The Dalmatian/Pointer Backcross Project:

Overcoming 20th Century Attitude About Crossbreeding

written by; Denise Powell - E Dalmatians | www.edalmatians.com

In July 2011, the AKC announced that descendants of a 1973 Dalmatian/Pointer crossbred litter would be registered as Dalmatians. The initial request for registration of descendants of that crossbreeding was made in 1980. The fact that it took 30 years for this issue to be resolved had to do with changes in attitude about crossbreeding.

Up until the middle of the 20th century dog breeders did not hesitate to crossbreed as a way to introduce desirable traits into established breeds where those traits were lacking. Offspring from such crosses could generally be registered as purebred after the third generation of backcrossing. However, in a span of 50- 60 years the time honored practice of crossbreeding fell out of favor. Attitudes about crossbreeding changed to the extent that the very idea of crossbreeding became thought of as heresy by most pure-bred dog breeders. Therefore, it is not surprising that many in the Dalmatian fancy were opposed to registration of descendants of the Dalmatian/Pointer Backcross Project that began in 1973.

When geneticist and Dalmatian breeder, Robert Schaible, PhD's started his project it had already been established that:

- The Dalmatian breed had a metabolic defect that causes them to have abnormally high levels of uric acid in their urine a condition know as hyperuricosuria (HU).
- HU was a serious problem because dogs with this condition are prone to urinary obstruction.
- All Dalmatians, worldwide, that had ever been tested had HU.
- HU was rare in other breeds of dogs HU was inherited as a simple autosomal recessive.
- Dogs with HU could be identified through urinalysis.
- Crossbreeding could be used to transfer a desirable trait from one breed to another.
- The only way to produce Dalmatians that did not have HU was to do an outcross to a dog from a breed that did not have HU.

The Dalmatian/Pointer Backcross Project began with a single crossbred litter. It took Dr. Schaible seven years and 5 generations of backcrossing to Dalmatians to reestablish proper breed type. When he reached that point, in 1980, he applied to the AKC for registration. The AKC spent several months reviewing the project and consulting with the Board of the Dalmatian Club of America before registering Dr. Schaible's dogs as Dalmatians.

News of registration of Dr Schaible's dogs was considered noteworthy enough to merit a multipage article in the April 1981 issue of the AKC Gazette. In a preface to the article, AKC President, William F. Stifel, wrote "If there is a logical, scientific way to correct genetic health problems associated with certain breed traits and still preserve the integrity of the breed standard, it is incumbent upon the American Kennel Club to lead the way."

The article sparked a controversy that took 30 years to be resolved. Shortly after the article appeared, Dalmatian breeders pressured the AKC into putting a hold on any further registration of descendants of Dr. Schaible's Backcross Project. The hold resulted in no Dalmatians with low uric acid (LUA) being registered with the AKC between 1981-2011 (LUA Dalmatians were bred and registered with the United Kennel

Club (UKC) registry during that time pe- riod).

The hold might still be in place and LUA Dalmatians might have become nothing more than a footnote in Dalmatian breed history if researchers at UC Davis led by Danika Bannasch, PhD, DVM had not identified the genetic mutation that causes HU. Dr. Bannasch's research prompted the Dalmatian Club of America to take a new look at Dr. Schaible's project.

Having a DNA test to distinguish which LUA Dalmatians were homozygous for the normal gene and which were heterozygous carriers of the defect eliminated the need to do test breedings to determine if an LUA Dalmatian was Clear for HU. In the past, the need to grow out multiple pups from a litter and test breed from them to identify which were Carriers and which were Clear was unappealing to most Dalmatian breeders. News of Dr. Bannasch's research was the catalyst for the Dalmatian Club of America to reconsider Dr. Schaible's project.

- In 2006, Dr. Schaible was invited to speak to the Dalmatian Club of America's Board.
- In 2007, Dr. Bannash was the featured speaker at DCA's annual educational seminar in conjunction with the National Specialty.
- In 2008, owners of LUA Dalmatians were invited to bring their Dals to the DCA National. Ten LUA Dalmatians were presented all together in the ring after the day's judging was completed. For 3 days LUA Dalmatian owners took turns in a Meet the LUA Dalmatian booth to answer questions, give out informational material and giving club members the opportunity for hands-on examination of the dogs. In 2009, proponents of LUA Dalmatians made a formal request to the AKC to lift the hold that prevented registration. The AKC referred the issue to their Health and Welfare Advisory Committee.
- In 2010, after receiving the Health and Welfare Advisory Committee's report, the AKC Board consulted with the Dalmatian Club of America and asked the club to poll the membership on the question of registration.
- In June 2011, a strong majority of Dalmatian Club of America members voted that they were in favor of AKC registration for descendants of the Dalmatian-Pointer Backcross Project.
- In July 2011, the AKC Board of Directors voted unanimously to accept descendants of the Dalmatian-Pointer Backcross Project into the AKC Stud Book.

In the end, a combination of a 19th century practice of crossbreeding to bring in a trait that was missing in the breed and a 21st century DNA test has the Dalmatian breeders on the road to eliminating a serious health problem in the breed.

The Dalmatian-Pointer Backcrosses Project can now serve as a model for other breeds that are faced with issues that cannot effectively be dealt with through selective breeding from within the existing gene pool for that breed.

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