/titled. And there are currently **no other venues besides sports with a protection component**

(IPO/SchH/Ring, etc.) and the HGH that test the courage, fortitude, strength of character in a dog, and their willingness to actually confront and engage a threat under pressure.

By working their *own* dogs—even if the dogs arrived already titled from Europe, but then are trained and trialed further by the breeder—the breeder gains incredibly valuable insight into the genetic working abilities and temperament of their breeding stock. This is a big difference from the ‘breeders’ that simply import titled stock and breed them, without any practical knowledge of this dog’s true genetic temperament and working abilities, or that ‘farm’ their dogs out to other people to train and title for them. Sending a dog off to a handler in Europe to earn its titles is very different from putting in the work and effort to title a dog oneself; the former has much less working knowledge of who and what the dog is, while the latter has been intimately involved in uncovering the genetic layers of their dog in the process. They will have a better understanding of their dog’s strengths and weaknesses by working it themselves.

- **Produce dogs that excel in multiple venues.**

REASON: The GSD is a versatile breed, not a specialist. The dogs should be able to perform work in a variety of venues, and it shows a strong breeding program if a breeder’s dogs are excelling in all different fields: Schutzhund/IPO, Ring sport, Obedience, Tracking, Search and Rescue, Herding, Explosives or narcotics detection, police work, etc. It is not just one “token puppy” that is their superstar, but dogs from nearly every litter produced are doing different forms of work (even if to varying degrees of accomplishment); it is not just a “well, one of our puppies is a therapy dog” bit (only one puppy out of how many puppies produced?). Multiple dogs from multiple litters are succeeding in some avenue of ‘work’ or competition. After all, the GSD *is* a working dog first, and a companion second.

- **Produce dogs that look and act like German Shepherd Dogs are supposed to look and act (i.e. they are bred to the standard for the GSD).**

REASON: There is a breed standard that has been set for the GSD since the beginning of the breed, and responsible breeders breed according to the breed standard, particularly the SV standard! This rules out any “breeder” that breeds for ‘huge’, ‘oversize’, ‘Old World’ German Shepherds, or for ‘off-color’ GSDs like livers, whites, and blues. **All of these are faults** according to the breed standard. GSDs are not supposed to be “huge” (as in, over 85-90 pounds; it is amazing how many “breeders” brag about their huge 100+ pound GSDs!), because it can interfere with their agility, overall health and longevity, structure, and ability to work. That standard is in place for a reason, and that is to not only define what a German Shepherd should LOOK like, but what a German Shepherd should ACT like. Good breeders do not reinterpret the standard to make it fit what they are producing in their breeding program. They breed dogs that fit the standard as best they can.

- **Certify hips and elbows through OFA, OVC, or SV at the minimum BEFORE the dogs are bred.**

REASON: Hip and elbow dysplasia are common genetic problems in the breed, and any good breeder will do this simple test on their breeding stock to ensure they are not breeding affected animals. Hip and elbow problems can cripple a dog, even to the point of euthanasia! Good breeders screen before they breed. Bad breeders do not certify hips and elbows, but simply say “Well, I’ve never had any evidence of bad hips or elbows before.” How would they know this if a) they have never x-rayed their dogs, and b) have never worked or titled their dogs in any activity that would quickly reveal bad hips (herding, IPO/Schutzhund, etc.)? Basic health-testing is a must, and this means hip and elbow x-rays, not just a “clean bill of health” from their vet.

- **Keep their dogs and puppies in clean, well-kept facilities.**

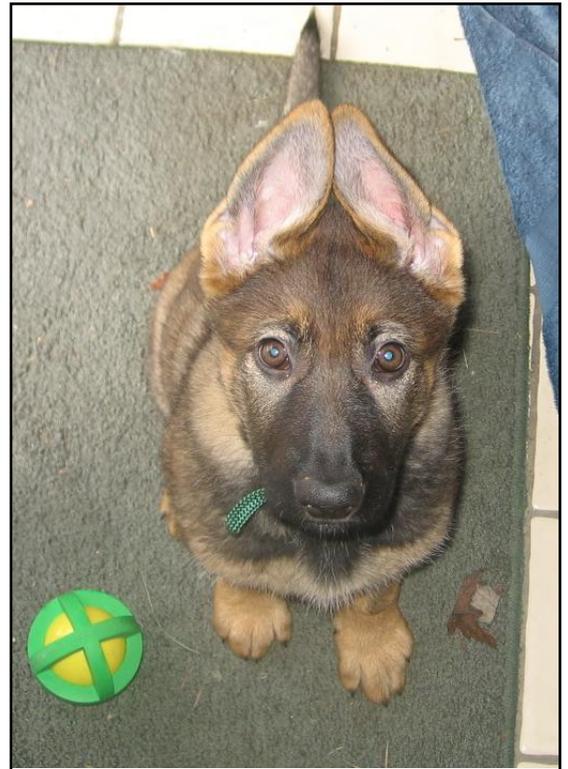
REASON: No-brainer. Dirty conditions spread disease and show a lack of concern for the animals.

- **Have dogs that are clearly well cared for and well looked after.**

REASON: again, no brainer. This shows a true concern and care for the animals and this breed. The breeder should not just have rows and rows of kenneled “breeding dogs” that they do nothing with but breed. This would be a glorified puppy mill; these types of breeding operations may have USDA approval, but they are just mass-puppy-producing businesses that typically provide pet stores with purebred puppies (no good breeder would EVER sell their puppies to a pet store!). Nor should they have female after female that has been farmed out to “friends and family” to have litter after litter. This simply takes the puppy mill concept and spreads it out over multiple regions, but the end result is the same—litter after litter of purebred, ‘AKC-papered’ puppies bred for the purpose of making money, rather than for improving the breed. A good breeder’s dogs are not just ‘puppy-making machines’. They are valuable companions and working partners.

- **Have dogs and puppies that show confident, appropriate temperaments.**

REASON: Temperament is the hardest thing to pin down/correct in breeding. The dog either has it, or it doesn't. All of the [basic elements of temperament are genetic](#), and no amount of socialization or desensitization or careful handling can *fully* correct a faulty temperament (although it can help the dog *cope* with temperamental shortcomings to some extent). If the parents do not have correct temperament, then it is highly unlikely that the puppies will have it! Puppies that are shy and nervous as puppies will not simply "get better" or "grow out of it" in most cases. Plus, the GSD is supposed to be a confident dog, even if it is aloof (aloof as in indifferent to people; a dog that hides from people is not aloof!). The temperament of the bitch is of great importance; she should be **SOLID** in her overall temperament, because she exerts a tremendous influence over the puppies. Also, good breeders are open to allowing true prospective buyers to visit their facilities and puppies (once old enough), and often encourage it. But on the other side of the coin, do not be surprised if a breeder exercises some discretion about allowing visitors; visitors can often track unwanted diseases like parvo in from the outside world, which can wreak havoc with a young litter of puppies. However, if a breeder is dead-set on selling puppies sight-unseen (as in, all they need is your credit card and they will ship a puppy to you), walk away.



A confident, forward puppy; that's a good sign!

- **Feed both dogs and puppies a high quality food.**

REASON: Health should also be a primary concern to the breeder. A good breeder wants their breeding animals in top condition, and wants their puppies to get the best start possible in life. Feeding a good food shows not only proper knowledge of animal husbandry, but also concern for the health and welfare of their animals. Good dog foods do not include bargain brand dog foods that most grocery stores sell! The better the nutrition, the better the non-genetic foundation for a healthy puppy.

- **Produce quality litters, not just quantity.**

REASON: Good breeders want to know what they are producing, and want to ensure that their puppies go to good homes. Breeding litters back to back to back from multiple females can mean that

there is no time to see what is produced or whether or not there are any hidden genetic health or temperament problems that crop up upon maturity. Additionally, if there is a surplus of puppies on hand, some of these 'breeders' will then sell them to anyone who has money to shell out, regardless of whether or not they are a good fit for the puppy. A common characteristic of these types of commercial breeders (who make their living from producing puppies) is a slick website that really shows off their dogs; it really does take a critical eye to read between the lines. Click on their "Puppies" or "Upcoming Litters" page. If a breeder has multiple litters on the ground all throughout the year, or has many different breeding females that are all being bred so as to produce many litters year-round, then this usually is a "breeder" who has one objective: to make money. *Run away* from such breeders, because even if they breed titled dogs, they typically care very little for what they produce, which also means if you run into an issue with your puppy, you're out of luck. They don't care. Because they breed so many litters, they do not even *know* what they produce, nor know whether the pups mature into good dogs, nor whether they have temperament problems or health problems, etc. For them it is about the money, not the dogs. For good breeders, it is about the *dogs*, not the money (see Lee Hanrahan's article "[The Cost of Our Puppies](#)" for a look at what puppies from a good breeder *really* cost).

- **Have a clear vision/goal for their breeding program and for the dogs that they produce, or want to produce.** They carefully select the stud that best matches their female, and should be able to explain *why* they chose this stud ("because he was available" or "because he's a nice dog" or "the top stud in the U.S./Canada/Europe" does not cut it!). This means they should be able to explain the female in detail: her strengths, her weaknesses, where she needs improvement, how this stud should match up with her and bring balance – all things that can be known *only* if the breeder is working their dogs and understands their bloodlines. They do not just breed to the "top-rated male" simply because he is a top-rated male and that means they can sell puppies. Good breeders don't think like that!

REASON: It is very easy to simply slap two dogs together and create puppies – people do it all the time and then sell their puppies for a pretty penny. We call them Backyard Breeders. But to create healthy, solid-tempered puppies with the proper GSD temperament, structure, and working ability – this is much more difficult, and requires an in-depth understanding of the dogs. Anyone can breed two dogs together – two untitled dogs, or even two highly titled, V-rated dogs – and then call themselves a "breeder". It does not mean they *are* a good breeder. Good breeders **know their bloodlines, their dogs, their strengths and weaknesses**, and *know the standard for the GSD*, so that they can breed accordingly and breed to improve their dogs each generation.

- **Spend quality time raising and socializing their own puppies before they go to their homes**

REASON: This is just 'good practices.' Young puppies are very impressionable, and a good breeder makes sure their puppies safely experience a wide variety of 'everyday' experiences they will likely encounter in their new homes. This helps create confident, well-adjusted, better socialized puppies, compared to the 'breeder' who keeps them locked up in a kennel all the time. It also helps teach them cleanliness if they are spending time inside and then being taken outdoors for group potty runs and play sessions; this makes them easier to potty train later, compared to if they were locked in a kennel where they poop and pee and then walk through it!



Good breeders ensure that their puppies safely experience a wide variety of 'everyday' experiences they will likely encounter in their new homes.

Rarely do good breeders “farm” their breeding females out to other people; good breeders usually want to raise their puppies themselves and watch them develop. This provides them with valuable insight into what they are producing from their dogs. Even if a good breeder happens to have a ‘foster’ for one of their breeding females, they usually bring the female back to their house to whelp the litter, or are incredibly involved in the whelping and raising process. *However*, if the female is being “fostered” across the state or across the country, or there are many such females from this breeder producing litters while with “friends and family”, this is not a good sign! This can indicate a glorified puppy mill, where dogs are being bred repeatedly and litters are being whelped repeatedly with no real concern for the quality of dog that is being reproduced. Good breeders like to breed, whelp, and raise the litter themselves, or at least remain very hands-on in the whole process. They care about what they produce.

- **Spend more time asking their puppy buyers questions about EVERYTHING** (household, house, yard, other dogs, previous dog experience, how long those dogs lived and what happened to them, training experience, plans for the puppy, etc.) **than the puppy buyer spends asking them questions.**

REASON: Good breeders truly care about their puppies and about what they produce. For most of them, this is a hobby, not a money-making venture, business, or scheme. They breed for the love of the breed, for producing happy, healthy, confident, well-adjusted, proper representatives of the breed. They want to make sure that their puppies are going into a good home with owners who will be able to properly care for and *train* their puppies. They care more for their puppies than they do for your money. If a breeder’s main topic of conversation or email is how much their puppies are and all the different ways you can pay for them—rather than an interest in who you are and why you want to purchase one of their beloved pups—you should find another breeder.

- **Purposefully match their puppies up with the appropriate home, rather than letting everyone ‘choose’ their own puppy** (or making them pay more for ‘first pick’, ‘second pick’, ‘super premium pick’—these are all just gimmicks. It is impossible to tell at 8 weeks of age about the full potential of a puppy. To charge significant amounts of money for the “super premium” pick of the litter is ridiculous.)

REASON: Because good breeders have spent so much time with their puppies, and have such an in-depth understanding of their dogs, their bloodlines, and what they wanted to produce with this litter, they really are *the best one* to pick the appropriate puppy for each home. They have spent time with the litter, and have tested them in their own ways (there are many different puppy tests out there, and different breeders favor different ones), and have the best idea of what puppies will *most likely* work best in competition or working homes versus pet homes. Good breeders know that a mismatch could be disastrous in that the owners decide to get rid of the puppy later on; because a good breeder cares about their puppies, they want to make sure each one goes to the right home in the first place. And contrary to popular lore, a good breeder’s “pet quality puppy” is **not** a ‘reject’ or a puppy of inferior quality (something commonly spouted by backyard breeders who claim buyers can have ‘first pick’ of their litters, rather than getting a ‘second rate’ puppy from a quality breeder). In every litter, all the puppies will be suited for a different variety of homes, which includes the pet home. Having lower drive or a more mellow temperament does not, therefore, make this puppy “inferior”. It may, however, make them better suited for an active pet home, rather than competition home.

- **Have a ‘first buy back’ policy, or something similar that says if the home does not work out for their puppy, they will buy it back or take it back in exchange for another more suitable puppy.**

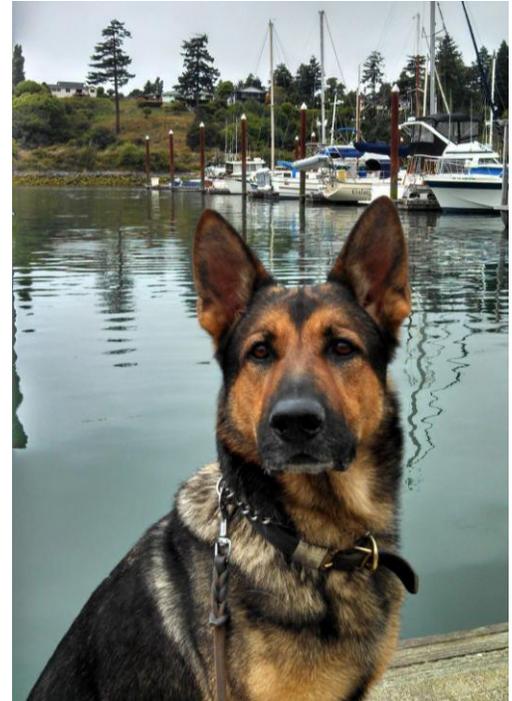
REASON: Again, good breeders care about their puppies, and it is one of their worst nightmares to have one of their puppies end up at a shelter because the owners didn’t want it any more, or it had

health problems, or it wasn't the right fit. A good and conscientious breeder will always take back a dog of their breeding should something not work out, even if it has health problems. Good breeders want to know if genetic health issues suddenly crop up in their lines! Good breeders feel responsible for what they produce, and will take all the necessary measures to keep their dogs out of a pet shelter. This is why so few well-bred dogs from good breeders wind up in pet shelters! Not only have the breeders worked hard to ensure that their dogs are of excellent quality with great temperaments, and that they have been matched up with appropriate homes (thereby cutting down on many of the factors that result in a dog being dumped in a shelter, such as poor temperament, health problems, or mismatch with the family), but they will take back one of their puppies should something not work out.

Summary

Good breeders are passionate about keeping the GSD breed strong, healthy, and all that a GSD is supposed to be. They health-test their breeding stock, they train and trial and title them to show that the dogs are breedworthy, they breed carefully and conscientiously after a long and careful deliberation over which stud truly is the best match for their female (even if it involves driving several hours to meet the stud, or flying the female across the country or even into Europe to be bred), and they are very involved at every step of the process: selecting and testing their breeding stock, birthing and raising the puppies, keeping track of their puppies as they grow up. While different breeders may breed for a different type of dog (a harder dog, the more "all-around" dog, a high-drive working dog for Schutzhund, etc.), they all tend to share these same characteristics. When you find a good breeder, the best thing you can do is to be completely honest about what you are looking for. If they are a good breeder, they will, in turn, be completely honest with you about whether or not their dogs and lines are a good match for you.

The majority of "breeders" here in North America are **not** good breeders; most of them do not meet the criteria listed above (especially the first several points—most "breeders" are breeding untitled, untested dogs! In reality, "[AKC-papered dogs](#)" means next to nothing in terms of quality. There is no way to objectively know if they are "good dogs" or are even everything a GSD is supposed to be, because they've never been trained or tested!). It is the handful of passionate, dedicated, knowledgeable, good breeders who are keeping the German Shepherd breed alive in this country, who are preserving it for generations to come, preserving the traits that make the GSD a valuable working dog for police/military/service work, and who are keeping it from falling into disrepair like so many other Americanized breeds. They are striving to ensure that the German Shepherd Dog remains a true German Shepherd Dog. These are the breeders we should support.



*The author's Handler Owner Trained (H.O.T.) dog, "Axel":
Ferox v Tehillah IPO3 CGC HCT-s
USCA National Competitor and companion dog*