

Ethics in Breeding Miniature Poodles

My Definition - by Suzi Francis

What does it mean to be an ethical breeder? To me this question can be broken down into three key areas: (1) How do I treat my dogs? (2) How do I select dogs to be bred? (3) Who is allowed to own one of my Poodles?

Harmony Miniature Poodles are house dogs. As I'm typing this, I'm surrounded by Poodles. Polly is lying on the dog bed chewing a bully stick, Faith and Eleanor are playing tug with the monkey toy and TJ is lying next to me checking for typos. We have a nice big back yard where they run and play many times each day.

They go places with us. No, I don't often take all four of them, but I take one with me whenever I can. They go to classes and to shows. Be it a puppy class, conformation training, Rally class or something different, I'm at class at least once a week with different dogs. They go to Dog Shows for fun and to prove their worth as breeding stock and performance dogs. They love getting dressed up for a show.

Our Poodles are crate trained. They sleep in their kennels at night and when we are not home. They are never left unsupervised in the house or left outside for long periods of time. I'm lucky. It's rare for them to spend more than four hours in kennels during the day.

They are well groomed. Yes, you may come over one day and find them full of dead grass from rolling around outside on the dead winter lawn, but I like a clean dog. The ones who are being shown are bathed every week. The ones who are not being shown still get groomed every three or four weeks.

They are seen regularly by a veterinarian. I drive an hour each way to take my dogs to the very best vet in the state. There is a very good emergency clinic 15 minutes away - just in case. I

believe carefully timed puppy vaccines are important. My adults are tested for immunity levels (titer tests) and are only given single antigen vaccines when needed.

What about breeding - how do I pick who is to be bred? The selection process begins years before breeding. I'm evaluating them as breeding stock even as young puppies. Temperament is the first key. If a dog doesn't have a good personality, I won't breed it. I like happy dogs that get along with most people and most dogs. I like dogs that want to do the right thing even when they don't. It goes even further that that with mothers (dams). Will they take good care of a litter of puppies.

Next I consider structure. Does the dog closely conform to the AKC Poodle standard? Does it have any major structural faults? Does it have proper Poodle "type". No dog is perfect, but will the strong points of one parent help the faults of the other? This is one of the major reasons dogs that are being bred should also be shown. Dog shows are designed to evaluate breeding stock. In order to complete an AKC championship multiple judges must agree that the dog is an amazing example of a Miniature Poodle. There are times when a non-champion may be bred, just as there are times champions should not be bred. Dog Shows are a tool and should be used as such. My structural evaluation is much more in-depth than a person can do in two minutes of judging at a show, but it too is based on studying dogs and comparing them to the AKC standard. I have the advantage of seeing my Poodles over many years. Structure is an area where I draw upon the knowledge of my mentors. My mother, Judy Mears, is an AKC judge who has raised Samoyeds since 1970. Ann Kennedy (also a judge) and her daughter Katherine Vigil are my breeding partners, mentors and friends. They have been breeding Miniature Poodles since 1964. I don't make a breeding decision without consulting these three ladies.

Ann and Katherine are also every helpful when it comes to the third consideration which is pedigree. It's not just a matter of coefficient factors or the number of champions, but about the lines within the pedigree melding together for fabulous puppies. Breeding is always a gamble, but utilizing their knowledge of Miniature Poodle blood lines around the world sure gives me an advantage

Health is the final piece of the puzzle. We are lucky these days to have many tests we can conduct before breeding. An eye disease called PRA nearly wiped out Miniature Poodles years ago. There are now genetic tests for several types of PRA. Harmony Miniature Poodles are tested for PRA before being bred unless both parents were clear. Even with clear parentage we

will test every few generations just to be sure it is not present. We also have their eyes checked as puppies by an eye specialist (ophthalmologist), and again before being bred. Hip dysplasia is not common in Miniature Poodles, but it does happen. We have OFA hip x-rays done unless both parents have been cleared. Even then, we'll x-ray every other generation. At least one parent must have OFA clearance. These two tests are the minimum we do. If we know of other issues we will test for them as well. These test could include, but not be limited to cardio, dwarfism, dentation and coat color.

Prior to being bred, the dam is examined by a reproductive specialist (Theriogenologist). This exam includes a physical exam, blood work and titers if they haven't been run in the last three years. This visit is also a great opportunity to talk about any issues in breeding, whelping or raising puppies that may come up. A Theriogenologist is the perfect vet to have as a breeding partner. They run in-house progesterone tests or sperm checks, do trans-cervical implants with fresh, chilled or frozen semen, check pregnancy with ultra-sound or x-rays, do c-sections if necessary, and help to save struggling neonates. Life would be grand if you never needed a theriogenologist, but I'm so glad I have the best ones on my team.

The final factor in being an ethical breeder has to do with placing Poodles. This can be one of the most difficult and yet most rewarding parts of the process. I sometimes spend hours talking to potential puppy buyers when I don't even have a litter coming up. I enjoy talking to most of these people. I don't breed often. Over the last ten years I've had five litters of puppies so one factor is patience. Are the buyers willing to wait for my puppies? Some people can't wait, but still could be good owners. Those I refer to other breeders. These days I start the screening process with a questionnaire. It really does save time with those long phone calls. I do check references. The questionnaire asks for vet and groomer info. I call them. I find that groomers especially can tell you a lot about people as pet owners. The second step in the process is having the potential puppy buyers and their families come over to meet the dogs. I prefer the first visit to be before the puppies are born. The family gets to meet the dogs as they are normally before puppies are added. If people don't like my dogs they are not going to like my puppies. It also gives us a chance to chat and get to know each other. I consider most of my "puppy people" my friends. If I can't connect with them on a personal level, I probably don't want them in my life for the next 15+ years. Also during those visiting time I like to meet the whole family. I believe you can tell a lot about how people will raise a dog by the way they raise their children. You may

think it is not fair for me to judge, but in this case I believe it is. These people are wanting to have one of my puppies. Not only is their unruly child an issue around the dog, but if they can't control their kid how will they control and train a puppy? It's almost nice when the child is acting out a bit, so I can see how the parents handle the issue. Gentle, positive and consistent parents are going to be good puppy people.

I am hoping to find permanent homes for puppies. So I will discuss things like housing situations, stability, lifestyle and finances with people. These things may change as life goes on, but they are factors that need to be talked about. As an example - apartment living. Are you willing to take your Poodle on several walks a day in the snow, heat or darkness? What if the rent increases or the next property manager doesn't want pets in the complex? You can see, apartment living doesn't mean you can't have a Poodle, just that there are things to consider. I do promise to take the puppy back if you can't keep it. I'm happy to do that, but that's not the outcome any of us hope for when placing the puppy.

The final factor in picking the right home for a puppy is simply this: do I have the right puppy for this particular home. I may have several very nice puppies, but is there one that fits into your home. That's one big reason I prefer to get to know the people who are interested in owning a puppy. It helps me to better match people and puppy personalities. This brings up one other factor - you don't get to pick your own puppy. I've spend hundreds of hours with these puppies, you've spent a few. I have spent a lifetime matching people and dogs. Sometimes you may get to pick between two, but there will be puppies that are not available to you. Trust me.

Finally, three things that will not happen:

1. You will not be able to order a Poodle on-line from me. Personal connection is paramount!
2. You will not be able to get any "Doodle" from me other than a Poo-Doodle. Why mess with perfection!
3. You will not get any multi-colored or patterned Poodles from me. I breed AKC Poodles - anything other than a solid color is a disqualification.

I hope this helps you to know what to expect from me, but if you have question please feel free to contact me. I'm always happy to talk Poodles or answer questions.