

Reflections on Heredity, Life and Old Age of our Companions

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One day, one has to admit that our dog, our old companion, is not the same any more. One realizes that his behaviour changes in a subtle way and that it is necessary to pay close attention to these subtle changes. In many ways, our old dog is again turning into a big puppy. He demanded much attention when young, but now, he needs even more of it. He is not as self-confident any more. His universe shrinks and closes around himself. He does not look for contact with the external world as avidly as he used to. He loses, in small steps, his interest in playing with other dogs, likewise his interest in fights and the urges that push him towards the other sex.

Our old dog does not have left much energy, enthusiasm, speed and agility to get involved into these activities he liked so much back then. At present, his master and his close family are his whole universe! An universe from which he expects his comfort, help and love. Our dog never was a living piece of furniture in the house, but now more than ever, we need to dedicate even more time to caressing him and communicating with him – that is what our veterans expect from their masters.

For [list of 6 veterans over 10] who all live with us and share our leisure, long walks in the woods have been considerably restricted or even stopped for some of them. The circus of shows with all the included limitations is long forgotten; today, the excitement of wins has gone by. They have a right to some kind of reward for everything they have given to us and all the satisfaction they give to us every day.

Dogs are extremely sensitive to love and to the interest you give them, but also to all signs of reject. They behave like receptors of all feelings an individual experiences and transfers through other persons.

For a breeder, keeping his old dogs is much more interesting than any title. This allows him to consider phenotypes that represent physical looks, morphology and physiology of every individual as compared to their progeny. The more generations, the better. This is one of the 'engines' that determines the value of the stock and the breeding or genetic value, thus the future of any line. This permits by means of observation to keep an eye on the hereditary constitution (pedigree studies) of the genitors and to determine breeding choices in one's lines by knowing the characteristics one would want to live on. Maintenance, improvement or deterioration of the breed in a kennel depend on this practice.

Old age in our dogs - and in ourselves - has to be accepted as one of life's many experiences. The quality of the relationship between the owner and the old dog depends a great deal on the owner's attitude towards aging. If he has a more or less pragmatic philosophy, this attitude will be transferred to the dog. And thus he will be happy and confident without feeling sentiments of rejection or abandoning.

In this time of uncertainty, a good number of people lean on fidelity and love from the friend and companion, to whom we must provide our love and goodwill during every period of his life. The quality of existence is indisputably more important than its mere time.

Life expectancy of a dog varies considerably depending on the breed, food, stress, care and other conditions that the dog experiences during the whole life. For the more than forty years that I have had dogs, I have always paid attention to their quality of life. ; like this, I had a German Shepherd, several Irish Wolfhounds and a Borzoi who went past their 13th year, a Saluki who went past her 14th and a Doberman who went past his 18th.

In general, the large breeds age earlier than some of the smaller ones. But “exceptions” have been observed, and it is most desirable to multiply these. Longevity of our dogs depends on two great influences: Heredity and environment. Both of these include several aspects each. Considering heredity, a breeder will turn his attention to lines where the majority of dogs lived to a ripe old age.

Mr. Donnelly, breeder of Irish Wolfhounds in Ireland, had with him two specimens of fourteen years, one of ten and one of nine. He considered an adult of four years a “pup”, and his oldest Irish Wolfhound lived to the respectable age of 15. Feeding in these days was natural and the dogs virtually did not know any stress.

Mr. Donnelly disapproved of showing old dogs and remarked - very rightly - that certain imposed activities can go very much against their nature. He advised against racing and even coursing if the dogs did not like those activities [not quite true to Donnelly’s original article]. He added that under this conditions, a win was similar to a posthumously awarded medal.

This is equally true for the other sighthounds and for the dogs called “working” who have “done their time” and still are forced to work. Stress, this universal pathology of the modern world, also affects our dogs. Observe yours well during shows or working trials, omit them if he does not seem to be enthusiastic, or else try to make him accept these activities in a pleasurable way, which is the only way that brings success.

People say that a well-balanced dog should be able to adapt to noise and activity, to the universe of glass and concrete that normally constitutes a show. This is very unlikely; even humans do not resist, and we do not really know what it is like for our companions. We must also consider the olfactory shock that a show constitutes; it becomes thus clear that such a cynophile rite has negative effects on the organism if a dog is shown too often. One needs to know when to allow one’s companion to retire, winner or loser, champion or not.

At seven to eight years, an animal must not be subjected to the agitations of shows any more. It is, by the way, symptomatic that one can see at certain well-reputed breeders’ kennels dogs of this age that are still stunning, but out of the centre of attention - because these breeders do not have the respect for their old dogs, only wanting more glory. No doubt a wonderful guarantee for the future buyer.

Past the seventh year, which often is a “cap” for the giant breeds, the dog enters what seems to be the beginning of old age. But it does not need to be a shipwreck.

What does “old” mean when speaking of our dogs? Aging can come much more rapidly in some individuals than in others. The giant breeds, Great Danes, Irish

Wolfhounds, Saint Bernhards are well known for their rather short life expectancy. These breeds are generally old at eight, while a Maltese, A Shih Tzu or a Whippet cannot be considered of old age before twelve or thirteen years. An animal may have a genetic predisposition to some chronic dysfunctions of degenerative diseases which make them age before their time.

The body is composed of Billions of cells of very different types corresponding to the many tissues and organs of the body. These need to be nourished and oxygenated, and toxic waste products need to be excreted. Most of the cells live for a certain time, die and are replaced by new ones. Old age appears once the cells die quicker than they can be regenerated. This mechanism shows us the importance of a good feeding program.

At the very beginning of old age, one can observe a certain progressive slowing of the dog's activities. The fatigue of the organism, its wear and tear will manifest slowly, imperceptibly at first, but certainly. The owner, used to the active dog, will gradually have to modify and adapt the daily routine. He has to be more attentive than before when doing this, for an aging dog does not adapt to new circumstances as easily as a young one, and he becomes more sensible to things which, in the past, would not have bothered him at all.

Back when he was young, nobody could ever have stepped on his paws by mistake without involuntarily being snapped at. Now, the risk of this happening is even heightened by his fading perception. He is no longer able to omit most surprises, and this can, over time, become a very frustrating experience without the owner taking appropriate measures.

Other sources for trouble are, for example, the hips, kidneys or other disabilities that, step by step, lead to a destabilisation, which then can make the old dog somewhat grumpy from time to time. This new behaviour may surprise the owner who, himself, is probably in good health, but he has to consider the underlying physical causes and take every possible step towards relieving them. A great quantity of unpleasing incidents can easily be omitted with a bit of observation, goodwill and common sense. One needs to be a bit more obliging towards the dog, which will eliminate reactions of anxiety and hostility. By the way, paying attention not to step on his paws – both literally and figuratively – is certainly not too high a price to pay for the numerous years of happiness and satisfaction that he has shared with his family. He will reward them with a look full of acknowledgement and thankfulness.

The universe created around the dog by his owner has certainly not been overly modified, but the dog himself has gradually changed. It is very probable that animals are able to perceive this slowing down of their bodies. So it will be necessary to reduce exercise intensity without affecting walks too much, for these keep muscle mass in form. Exercise in itself is an aerobic activity which helps transporting oxygen and nutritive elements to the cells of the body.

We must not forget that everything that transports oxygen to the cells helps their regeneration, so encourage your dog to exercise, moderately but regularly: You will increase his life expectancy. Still, it might be preferable not to take the old dogs on a walk together with the younger ones, as their vitality and activity is naturally higher than the veterans'. Distance, for example gallops, become less necessary as the dog

gets older. It is always a question of observation of certain nuances in the exercise. Omit walks under pouring rain or heavy sunshine; the organism has more trouble with keeping the body temperature constant in older dogs. Likewise, an old dog affected with eye disabilities must always be on a leash to omit stupid accidents.

At home, manage his routine and do not think that he will suffer from it. His favourite place must be reserved for him, and he must not be challenged by younger dogs. Routine is the last resort before the Dark. Deficiency in vision is compensated by his olfactory capacities. The smells of his environment become his railings. A new place, more or less unknown, is an uncertain and opaque world, and the owner is the only support in there.

The food should reflect both his age and his energy. Since his range of action is more limited than before, portions should be restricted if necessary, otherwise he will become fat. He needs more sleep and to be let out more frequently to relieve himself. On the other hand, food needs to be of highest quality, with small, but frequent rations being given. Addition of vitamins and trace elements is a good idea. Like everything else, food must be changed gradually, not abruptly.

Omit foods containing refined sugar as an additive or conservator. Make your animal's diet as natural as possible, not containing artificial or synthetic additives like, for example, monosodium glutamate, which is a veritable poison and has destructing influence on the organism.

Keep attention to the teeth; caries is rare in dogs, but they often have gingivitis, an inflammation of the gums. This can lead to parodontosis, the primary cause of tooth loss in old dogs. It is necessary to clean your dog's teeth, twice to three times a week, be it with a toothbrush or with a rough cloth dipped in salty water or one of the commercially available dog toothpastes.

Vitamins A, D and C play an important role here. If tartar is too prominent, have it cleaned by a veterinarian before parodontosis can set in. Every animal is a particular case and may need a special diet to prevent new tartar from forming. It may also need a supplement of vitamins and minerals or certain enzymes in easily-ingestible form.

It is certainly necessary to assure a closer surveillance with more tenderness and activity than ever so that he will have a longer and more comfortable life. An old dog must not be allowed to sleep outside any more, and kennels are to be omitted more than ever now. His place is near his master, in the house, far from air currents and exaggerated movement. Winter is the time of long siestas in front of the fireplace, and during summer, a cool room is reserved for the great companion on past promenades to protect him from exaggerated heat.

Old age is an indicator for quality. A good breeder will always be able to show you ancestors. He never gets rid of the less useful mouths to feed because in his breeding, he works for the most distant future. It also is a sign of consideration for a past which was his as well as the dogs'. To breed or to live with a dog means to discover a cycle, the fragility of life and the respect with which we need to treat it.