

Selecting a Reputable Breeder

By Karen Fore, Breeder of Fancibul French Bulldogs

I am the “breed referral” person for my national breed club. The most frequent question asked of me is, “How do I know if a breeder is reputable?” Currently, it is a challenge for a prospective buyer to identify a good breeder. Prospective buyers find hundreds of websites, many designed by professional web designers, advertising puppies for sale. The popularity of the French Bulldog breed has led to a high volume import trade internationally, and most large newspapers now include French Bulldogs for sale in classified ads. To the person wanting to purchase “only a pet”, this is bewildering as they attempt to research the breed and its breeders. What follows will help you to make an informed decision when you purchase a puppy.

Commercial Breeders

When I asked his opinion regarding “breeder reputation” and puppy mills, an official representative of the American Kennel Club replied, “Breeders tend to think a ‘puppy miller’ is that breeder who has one more puppy per year than they have had.” A grin came immediately as I considered his satirical response to my query. He did raise a good question: is the NUMBER of puppies bred yearly the line of demarcation between conscientious and disreputable breeding practices? What distinguishes a reputable breeder from a commercial breeder from a puppy miller?

The representative above immediately whipped out a stack of photos to show me Oklahoma facilities where French Bulldogs and many other breeds are bred and raised. Some facilities have many breeds, so their play yards are defined by fences into large, medium, and small exercise areas. Some had no exercise areas but were two-story dwellings with indoor-outdoor runs that actually looked to be large cages. Most dogs were contained in outdoor runs often shielded by a roof to protect them from inclement weather. The rep described the costs of building the various types of facilities. These photos and the capital investment represented by them raise another question: As long as a breeder provides adequate space, food and water for survival, is this enough to earn that breeder the title of “reputable”? Can a facility with multiple breeds and state-of-the-art kennel buildings earn the title of “reputable”?

Many commercial kennels have modern, sanitary and safe environments that help these breeders to manage large numbers of dogs, multiple breeds, and high volume production. By legislation, the federal Animal Welfare Act, they are expected to maintain a certain level of functioning which is supposed to be enforced by USDA inspectors. They also receive inspections by AKC representatives whose main focus is that breeders follow the registry rules and

procedures regarding paperwork, but these representatives also use a checklist concerning environmental conditions. Whether these regulations and guidelines are sufficiently enforced is a regularly debated question.

Many of these commercial breeders attend seminars and work closely with veterinarians in an effort to learn about reproduction and maintenance of health in their breeds as well as facilities management techniques. Further, the AKC mentioned earlier declared that commercial breeders may hire employees to clean and handle the puppies produced (most puppies are moved out of commercial breeders' facilities by the age of 7 to 8 weeks to maximize their attractiveness to buyers.) . This raises a third question, can such a professional approach earn a breeder the title of "reputable and ethical?"

To sum up the last several paragraphs in one question: Is minimal touching by kennel help, little outdoor exposure, confinement to a cage or cage like environment from birth, and transfer at 7 to 8 weeks to a broker, pet store, or even direct to a new home enough socialization for a dog destined to become a lapdog? Will anyone be familiar with the puppy's temperament? Will anyone mention that no veterinarians recommend removing a puppy from its mother before the age of 9 week?

Considering the unique purpose (lapdog, companion) for which the French Bulldog was developed, a buyer will likely find that their new lapdog fails to meet their expectations. Only if a breeder goes beyond legal requirements to prepare their litters to become socialized, adaptable companion pets is the buyer likely to have a positive experience. I believe that it is risky to select a puppy intended to become a lapdog if it was bred and raised in isolation from other dogs and with minimal human contact.

Temperament and Behavior

When prospective buyers do research to decide which dog is the best one for their lifestyle, they expect to have a new puppy that fulfills the findings and expectations created by that research.

The standard for temperament states that French Bulldogs ideally are

"well behaved, adaptable, and comfortable companions with an affectionate nature and even disposition; generally active, alert, and playful, but not unduly boisterous."

In my reading of written applications and my interviewing of prospective buyers for the past 14 years, the one characteristic MOST desired by potential buyers is "a pet with good temperament", "non-aggressive", "good with children." In selecting a breeder, it is therefore paramount for a buyer to ascertain if the breeder considers temperament in their breeding program and also manages his/her litters to bring forth the characteristics desired and

expected for the breed. Temperament develops in a dog much as it does in humans in that it is genetically endowed and then emerges through environmental conditions and experiences.

Questions the buyer may want to ask:

- Does the Breeder insist on transferring puppies at an early age of 6-8 weeks before the puppy is taught by its mom and other dogs to be a dog?
- What does the breeder do to help puppies adapt to changes in their connections and environment?
- What type of handling is given to help the puppy through the “fear stage” of development?
- Is the breeder leaving socialization in the hands of a buyer who is most often NOT experienced with developing behavior?

Too often buyers don't think about these kinds of questions when they see a “good deal” on the Internet. Years ago, I became involved in a series of interchanges with a Russian breeder. I tried to explain why reputable American breeders would not want to swap or sell puppies with Russian breeders. I pointed out that their internet “shopping cart” marketing method (selling directly over the internet and shipping puppies with no questions asked) was endangering puppies they export to America because many of their puppies were ending in puppy mills in the USA.

During these email interchanges, she asked, “What is a “puppy mill” or “puppy miller?” Denying that this is a problem in Russia, she remarked that “This must be an American problem.” My contention is that the Russian manner of marketing puppies makes them vulnerable to winding up in a puppy mill, dog auction, backyard, or even in the hands of a buncher (a person who collects animals and sells them to research laboratories for use in experiments). Regardless of whether it involves American-bred puppies or the foreign imports, buyers should beware of the internet shopping-cart- pay by VISA mode of purchase. Such a quick, easy mode of acquisition has led to much fraud. Buyers constantly report they did not receive the puppy they thought they were purchasing.

Also, when buyers purchase a puppy on a whim (birthday presents, etc.), the dog often ends up in rescue organizations, shelters, or passing from home to home. This is because the impulse purchase is not a long-term commitment to the puppy by either breeder or purchaser. A responsible breeder carefully considers potential homes and screens buyers; a responsible purchaser has done research and the purchase is a thoughtful transaction not based on a whim. Frivolous transactions have resulted in thousands of French Bulldogs winding up in dog auctions, pet stores, or the hands of unscrupulous people wanting to make a fast buck from a very popular breed of dog.

Health Issues

Beyond temperament and behavioral concerns, the prospective buyer of either a companion or a show prospect often emphasizes in their application that a healthy puppy is also a priority. This brings up the question, “Can a breeder earn the right to be called ‘reputable’ and forego health screenings on breeding adults or puppies they raise?” It’s true that some Frenchie owners have reported they have purchased wonderfully healthy puppies with true Frenchie temperament out of classified ads, from pet stores, or through commercial facilities. These were the LUCKY BUYERS! These are the exceptions. Over the years I have heard a far greater number of heartbreaking stories.

I recently listened for 45 minutes as a man cried and lamented over his purchase of a French bulldog from a New York pet store. Not only was he venting tremendous grief, but he divulged that his wife’s grief was so intense that she had been withdrawn in the bedroom for two weeks. He said he knew his friends thought he was absolutely nuts for being so extremely upset by the loss of a family pet, but the French bulldog was “their child.” He also revealed that when they purchased the French bulldog the family did not know it was so risky to go through a pet store, nor was he aware of the process from litter to the marketplace that might create increased risk when adopting a puppy with health problems. It is the responsibility of a reputable, ethical breeder to take time to educate potential buyers. whether they have a puppy available or not? Many times I hear that prospective buyers send emails and make phone calls that are never answered.

In 2007, the French Bulldog Rescue Network touched the lives of 190 French Bulldogs. Of these 68(38%) were surrendered due to medical or behavioral issues that seemed unmanageable to the first owners. Of those surrendered, 107(78%) were 3 years old or less. They were not geriatrics becoming a burden but young dogs that likely arrived at their first homes with health and behavioral issues so great that the newness and delight about the young puppy were overshadowed by the overwhelming extent of health and behavioral issues.

The prospective buyer should consider the inherent health issues that may afflict the French Bulldog, study the information that is breed specific on the Health & Genetics links of the FBDCA website:

<http://www.frenchbulldogclub.org>, and then inquire of breeders what, if any, screenings are done on adults and puppies. A buyer should be aware that in spite of genetic health screenings, the most healthy of canines might produce a puppy with a health issue so the buyer must carefully decide if the breed is the right one for them and if they are able to provide for this type of dog through its lifetime if health problems do arise. Reputable breeders tend to be quick to point out that “this breed is not for everyone!”

Although temperament and health are vitally important to the buyer of a show prospect, this group of buyers often focuses on pedigrees, history of breeder, show results of the puppy's ancestors, and apparent conformation of a certain line. Can the breeder earn the title of "reputable", "responsible," and "ethical" when failing to provide data to support their claims about their puppies and breeding program? Talking with prospective buyers, I hear they have often been provided with a lot of excuses from breeders for NOT providing pedigrees of a litter, or even failing to provide registration papers months after the new owner has the puppy. I often hear that breeders fail to provide photos of puppy, littermates, and data regarding its ancestors often accented by remarks such as, "I don't show my dogs because of the politics in dog shows." Some brag on their website or in interviews about the numbers of champions behind their puppy; but on examining the pedigrees provided, these "35 AKC champions" are now three generations back in the ancestry of the litter. Reputable, ethical breeders do not hesitate to provide registration information, pedigrees and health testing information.

According to the American Kennel Club, the title, "responsible breeder" goes beyond the condition of facilities as stated in its brochure on breeding ethics. "Responsible breeders plan ahead to be sure that each puppy they produce will be placed in a safe, loving home suited to its needs." In other educational materials, this registry states that responsible breeders will accept responsibility for the puppies they produce throughout each puppy's lifetime, and are ALWAYS available to answer questions and provide information to buyers of their puppies. ("Should I Breed My Dog?" The American Kennel Club brochure, © 2003.) Additional tips concerning the hallmarks of the reputable breeder are published on the AKC.org website:

http://www.akc.org/future_dog_owner/puppy_buyers_beware.cfm.

An approach to screening breeders is to learn their motives for producing the puppy being considered for purchase. Just as motives for production tend to affect the product, the motive for producing a litter of puppies does tend to affect the quality of the puppies born. Puppy buyers should ask questions to discern if the breeder:

- "A. Is devoted to a particular breed.**
- B. Believes that the breed as a whole is more important than any one dog**
- C. Breeds to the Standard, with the intent of improving the breed**
- D. Enjoys nurturing puppies**
- E. Enjoys interacting with people.**

In seeking a "green flag" when interviewing breeders, a prospective buyer should consider if the breeder is breeding puppies for any of these "wrong" reasons:

1. To re-create a pet breeder owned
2. To give the breeder's children a nurturing or educational experience involving reproduction
3. To give the dog a sexual experience
4. To earn a living or to earn a "little extra money"

After investigating values and motives, buyers will be at much greater risk if they choose to buy from a breeder that has not met the hallmarks (A through E) and is breeding for any of the reasons listed in 1 through 4. (The American Kennel Club, Inc. Breeders Education Committee outline, Sec. 1: "To Breed or Not to Breed", October 1999)

Those who have earned the title or "reputable" and "responsible" can testify that breeding a dog that meets the standard for conformation, temperament, and health is demanding and requires a responsible, knowledgeable approach, and a lot of financial and emotional investment in their breeding programs. Responsible, "ethical," "professional" and "reputable" are terms not easily earned by happenstance breeding efforts. Buyers should expect members of the National Breed Club to follow practices outlined in the FBDC Code of Ethics. Anyone can view and download the French Bull Dog Club's Code of Ethics on the website: <http://www.frenchbulldogclub.org>.

Buyers should expect the breeder to provide credentials and references to back up their claims about any puppy they are selling.

Some Definitions of Breeders

Since one cannot discuss ethics in any realm without considering motives, it probably helps to review the definitions and characteristics of different classifications of breeders and the central purpose of their breeding programs. This will help buyers to understand what type of breeder they are dealing with.

Commercial breeder: Usually owns several breeds and a good number in each breed, which requires official licenses, inspections by a representative of the USDA, state agencies, and by the American Kennel Club representative if the kennel uses this registry. As a commercial business with focus on profit, the breeders do not tend to screen stock for genetic diseases, give minimal vaccinations to puppies, and puppies tend to be sold to Brokers at an early age to keep expenses low.

Broker: One who collects puppies from a commercial kennel to resell at retail outlets, e.g. a pet store, at dog auctions, or to other commercial kennels. Brokers must be licensed by the USDA and must abide by shipping regulations of the Animal Welfare Act.

Amateur or Backyard Breeder: A dog owner who has an occasional litter of puppies to supplement income, provide a "fun" experience for the family,

or sexual information to their children. Sometimes this breeder finds their purebred dog accidentally bred. Often uses classified newspaper or internet classified ads to sell the puppies born. Usually this type breeder is totally ignorant of the breed's standard, genetics, behavior, good health practices in rearing puppies or appropriate care of their household pet. This type breeder tends to move on to becoming a commercial breeder, or onto the following classification, a Fancier.

Fancier or Hobby Breeder: A breed fancier usually focuses on one breed, but may have two or even three. This type breeder follows a breeding plan with the hopes of enhancing the breed(s) they love. A Fancier or Hobby Breeder often is involved with a kennel club and/or rescue organization because their interest is promoting and protecting the breed. They often are involved in showing dogs in competitions. The Fancier screens breeding stock, works carefully with a vet, gives their puppies a lot of hands-on attention. Because of their devotion to the breed(s), they carefully place puppies into homes.

Buncher: One who collects dogs of unknown origin for sale to laboratories, other bunchers, or to brokers. These are considered worse on the scale of disreputable than the "puppy miller" for some bunchers have acquired their canine collection by purchasing stolen pets, collecting dogs advertised as "free to a good home", and at times adopting pets from local shelters for resale to research laboratories. The USDA is supposed to license and inspect bunchers to make sure they abide by the Animal Welfare Act.

The Puppy Mill: A breeder who produces puppies with no breeding program, no attention to puppy's future placement, gives little attention to health of dogs or their puppies. The environment for the dogs is substandard to deplorable. Dogs and puppies are given very minimal healthcare and nourishment so they tend to be malnourished, have parasite problems, and poor temperament from deprivation. **NOTE:** if the mill produces more than 25 dogs per year they are considered commercial breeders.