

Rescue and Breeders: Developing a Collaborative Relationship

By: Elizabeth Sommers, Consultant, National Rescue Committee

Contributors: Carol Allen, Chair, and Edell Schaeffer, Regional Representative.

Within the Golden Retriever community, volunteers active in rescue programs and responsible breeders are already allies in many ways, united by a mutual love of the breed and a shared concern for the well being of the individual dogs. It appears, in fact, that suspicions – suspicions that have little realistic basis – may be the only things that separate the two groups. These suspicions can be bluntly stated: rescuers are said to view breeders as caring little about the future of the dogs they produce and nothing about the enormous problems of homeless Golden Retrievers, while breeders are said to view rescue workers as animal rights extremists, opposed to all breeding and advocates of the “Don’t breed or buy while homeless animals die” point of view. Although there may be isolated individuals who hold such views in either group, a look at the actual overlap and supportive interaction between Golden breeders and Golden rescuers presents a very different and much more positive picture.

Examples of Cooperation

Consider these concrete examples that have been reported by rescuers:

- When a responsible breeder’s dog is taken into rescue, the breeder immediately takes it back, most often reimbursing any costs incurred by the rescue organization.
- In some cases, particularly when a dog ends up in rescue at considerable distance from the breeder, the dog may be re-homed by the rescue while the breeder takes care of any veterinary bills or other related costs.
- On occasion, the owner of the stud dog has stepped in to take the dog back and/or reimburse the rescue for its care and re-homing if the breeder is unable to do so.
- Rescues have been able to alert responsible breeders about individuals in their communities who have questionable histories and who are presenting themselves to breeders as serious beginners interested in acquiring pick puppies from well-known lines.
- Similarly, rescue organizations have been able to assist breeders with home visits or advice when puppies are being placed outside the breeder’s local area.
- Some rescues have programs that assist responsible breeders in the re-homing of older dogs, allowing the dogs to be placed on the breeder’s own contract but tapping into the rescue’s pool of adopters looking for older dogs. The rescue receives a donation in lieu of an adoption fee.
- A small but growing number of breeders will pledge the purchase price of a puppy, or some fixed sum, from each of their litters as a direct donation to their local rescue. One such breeder explained that she considers this a type of insurance payment for potential future services. She knows that if one of her dogs wound up homeless and for some reason could not be identified as coming from her, the dog would nevertheless be responsibly cared for and re-homed by a competent rescuer.
- Breeders sometimes offer to provide professional pro bono assistance to rescue. Those who are vets or own boarding kennel offer discounted rates for rescue dogs; those who have expertise in public relations, computers, or fund-raising offer free assistance in those areas; some retail shop owners pledge a portion of their profits to rescue; groomers or trainers/behaviorists offer either hands-on assistance or provide instruction to rescue volunteers, and so on.
- Experienced breeders will foster and work with Golden Retrievers who are so poorly socialized that they cannot be re-homed easily if at all. Because of their experience socializing young dogs and the physical facilities they typically have, this type of assistance can make all the difference in bringing around a young rescue dog that had a bad start in life.
- Breeders have on occasion been among the first to turn out when rescue volunteers ask for help with puppy mill closures, disasters, or other events that overwhelm the rescue’s volunteer force. They often loan crates and supplies; provide kennel space, assistance with evaluations, and transport; or contribute financially.
- Responsible breeders whose dogs have wound up in puppy mills through fraud or deception on the part of the millers, have provided affidavits and other evidence to aid in prosecution of the millers.
- Rescues have stepped in to help breeders when they have a puppy with unusual or serious health problems that make them unacceptable for the typical puppy buyer. Problems such as deformed limbs, blindness, chronic skin conditions, SAS, and hip dysplasia can occur even when every precaution is taken, and rescues are in a far better position to find homes for such special needs puppies.
- Breeders who travel to shows and performance events have assisted with the transport of rescue dogs, and rescue transport volunteers have also helped to deliver puppies to new owners, or return dogs to breeders
- Breeders have whelped and raised litters from pregnant bitches that come into rescue, or loaned supplies and provided much-needed advice to rescue “parents.” These breeders may also assist with evaluating litters and recommending homes for specific puppies.

Common Ground

The above activities illustrate that a collaborative and very workable partnership can and does exist between these two groups, a collaboration based on common goals and a passion for our breed. Further evidence comes from a survey of presidents of Golden Retriever rescue programs nationwide. Fourteen of the 29 presidents who responded said that breeders were among their program's most active volunteers, while 17 reported receiving occasional assistance. Primarily positive interactions with area Golden breeders were reported by 14 rescue presidents, while only two said that their programs had had negative interactions. In addition, a majority of the programs represented (18) reported receiving some type of assistance (financial, recognition, invitation to events, web links, fund-raising, etc.) from local Golden Retriever breed clubs.

This two-way acceptance may be due in part to the fact that, at least in our breed, the designations "breeder" and "rescuer" will often apply to the same individuals. GRCA member-breeders were significantly represented on the Task Force that developed the National Rescue Committee (NRC). Half of NRC's current members are either active or former breeders, and five of the 29 program presidents described themselves as current or former breeders. Many Golden Retriever rescue programs listed on the NRC's website (www.grca-nrc.org) were either started by individual breeders or began as a specially created offshoot of a local Golden Retriever Club. An interesting correlation that emerged from the NRC's annual rescue survey is that Golden Retriever rescue programs tend to exist in areas of the country where there are more local Golden Retriever clubs, and more recognized kennels.

Another connection between responsible breeders and rescuers that may surprise some is the number of active rescue volunteers who acquire, for themselves, puppies from responsible breeders in addition to the dog or dogs that most have adopted through rescue. Nine of the NRC members and 12 of the rescue program presidents who responded to the survey said they have either had acquired or plan to purchase a Golden puppy from a breeder. When you think about it, why wouldn't they? Someone who chooses to become involved in the difficult and often heartbreaking work of breed rescue has to be motivated by a deep and abiding love for the breed. And if you love Golden Retrievers – particularly if you have seen the harm that is done by irresponsible breeding, socialization and placement – then you especially treasure the Golden puppy whose background and life has been what they all should have. It is possible that those who see most clearly the troubles and limitations that irresponsible puppy-production so often creates are the people who have the deepest appreciation for the breeding of Golden Retrievers when it is "done right."

There is a key compelling reason why Golden rescuers tend to be very supportive of responsible breeding: the only alternatives (either no breeding or increased poor breeding) are simply unacceptable to someone who loves the breed. It is true that anyone who spends time in a shelter and comes face to face with dogs that are going to die tomorrow simply for lack of a home will empathize, to some degree, with the feelings behind the "don't breed or buy" attitude. Undoubtedly, there are people active in all-breed or mixed-breed rescue who do hold that position and are willing to see the distinctive breeds disappear. Rather than endlessly debate with them, we should just respect their logical consistency. It would be difficult, however, if not impossible, to find a Golden rescuer who consciously wishes for a world without Golden Retrievers.

Shining examples of rescue and breeders working hand in hand.

Shayna was rescued from a terrible life, accepted by Heartland Golden Retriever Rescue and fostered by breeder Dean Lake. Extensive rehabilitation was necessary because of a lack of socialization, neglect and abuse.

Today Shayna rides around the country in the motor home of her loving adoptive family.



Callie and five surviving pups were accepted by GRROWLS-NY and cared for by breeder Patti Conroy. Callie is still very thin after two weeks of care and weight gain.



Two of the surviving five puppies are growing and their wounds are healing, thanks to foster caregiver Patti Conroy. All were adopted by loving families.



Transporting "Katrina Golden Retrievers" from Texas to Arizona, Rick Fish and Greg Korycki take a break in New Mexico with some of their canine passengers.



Common Goals

In any event, even if animal rights extremists continue to push for such measures, all intentional breeding is not going to be stopped. Legislatures that cannot manage to control guns or outlaw tobacco are not likely to prohibit the breeding of dogs. Since there will be breeding of purebred dogs in the future, the only protection for the breeds' standards and for the individual Golden Retrievers that are produced is going to come from the responsible breeders. Others, those who are simply "producing" puppies to satisfy the mass market, are not improving the breed. In truth, they may be destroying it.

Ironically, development of that mass market and thus motivation for the puppy-producers has to a significant degree been an unintended result of the efforts of good breeders and rescuers alike. By maintaining our breed's standard and paying attention to health and temperament of Golden Retrievers, responsible breeders have created something very desirable, a dog many people want as a cherished companion and family member. And by extolling the unquestioned virtue of even "secondhand" Golden Retrievers, rescuers have added to the public perception that these dogs are wonderful pets – and they are! But the same potent combination of responsible breeders and rescuers who inadvertently helped create the current strong public desire for Golden Retrievers can also work together to educate and redirect that public desire.

Today, there are at least four uncomfortable realities that must be acknowledged.

1. Homeless, unwanted Golden Retrievers and Golden mixes are dying or being abandoned or seriously neglected every day. Approximately 10,000 Golden Retrievers and their offspring make it into Golden Retriever rescue programs each year, and there are still others in all-breed rescue programs or shelters or without any type of support.
2. Eliminating all breeding would mean the end of distinctive dog breeds.
3. As long as there is a high demand for purebred Golden puppies of any background or quality, there will be "producers" of puppies who care little or nothing for the quality of the dogs being produced to satisfy that demand.
4. Responsible breeders and rescuers have done a good job of convincing the public that life with a Golden Retriever is a not-to-be-missed experience, thus helping create the high demand for puppies of the breed, a breed that only they and other enthusiasts can protect.

The challenge that those realities create is best met by a working alliance between responsible breeders and rescuers. The shared goal of these two groups, together with anyone else who cares about the breed, would be to create a different set of realities:

1. There are no more homeless or unwanted Golden Retrievers, and rescue services are needed only for those dogs accidentally lost or whose breeders have died or become unable to accept their return.
2. The breed continues to exist by the breeding of quality, healthy and temperamentally sound Golden Retrievers and the intelligent, careful placement of their puppies.
3. People wanting to have a Golden Retriever as part of their family come to understand that the only way to safely and responsibly meet this goal is to either obtain a responsibly-bred puppy or to adopt a Golden or Golden mix, either adult or puppy, from a rescue program or shelter.
4. Breeders, rescuers, and all who are involved with Golden

Retrievers make a sincere commitment to help would-be owners reach those understandings, and to encourage them to insist on either carefully-bred puppies or one of the other responsible, and safer, alternatives.

It is important that all involved in the breed – breeders, competitors, local Golden Retriever Clubs, and rescue programs with their many volunteers – remember what unites us: our passion for Golden Retrievers. The only true safety and salvation for this breed is to sharply decrease and perhaps one day end the irresponsible, careless and uncaring breeding and sale of Golden puppies. And there is no one except us to do the work necessary to accomplish this goal.

Joint Efforts to Bring About Change

Educating the public is the essential step in reshaping the market that supports and encourages irresponsible breeding. It is a slow, difficult, and sometimes frustrating course, but it is a goal very much worth pursuing and one that is possible to reach. Encouragingly, honest and respectful efforts at such education are very often successful. By and large people are not cruel, and certainly most people care about their own self-interest. Therefore, very few people want to encourage the horrors of puppy mills, and even fewer want to wind up with a bad dog in their own home. Although it may seem more than obvious to those who will be reading this article, many people who are not versed in the dog world simply do not understand that purchasing from a pet store or from a backyard breeder does nothing but encourage what amounts to careless and often inhumane farming of dogs. Nor do they understand that acquiring a puppy from such sources risks the worst kind of disappointment for their family. It doesn't take too much effort or time, however, to convince them of a basic, very logical truth: puppy-producers who don't care what kind of owner buys their puppies also won't care what kind of puppy they are producing. If they are willing for their puppies to be sold to anyone who has a charge card (or increasingly, anyone who is willing to take out a long-term pet store loan), then things like health clearances, temperament of breeding stock, proper nutrition and appropriate socialization aren't going to have been very important to them either.

As one rescuer said, "Getting an irresponsibly bred purebred puppy is probably the worst crashout a family can indulge in. Any other way of acquiring a dog has a much better chance of resulting in a loved, and loving, family companion." No matter what its origins may have been, an older rescue Golden Retriever is a known quantity: its unique personality and its physical and mental health can be known with far more certainty than is possible with any puppy. True to the nature of this breed, so many of these dogs are still "true Golden Retrievers" whose wonderful personality has prevailed through the worst kind of background and the worst of treatment. When Golden or Golden mix puppies are available through rescue, their inherent, genetic potential for later problems may be as unknown as that of the pet store puppy, but they will have the decided advantages of being kept the appropriate time with their mothers, socialized appropriately, placed with care and judgment, and given lifetime support, with the rescue acting in the role of a responsible breeder. An irresponsibly bred and callously marketed purebred puppy has none of these advantages, and the sometimes disastrous result of a family's decision to purchase one of those puppies can be chilling indeed.

To the extent that rescuers and breeders fully understand the

“big picture” of what is happening with and to our breed, they are in a far stronger position to effectively intervene in the decisions puppy-buyers will make. Those who work in rescue are very much aware of the impact of irresponsible breeding, an awareness that gives rise to another often-heard and more accepted slogan: “If you don’t rescue, don’t breed.” The sober fact is that any breeding of Golden Retrievers is going to have some impact – for better or worse – on the state of the breed. It is difficult to imagine making truly wise breeding decisions without seeing and understanding the big picture – what is happening in competition rings and secure whelping boxes and what is happening in shelters and on the streets. At the same time rescuers, who may sometimes have trouble seeing beyond the tragic eyes of the dog they had to leave in a shelter, need to remember that without any breeding there would be no Golden Retrievers and unless good breeders are once again responsible for most of the puppies produced, there will be fewer and fewer healthy Golden Retrievers of true temperament and development...and greater and more difficult calls for rescue’s services.

Public education is most effective when it is directed at people just when they have decided they want to acquire a Golden puppy and learn, to their surprise, something already well known to breeders, rescuers, and those who volunteer in puppy referral: there are simply more people who want Golden puppies than there are responsibly-bred Golden puppies to sell to them. What that potential buyer decides to do next is critical. Because they are not as aware of that big picture, they will need a reason, a strong reason, to keep them from becoming part of the large market that will settle for any Golden pup and thus supports and encourages the irresponsible and unconcerned puppy-producers. Only breeders and rescuers, working in combination, can provide that reason at the critical time. Breeders need to refer puppy buyers to rescue programs and vice versa, and in the process, the potential puppy buyer can be educated about the difficulties that can arise, and the harm that is done, when dogs are acquired from the wrong sources or for the wrong reasons.

Although it is rare for a Golden rescue program to have a purebred puppy, would-be purchasers nevertheless routinely approach Golden rescues hoping for one, and the “mantra” of most rescuers is that the only certain and safe direction for any family wanting a purebred puppy is to go to a truly responsible breeder. Rescuers say this over and over, with every chance of being believed because they are not directly furthering their own interests. Furthermore, good rescuers know who the responsible and irresponsible breeders are in their community, and they are not at all shy about making recommendations to the former. Those recommendations, and warnings about the dangers of settling for a poorly-bred and carelessly-placed puppy are particularly persuasive because the rescuer can provide concrete examples of what has happened to other families who wound up getting an irresponsibly “produced” puppy from a pet store, small scale mill, or backyard breeder. Rescuers always know of those examples, because those other families routinely approach Golden rescue programs seeking help in extracting themselves from an often untenable or frankly dangerous situation.

A breeder is in an even more powerful position to redirect a person who might be tempted to purchase a poorly bred dog, because he or she is talking to that person at the most critical time, just as they are learning that they won’t be able to obtain, or will have to wait for up to a year for, a puppy from a good breeder. The breeder has an excellent opportunity to give accurate information about good and bad breeding practices, about the likely consequences of those practices, and about rescue as an alternative.

By explaining what they do in their breeding program, by letting would-be purchasers meet their dogs and puppies and see what a real Golden should be like, responsible breeders are in a pivotal position for educating buyers about what they should be looking for, and what they should insist upon, and what they can do if they can’t get the quality they seek.

One noted rescuer, Sheila Boneham, has expressed the need this way:

“I think one of the saddest things about the whole problem of badly bred dogs throughout the country is that so many animal lovers have such meager expectations. Too many people seem to think that behavior and health problems are normal in the sense that ‘all’ dogs have them. As a result, they don’t demand that the puppies they buy be high quality – and I don’t mean that daddy was nationally ranked, but that the dog’s forbearers were healthy, mentally sound, good examples of their breeds and that their breeders were knowledgeable and responsible to both their dogs and their buyers. People *and* dogs would both benefit if people demanded more of breeders and stopped feeding the bad ones.”¹

Getting puppy-purchasers to “stop feeding the bad breeders” is the ultimate goal of the desperately-needed educational effort, and the educators must come from the community of responsible breeders and rescuers, as well as other breed enthusiasts and competitors who may be approached by persons interested in acquiring a Golden. Every interaction with such a person should be considered and dealt with as a critically important opportunity to deprive those who are simply puppy-producers of another customer.

Conclusion

Golden rescuers and responsible Golden breeders share a very important common goal: both want this wonderful breed to continue and to be strong and true to its standard. Responsible Golden breeders need rescuers to keep their dogs safe; rescuers need responsible breeders to keep their breed safe; and they need each other to fully educate the public. The quality of our breed will be assured, and the number of homeless Golden Retrievers will be reduced to a manageable level only when the public has been educated about the high quality that the breed can, and should meet and about the acceptable, responsible ways to acquire a Golden. Effectively providing such education is difficult, but is it is not impossible. It will require, however, the combined effort, patience and resources of those who support and value this breed, particularly breeders and rescuers. Fortunately for our Golden Retrievers, there is already a solid tradition of such collaborative effort. For their sake, it is to be hoped that neither group will allow unfounded suspicions to keep this type of cooperation from growing and becoming even more effective.

1. Sheila Boneham, owner of Breed Rescue list and author of “Breed Rescue: how to start and run a successful program”; three-time winner of the Maxwell Award by the Dog Writers Association of America (www.sheilaboneham.com).