

Finding & Selecting the Right German Shepherd Puppy

In South Africa, the only German Shepherd Dog registrations that are internationally recognized are those registered by the German Shepherd Dog Federation and the KUSA, with the Federation being the preferred organization registering more than 90%. The Federation's International credentials are set out in the Breeders Section: It is the only South African authority that sets compulsory minimum breeding standards designed to protect the Public. The Federation recognizes dogs bred under KUSA jurisdiction, but these dogs may not necessarily qualify to breed under the Federation umbrella. Potential buyers of puppies who wish to participate in the Federation are advised to check beforehand whether the puppy they intend buying will qualify.

This three-part series explains how to evaluate breeders and how to utilize the various qualifications in order to determine parental quality.

Part I: Evaluating a Breeder

It can sometimes be difficult to determine from breeders' adverts whether you will be getting value for money. Some breeders simply charge what the top breeders charge without correlating puppy prices to the quality of the parents or the "back-up" services offered. Buying the most expensive puppy does not necessarily mean getting the best. To make an informed decision prospective buyers need to be aware of what the various qualifications awarded to dogs and breeders actually mean.

Good puppies can be obtained from small and/or new breeders, particularly if they are breeding under the umbrella of a club or an experienced breeder. However, they may not be able to offer the guarantees offered by the bigger breeders, who will normally replace puppies with disqualifying faults, and this should be reflected in the price. Keep in mind that no matter how strictly a breeder selects the parents, a perfect puppy or a show winner cannot be guaranteed.

The expected quality of a puppy can be assessed by evaluating the following:

Show Gradings

An explanation of show gradings was published in the July edition and can be found on www.gsdfederation.co.za (General Menu / Abbreviations). Puppies from parents with high gradings are more likely to be of superior anatomical quality than puppies from parents with the minimum accepted grading of G (Good). Particularly the sire should have a high grading of at least V (Excellent). The highest grading bitches under two can be awarded is SG (Very Good).

Pink Pedigrees vs. White Pedigrees

Breeders sometimes advertise that their puppies have pink pedigrees. This means that both the sire and the dam have been Breed Surveyed and have passed a strict temperament test which includes protection work. Although all serious breeders strive towards surveying their stock, a puppy with a pink pedigree is not necessarily superior to one with a white pedigree. Puppies of surveyed, G graded parents will still have pink pedigrees even though both parents are of the minimum anatomical standard. Conversely, a very good non-surveyed young bitch mated to a VA or VA(SA) male may have superior puppies even though they have white pedigrees. It is advisable to personally check the temperaments of non-surveyed parents.

Breeders Medals

A breeder earns points (once off) for qualifications achieved by animals they have bred and medals are awarded accordingly. These achievements should, however, be assessed in terms of how prolific a breeder breeds and the proportion of animals bred and shown that achieve high awards. For example, if a high proportion of those shown are graded V and are Breed Surveyed, it can be assumed that the breeder breeds a high average anatomical quality and temperament. Conversely, if only a small proportion achieve V gradings and the balance lesser gradings, it can be concluded that the average anatomical being bred is relatively low. These medals can also be seen as a measure of experience: it takes years of dedication and hard work to achieve a Diamond Award.

The Top Twenty Competition

This competition was designed to encourage breeders to get as many of their breeding participating in shows and obtain additional qualifications. The competition does not necessarily imply that the winner is the best as it is linked to numbers and participation. It differs from the Breeders Medals in that an individual dog earns points for its breeder, its sire and its dam each time it competes in a 12 month cycle.

A new breeder will only feature in this competition once he has bred enough animals old enough to compete and qualify for additional qualifications. For example, animals may only be entered in a Breed Survey if older than 20 months. However, the results reflect that the more established breeder is serious and works hard at getting offspring into the public eye and qualified.

Similarly a young or a recently imported animal will need two to three years to feature in this competition. A sire's number of studs also has a huge impact on his standing in the Top Twenty Sires competition. Of significance is the fact that a successful sire will be in high demand and thus have more offspring, helping him in the rankings. Likewise a successful brood bitch is more likely to have her puppies shown and thus gain points to advance in the rankings.

Part 2 – Correlating Puppy Price to Quality

You always get what you pay for?! WRONG!

It is easy to recognise why a Mercedes should cost more than a Golf. However, with puppies it is more difficult and a perspective buyer can easily be misled into paying more than he should.

The German Shepherd Dog Federation protects puppy buyers in two ways: by setting compulsory minimum breeding standards and by providing information. However, the mere fact that a puppy is Federation registered is sadly no guarantee that the buyer is actually getting value for money. This is because some breeders simply set their prices according to what top breeders charge without providing the same quality, after sales service and guarantee.

To ensure value for money, it is essential that the prospective buyer do some homework and avail himself of the information obtainable through the Federation system. Not doing so can lead to costly mistakes.

The Meaning of a “Guarantee”

If a product is guaranteed, it does not mean that nothing can go wrong: only that the seller or manufacturer will make good either by repairing or replacing a defective product. The Consumer Protection Act protects consumers in that the buyer of a defective product can, within six months of purchase, demand a refund of the original purchase price, repair or a replacement. Significantly the buyer cannot demand compensation for indirect damages,

damage caused by the buyer or costs incurred while the product was in his possession.

The dog breeder is at a disadvantage compared to a producer of hard goods as many things can go wrong that were impossible to determine at puppyhood; and thus could not have been prevented by quality control. Dogs are biological entities subjected to a host of genetic variables that sometimes only become apparent later. Add to this the complication that genetics is only a potential, and that the environment provided by the buyer will in most cases influence the physical manifestation thereof.

Consider Hip Dysplasia (HD), which is not a problem confined to German Shepherds: at least 40 other breeds are more susceptible to the problem. Manifestation of HD can be environmental and is not necessarily genetic: it is thus possible that the buyer can unwittingly cause the problem by incorrect feeding or exercise, or the dog may injure itself. In spite of this, most Federation breeders will guarantee their puppies in that they will replace if the puppy fails the Federation's HD scheme before two years of age. No breeder can guarantee that a puppy is "HD free": this is just not possible.

Most large breeders will offer a replacement guarantee if a puppy manifests a disqualifying fault as per the Federation's rules and regulations. Understandably it is not always possible or practical for a small breeder to do the same and he should charge less to compensate.

The Quality of the Parents

Buying a puppy is always risky and the way to limit this risk is to buy a puppy out of parents that actually manifest the required traits. For example, if you want a beautiful well-constructed dog that will protect you and your family, it is unlikely that a puppy from "G" graded parents lacking in confidence will fulfil your expectations. Risk can only be eliminated through the expensive option of buying an adult dog with all the required qualities and training.

The average quality of a litter is almost always lower than the average quality of the parents. It is possible to get a good puppy from mediocre parents and vice versa, but the odds are against it. Therefore, the higher the quality of the parents, the higher the quality of the puppies is likely to be, and the higher the price should be. To fully maximize the potential of your puppy, it will be up to you to provide the correct environment, rearing and training.

Part 3 – Correlating puppy Price to Show Gradings

In the Federation dogs can enter various tests and events and qualifications so received are then added to their names as a record of their achievements. E.g. *Akio von Arlette, "a", SchH1, Körkl 1 (For Life), VA(SA). In order to properly evaluate the qualities and abilities of a dog, an understanding of these qualifications is required. Show awards are discussed here with the other qualifications discussed in Part 4.

Sieger (fem. "Siegerin"): German for Champion. In KUSA, as is in most All Breed organizations, the title of Champion essentially is awarded after a dog earns points over a range of shows. It does not refer to a specific event and the title is awarded for life.

In the Federation a Champion is the winner of a major class at the annual National Breed Show. The title is therefore awarded for a specific event in a defined year. To avoid confusion with the KUSA system, the Federation awards the title of "Sieger" instead.

VA: "Excellent Select" grading a German Shepherd can be awarded at the German Sieger Show or by special permission of the WUSV. Not awarded in South Africa.

VA(SA): "Excellent Select" grading awarded at the Federation's National Breed Show. The grading is awarded to the very best dogs and bitches over 24 months which have previously passed a recognised HD scheme, are Breed Surveyed and pass the protection-work at the show "TSB1 Pronounced".

V(NBS): "Excellent" grading awarded at the National Breed Show to animals over 24 months

which meet the strictest Breed Standard requirements regarding conformation, appearance and temperament and have passed a recognised HD scheme. In addition, males must pass the protection-work “TSB1 Pronounced” and females at least “TSB1 Present”;

V: “Excellent” grading awarded at any show to animals over 24 months which meet the same standards of a V(NBS) with the exception that no protection-work test is required.

SG: “Very Good” grading awarded to animals over 12 months which meet the Breed Standard in most requirements regarding construction, appearance and temperament.

G: “Good” grading awarded to animals over 12 months with small failures regarding construction or appearance, but that largely meet the Breed Standard and have no disqualifying faults.

Bear in mind that bitches may have a litter at 22 months, which is younger than the minimum age of two years when an animal may be graded V. It is therefore possible that a young bitch of superior quality may only have been graded SG. As every animal is issued with a grading card at every show with the placing and grading awarded, her show results will provide proof of her anatomical quality.

In contrast a male may only mate bitches once it is two years old and thus should have been graded V by the time his first puppies are registered.

Bear in mind is that animals in possession of a V(NBS) or VA(SA) had to pass a protection-work test under difficult circumstances to be awarded the grading. Therefore, not only are these animals superior in anatomical conformation, but their temperaments and protection ability have been vigorously tested. Expect to pay more for puppies from such animals.

At the bottom of the scale are the G graded parents. As a G grading is the minimum grading that allows an animal to breed, puppies from such parents represent the bottom end of the market, no matter what other qualifications their parents may have.

A male can mate 60 to 90 bitches in a single year while a bitch is limited to two litters. Therefore always be stricter in the selection of the male. There is no excuse to breed with a G or SG graded male as there are sufficient top males available in South Africa.

Part 4 – Correlating puppy Price to Qualifications

Federation dogs enter various tests and events and qualifications are then added to their names as a record of their achievements: e.g. *Akio von Arlette, “a”, SchH1, Körkl 1 (For Life), VA(SA). To properly evaluate the qualities and abilities of a dog, an understanding of these qualifications is required. Show gradings, the basis for evaluating anatomical quality, were discussed in the previous issue.

The Breed Survey is a dog’s most important qualification and puppies from breed surveyed parents are issued with special (pink) pedigrees. The survey is divided into three parts: a basic temperament test which includes a gun-sure test, protection-work in which the dog has to attack and apprehend an aggressive man and a detailed anatomical description. In the latter the dog is also measured and weighed.

An “*” preceding a dog’s name indicates a valid survey. The first time a dog passes, the qualification is awarded for two years and the second time “For Life”. Until 2010 two classes were awarded: Körkl 1 or Körkl 2. “Körklasse” (Körkl) is “Breed Survey Class” in German. To be awarded Körkl 1 a dog had to pass the protection-work “TSB1 Pronounced”.

Since 2010 only one class is awarded and a breed surveyed dog is referred to as “Angekört” (Breed Surveyed in German). As it is very important whether a dog passed “TSB1 Pronounced”, peruse the survey document.

The protection-work is the defining factor that determines whether a dog passes or fails. It is significant that immediately after biting, at the peak of its aggression, the dog's tattoo number is checked by a non-aggressive person, and unprovoked aggression towards him results in disqualification. This "test" is probably responsible for the breed's innate ability to distinguish when to bite and when not to.

Disqualifying anatomical faults and gross over-size also fails the dog. The Surveyor also has to identify the dog's particular virtues and faults and make a breeding recommendation.

The Breed Survey is an excellent temperament test and serves as a basis for breeding, and together with the Show Grading indicates the quality of a dog.

Hip Dysplasia (HD)

A+, A0 or A-: Passing grades within the Federation's HD Scheme.

"a": Passed the Verein für Deutsche Schäferhunde (SV) HD Scheme in Germany. Passing grades are "Normal", "Fast Normal" (Near Normal) or Noch Zugelassen (Still Good Enough).

Thirty years of data ($\pm 50,000$ dogs) shows no correlation in the HD status of parents to their offspring. As only animals that have passed the HD scheme are allowed to breed, the actual grading of the parents can thus be ignored.

Some Common Working Titles Recognised by the Federation

AD: The 20 Km endurance test

BH: Begleithund (Companion Dog) test. Consists of two phases, basic obedience and a relatively strict temperament test in a shopping centre where the dog has to demonstrate stability in public without its handler supporting it. A prerequisite for male dogs to enter a Breed Survey.

IPO, formerly Schutzhund: Training test consisting of tracking, advanced obedience and protection work. Over-emphasized in importance by some as these tests measure handler capability rather than temperament or working ability.

Conclusions

One male can sire 90 litters a year and a bitch can only have two: always be stricter selecting the male.

Evaluate a dog's qualifications together rather than in isolation: each assesses a different aspect. The Show Grading and the Breed Survey are the most important.

Ideally the sire of puppies in the upper price bracket should be "Angekört, TSB Pronounced" and "VA(SA)"; or at least V(NBS) supported by a relatively high placing. This automatically means the dog has AD and BH which are prerequisites. Remember that every dog also has a mother.

The minimum grading required to breed is G, and puppies from G parents represent the bottom end of the market, irrespective of any other qualifications. There is no excuse to breed with a G graded male.

Also of value is the breeder's guarantee and ability to properly inform the buyer how to raise a puppy, what vaccinations and deworming the puppy has had and what after sales support will occur.

It is possible to get a good puppy from mediocre parents and vice versa, but the odds are against it. Therefore, the higher the quality of the parents, the higher the quality of the puppies is likely to be.

Finally, to fully maximise the potential of your puppy, it will be up to the buyer to provide the

correct environment, rearing and training.

¹*TSB = Trieb, Sicherheit & Belasbarkeit or Drive, Self-assuredness & Stress Tolerance*