

BREEDING THE HEARTACHE BREED

French Bulldogs have been described as the “heartache breed”. This is not because they are hard to live with, or because they have an abundance of health problems. The description usually flies from the lips of newcomers to the breed, who get into breeding once they hear that puppies can sell for \$1000.00 or \$1500.00, or even more. They start out with a bitch or two, and when they get around to their first litter, the problems start.

Bear in mind: this is a man-made breed. Their survival without human intervention is definitely in question. The males often need an assist to impregnate the females (especially the taller girls!). The females also need particular care during pregnancy. The puppies usually have to be taken by Caesarian section. Then, if you are lucky, you may have three or four puppies. Once the puppies are on the ground, the problems are only beginning. Special care needs to be taken to assure the puppies grow optimally, and that they are not exposed to potentially devastating infections.

Faced with these obstacles, the novice breeder often flees to another easier breed. “No wonder the puppies are so expensive!” I’ve been told time and again. It’s not a breed you can get into to make money. Each litter costs me much more than I might make on the sale of any puppies. But when I breed, it is to produce something *I* want, not to produce puppies for profit.

CHOOSING A MALE:

When planning a litter, you have to start with your bitch. First off, you need to ask yourself: what is your goal in breeding her? Are you trying to replicate something good that you already have, or are you trying to improve on it? Are you trying to produce a particular conformation or a certain color? Maybe you are trying to fix something in her that you really wish wasn’t there. The answers to these questions will help determine which male you choose. Having specific goals will help you when you are talking with the owner of the stud male.

In choosing a stud male, you should look for stud males who have the positive characteristics you seek to combine with your female. Better, you need to find a stud male who *produces* the positive characteristics you seek. There are many fine champion males who do not pass on their positive traits. It is just as true that there are some truly average-looking males who produce spectacularly. Remember that if you are using a male who does not already have progeny on the ground, you have no guide to indicate what you will get. You will have to decide if the risk is worth taking.

So where do you find a male? The first place I look is at the dog shows. There you are able to see the male in real life, and decide if he is the one for your bitch. (A photograph can only tell you so much.)

The breeder or owner will most likely be there to answer your questions. They may also have other males available that you could go and see.

If there are no males close to you that fit your needs (and with a rare breed like Frenchies, that is definitely a possibility), your next avenue is to go to the breed publications. There you will find advertisements that will show different available males. You can then call and ask pertinent questions. If you find a potential male, ask for photos and a pedigree.

Learn to read a pedigree. At first, all those names will be just a jumble. But as you read more, you will begin to see familiar names. By knowing what is in the male's background, and in your female's background, you can have a better idea of what the breeding will produce.

One caution: it is common for a novice breeder to simply go to the top winning male Frenchie to breed. Ask yourself what this male can contribute to your female. (Famous blood lines is a wrong answer!) Look critically at his characteristics, and his weaknesses. Moreover, find out what his progeny are like. Does he produce well?

Dog breeding etiquette dictates that the owner of the male sets the terms. To try to bargain with them on their stud fee, or how the breeding is to take place is considered uncool. If you do not like the price or the terms, go elsewhere, and go politely. If you get into hostilities with the owner of a male, word of the bad interaction can follow you and keep you from forging other ties.

Remember, a breeding is a form of marriage. You get the in-laws. Once your Frenchie's blood lines are mixed with those of another breeder, you are inextricably bonded with them, not only for your bitch's life, but for all future generations. This is one of those times when you *can* choose your relatives.

PREPARING THE FEMALE:

Once you have decided on a stud male, and the owners of the stud male have agreed to breed to your female, then you need to start preparing your female. I begin as soon as I have some indication she is going to come in season. I keep charts and records, so that I know approximately when each female is due. Then, as the time approaches, I watch closely.

If she seems to be late, it is definitely worth the cost to take her in and have her checked. Have the vet look particularly at her thyroid. While you are there, have her checked for vaginal infections. A stubborn infection can keep a bitch from conceiving, or even damage or kill the developing embryos. Also important is to check her for brucellosis. This is a viral infection that could make her infertile, and could also be passed to the stud male. (You should not allow a natural breeding if the male and female have not been checked for brucellosis, and certified clear.) If all is in order, adjust her nutrition and wait.

During this time period, I supplement their diet. Folic acid is critical for embryonic development, so I start building up her reserves in advance. I also use some form of kelp extract, for iodine (to keep the thyroid in balance). Another additive is Vitamin E. If nothing else, it keeps their coats nice. If you are not giving your bitch a multi-vitamin already, this is the time to start.

I have been told by certain breeders that adding a touch of cider vinegar to the bitch's food each day will reduce the incidence of vaginal infections. The concept seems to be that it acidifies the blood and secretions, making a less ideal environment for bacteria. I can testify that it at least makes the bitches thirsty. Maybe the extra activity flushes the bacteria out.

COMING IN SEASON:

Assuming your bitch blesses you with irritability and spots of blood, your next goal is to determine exactly when she will be ready to breed. Some experienced breeders simply watch the bitch. When the color of her blood flow changes from bright red to dark, she is supposed to be ready. That occurs somewhere between ten and fifteen days into her season. Since the window of opportunity is only two or three days, I choose to rely on my veterinarian. With a vaginal smear and a blood progesterone test, your vet should be able to tell you exactly when she will be ready. (Note: this may involve three or four trips to your vet to get the timing right!)

All this time, you should have been in regular contact with the owner of the stud male, letting them know of your bitch's progress. The male will need to be available when your bitch is ready. Then they will have to be gotten together. The options will boil down to:

- Ship your bitch to the stud male
- Go there with your bitch
- Have chilled semen shipped to your vet

Please note that having the male come to you is not mentioned as an option. It is a long-standing convention in dog breeding that the female comes into the male's territory, not the other way around.

THE BREEDING:

The breeding itself can be a major event. If it is done naturally, the two have to be monitored carefully, to make sure they don't tear each other up. A female who doesn't like a stud male could easily inflict considerable damage on him. Also, if you have a smaller male and a bigger female, there may be physical limitations. He may need a boost.

A somewhat safer alternative is to assist the breeding. By this I mean letting them get together, but drawing the semen from the male using artificial insemination techniques. This can help avoid such problems as getting urine in the female's reproductive tract, and since there is no penetration, there is no chance for one to give an infection to the other.

Usually, breedings are done on two successive days. This is by agreement with the owners of the male. I have seen litters of five come out of a single breeding, and no puppies come out of five breedings. The key is to do it on the right day, when the eggs are in the right spot. If your bitch is healthy and vigorous, the male is producing viable sperm, and the vet has helped you time it right, everything should work.

Note down the breeding dates. These dates will be critical in determining when your bitch will need to be C-sectioned.

GESTATION:

Next comes two agonizing months of waiting. During this period, you will doubt she is pregnant, you will question your vet's abilities, and you will question your own sanity in even attempting a breeding. Your bitch can (and probably will) go off her food, especially if this is her first litter. She may go through bouts of morningsickness. Be patient with her. While it may not look it from the outside, there is a lot going on inside her.

I always restrict the bitches somewhat, especially during the second half of pregnancy. Don't let her get too hot, too cold, dehydrated, or malnourished. Don't let the other dogs roughhouse with her. Don't let her pick up an infection from living or sleeping in an unclean environment. In short, pamper her a little.

Throughout gestation, her nutrition needs to be tailored to the needs of the developing puppies. You need her to get a high protein, high fat diet, with all the vitamins and minerals. She should receive folic acid daily. Many seasoned breeders also give their bitches-in-whelp at least a little liver each day. This is purported to reduce the incidence of birth defects.

During the second month, bones develop, so she will need extra calcium. I add cottage cheese to the bitch's meals, and add a calcium supplement as well. During this time period, you might start splitting her meals, giving her half as much, twice as often. The pressure of all those puppies makes it hard to eat a big meal.

So what if she won't eat? (How would you feel, with little things growing and moving around inside you?) Tempt her with things you know you can get her to eat. One thing I have found is that strong-smelling foods will often put them off. Sometimes bland food is easier for them. When all else fails, I fix white rice and boil some chicken. I mix the broth and small pieces of chicken into the rice, and I give it to her in small portions.

During the second month, you should begin to see signs she is pregnant. Her nipples will enlarge, and subtly, her outline will change. By week six, you should definitely be able to tell she is pregnant. If you aren't sure, it's time to go to the vet again. From about day 32 to day 38, you should be able to see the puppies via ultrasound. After that, there's a gap until the puppies' bones begin to calcify. Then they become visible on X-ray, usually during the last week.

I usually just wait. Taking the bitch in to the vet all the time can stress her, and it also exposes her to all manner of infectious diseases.

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN:

During the last week, you should set up the whelping box, a safe and secure environment for the mother and her puppies. There are commercial whelping boxes available. All of them have a railing around the edges so that the mother can't lay on a puppy and crush it against the side. Some people build their own. You will need soft, cleanable bedding material. The bitch will bleed after the C-section, and at first, may not regulate her bodily functions as well as she normally does. Additionally, it should have a heating pad or some source of warmth. And there should be protection for the puppies from chills and drafts.

I always put the whelping box in a separate bedroom, far from the other dogs and commotion. That way it is easier to quarantine. Also, it is easier to close it off and keep it warm. Once it is set up, put the bitch inside, and let her get used to it. When she comes home with the puppies, you don't want her going into a strange environment.

So, assuming you have gotten to about day 58, and all has gone well, what next? The countdown begins at about day 59. That's when you need to keep a steady watch over your bitch. If she hasn't already, she will probably stop eating. Monitor her body temperature. Most of them are normally at about 99.4 degrees to as much as 101 degrees. When she is ready to go into labor, her temperature **should** drop about one degree. (Not always!) She should show some restlessness and nesting behaviour (tearing up bedding and such). She may start panting, looking glassy-eyed. You need to take her in before she starts labor, otherwise she might start forcing the puppies out. If she does that, you risk losing the puppies, and even losing the bitch.

It's a good idea to have a backup vet, someplace that is open 24 hours. If the bitch goes into labor in the middle of the night, you don't want to wait until morning. By then, your puppies could be dead. Contact your vet in advance, so he is alerted that a C-section is due. The vet may want to look over your bitch, just to see that all is going well. Also, he may determine exactly when to do the surgery.

You don't want to take the puppies too soon. It should be at least 60 days from the last breeding, and should fall in the 60 to 63 day window. Most Frenchie bitches I've worked with don't go much beyond 61 days.

THE BIG DAY:

Once you are committed to the C-section, you are in the hands of your vet. If your vet has experience with the Bull breeds, so much the better. I always insist on being present in the operating room, partly so I can reassure my bitch when she comes out of the anaesthetic, but also so I can help clear the fluid out of the puppies' lungs and rub them to life. Some vets allow this, some do not.

It is the most amazing and exciting thing to be there as each puppy is drawn from the mother, still in its own amniotic sac. Then the sac is removed, and you can see the color, the sex, and the form of each one. And you can hear their first cries as they enter our world.

The vet should check each pup at birth, especially for cleft palate and hydrocephaly, both of which are a fact of life in a dwarfed, flatfaced breed. If there are birth defects, some hard decisions will have to be made.

COMING HOME:

When you get home with the mother and her puppies, put the puppies on the heating pad in the whelping box, but be careful of the bitch. She has just come out of surgery, and she may still be groggy from the anaesthetic. Also, since she was unconscious, she has yet to understand that the puppies are hers. You don't want her to hurt the puppies by accident.

During the first three hours, I don't ever leave her alone with the pups, not for a minute. Once I see signs she is relaxing with them, I relax some. I still watch her as often as I can until I see she is starting to adjust to motherhood. When she recognizes the puppies as hers, will allow them to feed, and is willing to clean them, you can get some sleep.

THE FIRST WEEK:

Don't expect much sleep the first few days. Until the mother becomes accustomed to the pups, and until her milk comes in fully, there will be lots to do.

The first day or two, the mother will produce colostrum. This is the watery, almost yellowish proto-milk. It is full of antibodies the puppies need, so it is absolutely critical to their development that they feed. You will probably have to hold them against the mother and encourage them until they gain enough strength to find her and feed for themselves. Sometimes this takes tremendous patience, as some will just refuse to hang on. The puppies should feed every two to four hours.

You may also have to do supplemental feedings, especially during the first days. I use an infant bottle, and feed supplementally with warmed-up Esbilac, as often as is needed to keep the puppies plump. (It is easier than making your own formula.) Some bitches will start producing milk in abundance, and get you off the hook. Others will have you feeding their pups for a week! The worst-case scenario (I went through this with my first Frenchie litter!) is if the mother develops mastitis. If the swelling and blockage cannot be controlled quickly, the mother may have to be taken out for treatment, and the puppies raised by hand. That will mean three to four weeks of bottle-feeding them, at two to four-hour intervals!

When you bottle-feed, watch out for “milknose”. It is very easy for Frenchie puppies to regurgitate milk back through their noses. If milk remains in their nasal passages, serious infections can result. Usually, wiping and “burping” until they get it all out is sufficient.

The first few days, you may have to take the place of the mother in that other delicate activity, getting the puppies to pee and poop. The mother stimulates the puppies by licking in the appropriate areas. (Be glad human babies aren’t the same!) If she refuses to clean them, you will have to substitute. I use a cotton ball dipped in warm water. Rub here for them to pee, rub there for them to poop. It takes a while to get the hang of it. You should do this after every feeding, to keep their digestive tracts actively working. If any puppy backs up for a long period (the better part of a day) you may have to run to the vet. With some of them, it just takes patience and perseverance.

INITIAL GROWTH:

If you make it through the first 7 days, the worst is over. By then, the mother should be doing everything, and you should be back to a normal sleep cycle. You still need to watch for infections brought in by the mother. The puppies should be steadily growing and gaining weight.

Somewhere between day 10 and day 12, they should open their eyes.

Soon after this, they should be starting to stand and walk. (I have had some do it **before** their eyes opened!) This gives you the opportunity to evaluate their fronts, to see if they are straight. The rears take much longer. Don’t be dismayed if they take time to get their back feet under them. Don’t listen to negative comments from people who have raised other breeds. Bull breeds are different, and take longer to come together in the rears.

When they start to stand, they will need some kind of resistant surface to hold them up. I use remnant carpet pieces, which keep their little feet from slipping, and give something they can grab with their nails.

Once they are up on their feet, you can start looking for slipping patellas. If a puppy seems to be having a harder time than the others in standing, you might consider a trip to the vet. During development, there is a lot of movement and flexibility back there, but by ten weeks of age, the patellas should not be popping out of position. If you can feel a popping as the puppy moves its rear, this might be a concern. Have your vet make a determination.

WEANING:

All should proceed smoothly until about the fourth or fifth week. That is when the puppies start to develop teeth. If you haven’t been paying attention, the mother will probably let you know when she starts snapping at the puppies. That is when you should start weaning. For solid food, I have used a variety of different formulas. The most simple and successful has been just taking a high quality dry puppy food, soaking it and mashing it down to make a form of porridge. I add to this some corn syrup, and powdered vitamins, and sometimes plain yogurt. As they get older, I might add all-meat human babyfood, or paste-type canned dog food. To start, you want it to be pretty thin, in order to transition them from a liquid to a solid diet.

Getting them to take it is something of an art. Some puppies will take it off a flat surface by lapping it up. Others just skate in it. I take it on my fingertip and dab it into their mouths, until they develop a taste for it. (With the more obstinate ones, this can take days.)

Initially, I give them solid food once a day, and then put the mother back in to clean them up. As they get to like it, I start taking the mother out for longer periods, and start feeding them twice or three times a day. Eventually, the mother can stay out, and the puppies are on their own.

As they grow, I change the diet to soaked puppy kibble mixed with cottage cheese (for calcium). Once a day, they get multi-vitamins. I watch carefully to make sure they aren't too thin, and that they aren't too fat. Either one is bad. Too thin means a trip to the vet to check for internal problems. Too fat means a diet so their feet don't break down. Also, you don't want them to grow accustomed to keeping their weight at an unhealthy level; they will want to stay that way when they get older.

GROWING UP:

By this time, they are starting to look like French Bulldogs. Their ears should start coming up between week 5 and week 8. If they haven't come up by then, you need to look at taping the ears, and giving them additional calcium supplements. I have had puppies whose ears did not stabilize until they were 15 weeks old. Once they did come up, they were fine.

There is some disagreement as to when it is safe to allow puppies outside. I am an extreme conservative, and try to protect my puppies from parvo and all the other outside infections until they are at least 12 weeks old. They should already be on an inoculation schedule by then.

De-wormings and inoculations should be done on a schedule as recommended by your veterinarian. I give shots myself, to save the risk of exposing the puppies at the vet's office. Most people take the puppies in. One benefit is that the vet can look your puppies over for any problem you might have missed. An inoculation/deworming record should be kept, and should go with the puppy if it is headed for a new home. This will give the new owners' vet a record of your care.

One note: watch your puppies closely for a few hours after any vaccination. An allergic reaction can develop with startling rapidity. A puppy's airway can swell shut, and the puppy can die, if it has been left unattended. If hives or swelling develops after a shot, **rush** back to the vet! Quickly administered adrenaline and antihistamines can save the puppy's life.

NEW HOMES:

If you are looking to sell puppies, they can be placed in a home from 8 weeks of age. I like to wait at least until 10 weeks. But remember that after 15 weeks, the puppies start to go through the **uglies**, with the onset of adolescence. They may not look as appealing to a potential buyer until they are about 6 months old, unless it is someone who knows the breed and understands how they should look.

Evaluating puppies is an art. How do you decide what to keep and what to sell? You need to go back to your original goal in performing the breeding. Did you get what you set out to achieve? If so, keep hold of it. If not, did you get part-way there? Or did you get something totally unexpected that is worth hanging onto? Most of us find that from our first litter, we want to keep everything. They're all so cute. But you have to ask yourself seriously where you will be at in a year. (If you just got a litter of four boys, will they be at each others' throats every time a female comes into season? Maybe you should think hard before you decide to keep them all.)

The hardest decisions involve the litters where you didn't get everything you wanted. The desirable characteristics you wanted to bring in arrived, but brought things you weren't expecting, or wanting. You have to decide if the goods outweigh the bads. There are no right or wrong decisions in this case, just best guesses.

Whenever I part with a puppy, part of me goes with it. I worry that the people will not understand how delicate and valuable an animal they are taking with them. I worry that the environment they provide may not be as loving and safe as the home I have provided. I worry that things can go wrong, and the new owners will not spot the problems in time, or will not know what to do.

With new owners, I like to show them photos of the champions in the background of their puppy, so they know the quality of the bloodlines. I let them see the parents, or at least the mother, if the father is elsewhere. This gives them a clearer picture of what their puppy will become. I show them books on the breed, and copies of our breed publication. This gives them a variety of sources of information specific to the breed, and places where they can go for answers.

KEEPING IN TOUCH:

I try to maintain contact with the new owners, especially until the puppy is about six months old. I insist they take the puppy to the vet within the first three days for a checkup. (That protects me as well: it ensures that the puppy they received is sound and healthy.) That gets the new owners into a routine of going to the vet, and giving the puppy the proper care. I can answer any of their health-related questions, or help with problems of training or diet. I want them to know they can always come to me for assistance.

By the time they are six months old, and the ones you are going to place are gone, you can start to relax. By this time, you've put eight or nine months' work into the litter. You relax just enough that you forget all the lost sleep and the expense. And you decide to breed another litter.

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