

When one looks back now and reads where Peggy wrote that Domossi (7 years), Emperor (8) and Alcor (9) all died of “heart attacks” while Favoriet was believed to have died of a heart attack at 10 years – and there were questions about several others — it begins to dawn that it was a crucial time for our Dobermans, and those involved had absolutely no clue of what was happening. The seeds which were almost certainly being sown at that time blossomed into an epidemic in our time.

The affected Emperor was the son of affected Domossi, which makes sense in the autosomal dominant mode with the disease in each generation. Alcor and Favoriet were half brothers and both were sired by Uranus, which raises red flags about Uranus, the sire of 14 champions who died at 10 years. The cause of death has never been reported but it is certainly suspicious. There is also food for thought on Dictator, a brother of Domossi, and a great red dog upon whom most of my original stock was built. Could Dictator have been harboring the same disease as his sibling when he died of suffocation in a locked car? After all, the least one can expect from an affected parent is 50 percent of the offspring will also inherit the disease. Dictator sired 52 champions.

Alcor produced 26 American champions; Domossi 20; Emperor 18 and Favoriet 13. In the autosomal dominant mode of inheritance at least half of the 77 champions – not to mention many hundreds of siblings – would have been victims of DCM.

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The great champion Delegate vd Elbe, born in 1947, was a grandson of both the affected Domossi and the suspicious Uranus – and died suddenly at eight years. He produced 55 champions in 60 litters. I do not know the fate of his son, the two time National Specialty winner Ch. Dortmund Delly's Colonel Jet, but I do know that the tail male grandson, Ch. Steb's Top Skipper, who sired 50 champions, died of a heart attack at 8 years of age.

It has been publicly reported that two-time National Specialty winner, Ch. Brown's B-Brian, died of “sudden death” at six years of age. There are serious questions about another “matador” with voluminous matings who died suddenly at eight years. The cause was never publicly disclosed, but at least one of his sons has been publicly reported as dying of “dilated cardiomyopathy”

at 10 years of age while another son I was familiar with also died young of sudden death. These are hard facts when DCM is autosomal dominant and has an affected dog in every generation.

So it is easy to see why this insidious killer is impacting every bloodline and has become a quiet epidemic. I have mentioned but a handful of name studs who passed the disease on to at least 50, maybe 100 percent of their offspring. That's a lot of Dobermans. But what about all the other affected males and females, champions and non-champions, who died of some other cause or suddenly late in life —and nobody knew they had it— but still passed the disease to at least 50 percent of their children?

Geneticists are adamant that the best way for breeders to tackle a problem like dilated cardiomyopathy where there is no DNA test, is to exchange information and work together to improve the odds of slowing down the disease.

We most definitely need a registry or central clearing house for breeders and owners who are conscientious enough to name their own dogs and list their pedigrees and for those who want to register dogs they know or believe to be clear. To that end I am making the first entries by listing the pedigrees of all nine of my dogs that died at home.

I believe an open registry should be independent and a matter for breeders. This is not a project for the Doberman Pinscher Club of America which has not had an aggressive, organized plan to combat the disease at the breeding level in the 43 years since dilated cardiomyopathy first entered our breed lexicon. Now that DCM has reached dramatic proportions, the DPCA continues to wait for the cavalry. The officers are not down and dirty in the trenches of the whelping box where heartache and hard decisions on DCM are a way of life.

Defenders may point out that the DPCA has a web database called Dobequest which has profiles of Dobermans and lists ages and cause of death...and a longevity program for animals who live over 10 years which is aimed at promoting long lived dogs. One assumes its goal is to curb diseases. Dobequest has major gaps and little helpful information, particularly on cause of death, which makes it totally ineffective in the battle against cardiomyopathy.

Food for thought on the longevity program: Bikila's Nadia of Marks-Tey, Ch. Bikila's Qanah of Marks-Tey and Ch. Bikila's Pazia of Marks-Tey are just three of my dogs who quickly come to mind who qualify for Longevity Certification (LC). Nadia was a victim of cardiomyopathy while Qanah was probably affected and sired four offspring that died of DCM. Pazia was the mother of an affected offspring. Qanah could also qualify for the

Bred for Longevity Certification (BFL) because his father lived to 13 years and his mother, Nadia, to 10 years.

If this program is meant to be helpful to breeders and not just a superficial feel good project, it makes little sense to me to reward a DCM victim who reaches 10 years of age with a longevity title if it is spreading a fatal disease. Also, the program does not indicate the longevity of the parents, siblings or offspring of a certificate holder — obviously vital in genetic analysis — who may all be dead and buried long before 10 years. Nadia lived to 10 and all her dead children and grandchildren were under 10 years... yet she still qualifies for a certificate.

The cardiomyopathy registry may be best suited for the independent American Doberman Pinscher Education Foundation, founded by the late Peggy Adamson and Frank Grover, and now being resurrected after Frank's death. The foundation, formed because of shortcomings in the DPCA, aims to educate breeders and fanciers which will lead to protecting the health and welfare of the Doberman.

I envisage a website where verifiable information can be posted, traded and analyzed. It would be important to have inbuilt protectors against abuse. I have not formalized any details but I can think of no better place to have it than an independent foundation website. The project could be named after two breed icons who would have wanted this to happen: the Adamson/Grover Project.

Some cynics will think I am a naïve optimist, a Pollyanna, if you will. They will scoff and suggest that few, if any, will follow my lead because of the damage it might do to their kennel. But think of the damage it will do to that kennel if they **don't** participate.

All those people who now proudly claim "we test" will be obliged, some begrudgingly, to participate. If a breeder or stud owner can make such a big deal out of advertising a handful of tests for backburner issues such as von Willebrands, which is mostly a "trait" (a laboratory phenomenon and not a clinical phenomenon) and not a full blown disease in the Doberman; or hip dysplasia (which is not on the radar screen in our breed at this time) or CERF for the eyes (which are also a non-event in Dobermans); then surely they will not be able to ignore the main event fight against the biggest killer of our dogs...especially if pressed by a potential puppy buyer who can quote other breeders and owners involved in the project.

Also, do not underestimate the individual dog owner who is also on a crusade after being sold a dog who verifiably died of cardiomyopathy. They can unlock many of the secrets... and it will no longer be a whisper campaign but public for all to see in an open registry.

Trust me, this article and the information enclosed on my dead dogs to start a registry will end up on the

internet, putting pressure on other breeders to follow suit. But this is not, and should not, be a witch-hunt.

Truly, it is okay to show and tell. It is my experience that if you are upfront with potential puppy buyers they respect you even more. All my puppy buyers know of my cardio problems but they keep coming back because they know I am fighting it with all my might. If they absolutely want a Doberman then they feel more comfortable with somebody who is working to beat the problems rather than somebody who is constantly trying to hide the problem. Potential puppy buyers soon discover DCM is out there in big numbers. If they still have the passion for a Doberman they will generally work with somebody who is tackling the problem head on and will not abandon them if a problem arises.

I had an owner call me recently who was devastated by the loss of a very young male from DCM. He had read my book and wanted to know more about the disease. The breeder of his dead dog had been defensive ...but when I told him all my problems and how I was truly fighting to beat this thing, he was excited to put his name down for a puppy.

A registry is all about improving the breeder's odds. As I was born into a family of illegal bookies who networked the tough east side of Sydney, I know about odds. My father used to say: "If there are 20 horses in a race I don't care what the posted official odds are, the person betting with me has one horse and I have 19 running for me." You see, I want to tackle cardiomyopathy with those odds in my favor. I want 19 running for me.

For goodness sake, we are obviously going to have to take calculated risks when we breed. You have read the machinations I went through taking risks on my "V" litter. And those machinations will obviously continue. If we didn't take calculated risks then breeding would be completely shut down. There is no escaping some gambling the way this disease is embedded in our Dobermans, but it has to be calculated with good odds. Many people will have to change their mindset about the overriding importance of heads or toplines or angulation and feed important DCM information into the breeding equation... being totally honest about their own dogs; analyzing pedigrees; studying Punnett squares and asking penetrating questions of stud owners, etc.

Now that we know it is autosomal dominant, then a case of DCM means one of the parents had to have the disease. That is why breeders, who may not be sure if a breeding animal actually had the disease and the heart could not be checked by a cardiac pathologist, will have to monitor offspring, including obscure pets, so that they can work backwards to discover which (or both) of the parents had the disease. For example, I intend to monitor breeding stock that has already been spayed

to help in pinpointing any potential danger areas in younger family members.

Trying to find clear dogs will not be easy. It will be like a giant jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. But it is worth a try to slow this juggernaut down until the cavalry arrives. And even then it will be an uphill battle for generations to maintain type and eradicate the disease at the same time.

An open registry with a free exchange of verifiable information will obviously be of great importance in tracking the disease in our Dobermans. We will hit some, and miss some, and we might fail much of the time. **But failure is also not trying at all.**

I am on a mission because I love this breed and hate to see what is happening to it. I also have a great sense of responsibility to ensure that I do everything I possibly can on my watch.

I want to continue breeding without the fear of another string of cardio victims. And I also want to wipe away the anxiety harbored since my saga of death. When I go outdoors today on my property in Texas and call a dog that is out of sight and it does not instantly appear, I have disturbing visions of finding the animal crumpled on the ground. Nine dead dogs will do that to a man.

I bury all my dogs under sapling live oaks on my property. I group them into families and I have a flourishing forest of live oaks and yes, I talk to my old friends as I mow or walk the property. I have even been known to bury antagonists like champions Apollo and Jet Setter on opposite sides of a fence, just to keep the peace in the spirit world.

During the dark days when dogs were dropping like flies, I went to the nursery and stocked up on potted live oaks so that I would be ready. I still have one potted live oak sitting near the kennel. It is outgrowing the pot and I will need to plant it soon. However, this time I do not want to bury a dog under it... ■

*Rod Humphries, a former sports columnist, says there are two kinds of coaches in professional sports: those who have been fired and those waiting to be fired.*

*Rod, the dog columnist, now says that there are two kinds of Doberman breeders: those who have had cardiomyopathy and those waiting to get it.*

*He would be ecstatic if the cavalry arrived tomorrow and rendered the registry project obsolete.*