

# *Jet's Greyhounds*

*Espen Engh, Norway*



*Merits:*

Espen Engh and his late mother Kari bred their first greyhound litter under the prefix Jet's in 1975. Since then 168 homebred champions, including 71 FCI International Champions, have been made up on all continents. Two Jet's dogs have won the Dog of the Year award (all breeds) in Norway. Espen is an FCI all-breeds judge, having officiated in more than 70 countries.

*Important in the breed:*

These things are most important: the overall impression; a dog combining substance with elegance; a generous dog combining good length of leg with length of body, a stallion-like quality, a smooth flowing outline and suppleness and energy in movement. And these are details, which can make the dog perfect: a beautifully crested neck, small, rose-shaped ears, dark eyes, smooth and shiny coat over a tight-fitting skin, close fitting feet shaped rather more like a hare's than a cat's.

*What is your background with dogs?*

My mother got involved with dogs when she bought her first Greyhound in 1955. She was very active for a long period of time showing Greyhounds. For many years she concentrated totally on males; at the time she was not able to breed so that's why it made sense. And I think males actually provide a good training ground. It's wise to start with males, to train them and show them. Learning and graduating from males, you can later buy a bitch and start your own breeding. For us it was a good way to approach breeding. As a norm people will buy a bitch and start breeding her, no matter how good or bad she is. But if you first train on males, as my mother did, you should become very critical when you try to find a bitch to breed from. She had males for 20 years before we started to breed. Our first litter was born in 1975.

When people ask how I got my first dog, I usually answer that I didn't get my first dog, the dogs got me – because the dogs were there before me! I was born into a family with Greyhounds. My mother and I started breeding together after getting our foundation bitch. We found her from Sweden. My mother was judging and saw some excellent dogs from a litter which

was bred by Ann Gustafsson, of the Gulds kennels. The combination was a total outcross, but since there were so many excellent dogs in the litter the breeder decided to repeat it.

We were lucky. Our bitch from the repeat mating became a real star; she was Runner Up Dog of the Year in Sweden 1973 and in Norway two years later. She gave us an excellent start for breeding.

### *How did you become an active breeder?*

I've always been keenly interested in the aspects of breeding. For me it gives a chance to use my brain, because breeding is an intellectual challenge, but also to use one's artistic sense, because breeding is also much like art. Breeding is, simply said, fascinating!

I wasn't even 13 yet when my mother and I bred our first litter. We started out from that foundation bitch, who was not only an outstanding Greyhound but also had traits we later came to recognize as really good brood bitch traits. She was strong, she was sturdy, she had a leg in each corner and she stood well on the ground. There was nothing overly refined or weedy about her, no nonsense. We have later learned to appreciate those traits in a brood bitch, sometimes even at the expense of some fancier traits.

This is the kind of a brood bitch you should start out with. We were very lucky to get her, but it was also part of a plan: we chose her from that repeated breeding. We didn't take as much of a chance as we otherwise might have. I would probably recommend other people to buy a grown-up bitch, because then you know what you get – and that's important. Bitches are gold! A really, really good foundation bitch is absolutely key to success as a breeder. It's much better to start at the top than to strive for generations to get where you could have started in the first place. So for us it made sense to base our breeding on that excellent bitch.

Then we chose the best possible stud dogs for her. At that time we had an English import who was the top winning Greyhound in the entire Scandinavia. But looking at the bitch we thought that he wasn't the most suitable match for her, so we mated her to another dog who was not quite as spectacular but whom we considered to complement the bitch. There were two or three things in her that we wanted to enhance, to improve on. We had to find a dog who could do that without losing too much of what she had. So

we didn't breed her to our big star but instead to this other dog who in our opinion suited her better. That was a good combination: the quality of the litter was outstanding. We got a puppy which grew up to be the top bitch of all breeds in Norway.

But we were still amateurs in breeding and repeated that combination. Nowadays we don't do that. We breed on a small scale, and the Greyhound is a breed that has quite a lot of puppies per litter, normally 9–10. Either we get in the first litter what we hoped for, in which case we breed on from those, or we are not pleased with the litter, in which case there is no reason to repeat it. So I see no reason to repeat what you have already done. You either got what you wanted in a combination or you will never get it. Breeding is also about progressing and getting somewhere. Standing still and repeating is very unchallenging and uninteresting.

### *What is so lovely in your breed, the Greyhound?*

They have absolutely great characters. If you want a dog who lives with you as a companion, the Greyhound is wonderful. They are very faithful animals and dedicated to the owner. But as a kennel dog the Greyhound is not good, they don't enjoy being in crates or restricted areas, and it shows in their behaviour.

They are also very beautiful animals. From a breeder's point of view they have a very long tradition, so they breed very true. If you combine outstanding Greyhounds that complement each other, you generally get something outstanding. That's not the case in all other breeds. The Greyhound has a history of a thousand years' breeding for the same purpose, and their pedigrees can be traced all the way to the late 1700s, which is longer than any other breed. They are very purebred. That's why we don't get any terrible surprises, like one gets in some other breeds I know.

The essence of our breed is the overall picture. It's a combination of substance and elegance, not getting too much or too little of either. Greyhound is also about proportions, a combination of being upstanding with generous proportions, meaning good length – a dog with a large frame. Very important are also the shape and outline, the right curves in the right places, and for us side movement has also been extremely important. Those are things we believe we have been successfully breeding for; and if you breed for the

same traits for many generations, those traits are what you tend to get.

As we are focusing so much on the total picture, I will never sacrifice the overall impression. And of course there's health and soundness. Movements can never be sacrificed for anything, but I could sacrifice just about any detail. Almost anything else than that total picture you can compromise with; a little loose in the front, big ears... whatever, as long as it doesn't interfere with the overall impression.

### *Why do think breeding is so difficult?*

I'm not sure that it's quite as difficult as some people claim it is. In a breed that generally breeds quite true, you don't get any total shocks. I think that the key to successful breeding is to be very selective and critical of your own dogs. Make sure to select the best ones at all times, and then breed them to the very best. If you do that generation after generation, breeding shouldn't be as difficult as people say.

There are several ways to improve your chances. Many people make their breeding difficult through lack of accurate selection. For example, when breeders get a litter of puppies, they tend to select their one and only favourite at birth, which is absolute nonsense (yes, I know that many breeders disagree with me here) or at the age of four to eight weeks. Then the breeder probably is not likely to end up with the genetically best bitch, maybe just the third or fourth best. And that will still be the one they will breed on from.

That's not how we do it. We keep all the best bitches until we are sure about who really is the best. If we have five bitches in a litter, maybe two of them go away as home pets. We will hold on to the best two or three and make the final decision when they are 12–15 months old, or whatever it takes to be absolutely sure. We never ever keep just one puppy from a litter. This is absolutely necessary, because breeders normally have the experience to take better care of puppies and young dogs than puppy buyers. Consequently, more often than not the ones sold to others don't turn out to be quite as good as the ones you keep. Your bitch can actually look better than its siblings who may be better genetically. You have to rule out the influence of the environment, to be sure that the end product is not shaped by the environment but by the genetics. The ones we keep get exactly the same

amount of exercise and they get the same food, so the difference between the puppies when they are fully grown will depend on the genetic make-up. I feel this is the only way to make sure that you end up keeping, and thus breeding from, the best. I never intentionally sell the best one – so it's perhaps not a good idea to buy a breeding bitch from me. The best one is always mine!

*How do you start to plan a combination?*

I always start out with the bitch. The bitch line is the most important aspect, that's what separates a great pedigree from a very good one. In some countries you can actually hire bitches to breed with your males, but in Scandinavia we have a tradition that you breed from the bitches. For me that makes sense.

A breeder has to analyze the bitch thoroughly and focus on those traits of hers that are so outstanding that you want puppies from her in the first place. Those are the traits you don't want to lose. Then you have to find a male who is not too bad where your bitch is good but who can improve on traits where your bitch is not so good. That way you get something new but don't lose those traits you already have in your line. Don't even try to look for the perfect male, he does not exist, so you will always have to make some compromises. All dogs have imperfections – maybe not any desperate faults, but there is always something to improve on. You have to decide which traits you want to improve, and you will have to put them in an order of priority.

Then you hopefully get a big litter and you start to select the puppies. If you have a line-bred combination, as we almost always do to the extent it's allowed these days, it's much easier to predict the result. It's also much easier to select the puppies from a line-bred combination. You recognize the puppies from your line instantly. It's much harder to pick them from an outcross litter. Sometimes the outcrosses don't even look like Greyhounds when they are born!

You hold on to those puppies that have the most of what you wanted from that combination. It's much more difficult when you have an outcross and you did that to get specific traits, like dark eyes or small ears. Then you have to keep the puppies that have those traits. Otherwise you just diluted

your line, and that's not good at all.

What you have to realize is that breeding dogs is a slow process. You are not going to get a puppy that has all the best from both sides, otherwise lots of perfect dogs would have been produced a long time ago! So you have to decide between those puppies that you get: which ones have most of what you wanted. Which one of the puppies picked up something from the father without losing too much from the mother? And of those puppies you have to keep the very best.

We have tried to establish a system for small-scale breeding. We select the very best bitch of every generation. She goes into the tail bitch line, the very bottom of the pedigree, and I call her the alpha-bitch. We breed her several times, producing three or four litters with different males that are related to her. In this way the tail bitch line always stays line-bred. Again we keep the best of that generation, another alpha-bitch, daughter of the previous alpha-bitch. If she's the best of three or four litters, she's the best of about 15–20 bitches in that generation, because Greyhounds often get 9–10 puppies. Only that alpha-bitch goes into our bitch line. If she is bred with really outstanding, closely related males, she is very likely to produce at least one outstanding daughter. This can continue forever.

But then we also have to produce males to breed to the alpha-bitch. For this purpose we select the second best bitch of each generation, called the beta-bitch. She is preferably a half sister to the best one. She is also an excellent bitch, but has been chosen to take the back-seat to the alpha-bitch and will not go into the main bitch line. This beta-bitch is bred with an outcross male from a line that is strong where we are weak. As we breed on a small scale, the beta-bitch generally gets only one litter.

If the outcross fails – OK, it was a failure and we don't breed on from it. But if it succeeds, we use those males for our alpha-bitches. Thus the bitch line is kept closely line-bred at all times, eight to nine generations by now. We outcross only the beta-bitch to incorporate wanted traits from other strains, but do not run the risk of ruining our bitch line while doing so.

*Are there any important points in the pedigree?*

Well yes, again the bitch line! Anyone, even an idiot, can breed one's bitch to a nice male. The difference between a really good and a quite good pedigree



*Int.Ch.Jet's Once Upon A Dark Night.*



*Int.Ch.Jet's Once Upon A Dream.*





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Int.Ch.Jet's It's All Up To Me.



Int.Ch.Jet's Something in the Way U Smile and Int.Ch.Jet's Somewhere In Your Heart.

is what you have on the mother's side. For me the focal point is the bitch line: mother-mother-mother... But also the father's mother is extremely important. In most pedigrees there are decent dogs as sires and grandsires. What makes the difference in the long run is the bitch line of the pedigree, both on the mother's and the father's side. These are the two lines I focus on.

In our breeding the bitch lines are our own dogs. Can you expect anyone else to breed the dogs that you prefer or need for your own breeding? Are you going to be that lucky? Well, sometimes yes, but generally no. In a small breed like the Greyhound, hardly anybody produces the males that our line needs. So I have to do that myself. That's why we use these beta-bitches for outcrosses, to produce males we can breed to.

We usually have to find these outcross males from other countries. The problem these days, compared to when we started 35 years ago, is that there are hardly any strains left. At least in most breeds there are not, there are just a few people who keep breeding their own line, generation after generation.

When we started out, there were kennels in England, USA and also in Scandinavia which were owned by real breeders. You could recognize their dogs from the moon. That is unfortunately now a thing of the past. Nowadays people are breeding just one generation and some other breeder breeds the next one. It's very hard to find the right kind of outcrosses because the dogs mainly just represent themselves. Very often they are the odd dog out, from their litter and from their family.

They don't really represent their family – because there is no family, no line. It's really, really hard to find dogs to use for outcrosses who can give you what you want. The dogs may have it, but their siblings don't have it and their parents don't have it, and that way you are not going to get it.

I miss the days of the big breeders, when you could actually predict their results and visualize their dogs just by hearing their kennel name. You knew their faults, but you also knew their virtues and strong points.

So we usually go to other countries for outcrosses. We have mated our dogs in England, Italy, America, just about everywhere, if we believe we'll find there what we need for the beta-bitch. I think breeding has become harder because there are so few families left. We are one of those few.

Usually the males have not had any offspring when we start using them.

It would be clever to use a dog who already had progeny, then you could see what he is likely to produce. But in the real world, very few Greyhound males actually ever have puppies. So you often cannot wait for that. Mating within a strain, within our family, it's usually the male's first litter. But since we are then line-breeding closely to our own family, the results are usually quite predictable.

*Why do you think you have been so successful in your breeding?*

The key is selection. We don't let ourselves be fooled into thinking that the dogs are any better than they really are. You must be absolutely objective about your dogs. Don't overestimate them, but don't think that they are worse than they are, either. Put your dogs in the right perspective and see them as they are: recognize what is good about them, what is not good, and what you can improve on in the next generation and further down the line.

Far too many breeders, the vast majority, are quite kennel blind and choose to turn a blind eye to their dogs' imperfections. That does not work. Also, be willing to do all the work. Keep those dogs that you need for your breeding. Don't be lazy about it. To me it sounds really lazy if you sell all your puppies and rely on someone else to raise them. Invest in your own dogs. Keep the ones that have the potential to be bred from, and do the work yourself. No one can do it as well as you!

We did something which gave us invaluable information in the start: we bred our foundation bitch back to her son. I can't advocate everybody to do that, but it taught us a lot. Our bitch had a certain set of qualities, and yet some of those qualities disappeared completely in that combination. For example, she had an absolutely stunningly beautiful head. Her son had an equally beautiful head, but several of the resulting puppies had really ugly heads. And the fronts went all wrong. That gave us an indication about what we had to work with in generations ahead.

Fortunately there were no mental or health problems in that inbred litter, so the basic things were solid. But there were some recessive genes we had to be careful with: we had to watch the fronts and the heads. The front was the most difficult, and it's a problematic area in almost every breed. We learned where to be careful for many generations to come. Combining our key dogs

like this was good to investigate what their genetic makeup was. It was very much a learning experience.

Generally we stick to line-breeding, aunts to nephews, half-siblings or cousins. We do that most of the time in every generation, so it has become a very tight family. We do the outcross with the beta-bitch, but we don't take risks by outcrossing into our main bitch line. We are very careful not to put all our eggs in the same basket.

We keep our main bitch line inbred, at all times. Not once in a while – at all times. And we do the outcross with that second best bitch of the generation. The tail bitch line always has to consist of the best possible bitch of her generation.

If you have a bitch line where the mother is the best of a generation, and her mother too, and also the grandmother and the great-grandmother, every single bitch in the bitch line is not just good but superb. Then you have a bitch line which you can line-breed to at any time, and for as long as you want. Our current litter has our bitch line 18 times in the pedigree.

Let's face it. First, who else in the world is going to breed dogs for me? They are breeding for themselves, with their own priorities. Nobody in the world is working for my needs. I might be lucky and they breed something I need, but it's more likely that I'm not that lucky. It's not their focus to breed the dogs that I need.

The second thing is, just how honest is everybody else with you? Are they going to tell you that their dogs have temperament problems? Monorchids? Heart problems? When you make an outcross, just how much information are you going to get? What people would like to give you is a PhotoShopped picture on the wall, but they are not likely to tell you about all the skeletons in their closet. That is human nature. You discover those faults the hard way, in your puppies.

There are fortunately some people will say "yes" when you look them straight in the eye and ask "have you had any problems with kink tails?" or problems with heart failure. But they are not going to tell you about the things you don't ask about, the problems you never thought about because you never had them.

We have a new disease in Greyhounds, neuropathy. Every third Greyhound that has been tested has this lethal recessive gene. If a puppy gets it from both parents, it dies between the age of 4 and 7 months. This disease

has never been talked about until very recently. Is anyone going to tell you about something like this if you don't ask about it? Well, nobody ever told me, that is for sure!

We have made two outcrosses recently where we got dogs that have tested positive for neuropathy. I believe that in both of these cases the breeder didn't know. If they had known, would they have told us? Maybe. But if you keep on breeding within your own strain, and that's our main theme, you are going to have much more control over your breeding, because you have already used selection to remove those traits you don't want to have in your dogs.

### *How do you analyze the surprises?*

We have a litter of Greyhounds at home right now (December 2009), 12 puppies. If you look at their pedigree, we have bred 57 of the dogs in that pedigree. So it's not surprising that we know what those puppies are likely be like when they grow up. Compare that to using semen from a male that the breeder has never even seen, which seems to be the preferred method of many breeders. They have no idea what they are getting and have no way of making an accurate selection.

We get good things in our line-bred puppies, and also bad things, but not so many surprises. We know which traits to be afraid of and which to select against, but we also know where the quality will come from. Of course you have to be selective in each litter. We got something we hoped for, but not a perfect dog. Those we keep. But we also got puppies which should not be used for breeding, not by the owner and certainly not by the breeder. They will go to good, loving homes. There is no excuse for a lack of quality.

Never bother to say that this mediocre puppy comes from two beautiful parents so you'll breed her anyway. In 99% of the cases that does not work. It may work in one, but breeding one litter per year, you would have to breed a hundred litters to get one good litter – it will take you a hundred years to produce a good litter. So don't even think about it. When breeding from a bitch, ask yourself the question: Is she good enough to line-breed to? If not, forget her.

*What advice would you give to breeders who are just starting their careers?*

If I had to advise a beginning breeder, these are things I would like to say:

- Get the best possible foundation, the best bitch you can possibly find.
- Be totally objective when you analyze why she is so good, but also analyze what she needs to improve on.
- Then breed from her, breed several litters from her.
- Keep all the best puppies and go on from those.

It's actually quite simple!

Maximize the predictability and minimize the surprises. That's a very good way of doing it. If you get huge surprises in your litter, you did something wrong. Either you don't know your bitch or you didn't know the male well enough. When you breed your pedigree yourself, there are fewer surprises.

However, outcrossing can also be useful. With line-breeding you get to the point where you have a certain set of qualities but also a set of imperfections. First, of course, you will have to realize this. You cannot get rid of those imperfections within your own strain, because those desired genes do not exist within your family of dogs. So you have to outcross to correct those imperfections. Otherwise you just go kennel blind and paint yourself into a corner. With health hazards you have to be extra careful. But the same advice applies to outcrosses: watch out that you don't get those hazardous genes into your line. In an outcross you get unknown genes and traits which you could not predict. Be aware and awake!

Another piece of advice is: always be your own judge. If you cannot evaluate your own dogs and have to depend on other people to do it, you won't make it as a breeder. You have to know your own breeding and your own line.

It's fun when other people recognize your dogs, but if you have to make a choice between a dog that you like a lot and a dog that the judges like, I would much rather take the one I prefer myself.

We have been lucky because the judges have rewarded our best dogs. There are only a few judges who can give an accurate opinion about my dogs. I can spend generations to get smaller ears but 99% of the judges don't even notice it. Then there is one who says "you have improved the ears, Es-

pen". Hurray! "Thank you. I did it for me, but thank you for noticing it."

And as a breeder of course it helps to be an active judge. I am fortunate to see the breed all over the world and I know where it's going, I am not as likely to be fooled by pictures on the Internet.

But you don't have to be a judge to know a dog's anatomy, and knowledge of basic anatomy is something you must have in order to be a good breeder.

### *When is it time to give up some of your own breeding lines?*

I have watched some people go on breeding when they have lost the quality – and that's terrible. There might be a time in any breeder's life to realize that this isn't working. When the quality has gone down, it's time to stop.

Another reply to the question is this: if you come to a point where you have got something really bad and you cannot get rid of it, it's time to quit that line.

Right now we have this new problem (neuropathy) with Greyhounds, and we just have to face it and do something about it. We cannot live with the fact that many puppies are dying. We have been lucky with it in our own breeding, with no sick puppies for generations.

It's also about not putting all your eggs in just one basket. If you have one beautiful bitch, and you breed her when she is seven years old and the litter is all wrong, then what? Whereas, if that beautiful bitch is bred to outstanding males three or four times, how unlikely is it that you won't get at least one excellent bitch from those litters? It's a matter of planning ahead.

You make yourself vulnerable if you are lazy with your breeding. You can't take a few years' nap and then start all over again. Breeding must be kept going all the time. It's like with children. If you have a years' pause in caring for them, you are living very dangerously.

### *Are there mental problems in your breed?*

In general, not really. But there are Greyhounds that can be nervous, and you have to select them away. I think that's very important, and it's becoming even more important in our current society where aggressive dogs are not tolerated. So the mentality is important in any breed.

Besides, dogs that are afraid of their own shadow are really a big problem for themselves; it's a question of animal welfare. I think that a dog deserves a good life. They probably live to the age of 12, and if they are afraid of their own shadow all those years, it's torture!

It goes without saying that you have to be selective on mentality. Sound temperament and health have to be high on your priority list, no matter what breed you have. That being said, we don't have many mental problems and only moderate health problems in Greyhounds. That's why we have been able to breed more for type, beauty and movement.

But if temperaments were a problem, you'd have to put it high on the priority list. The same goes for health. You can select just a few traits at a time. If you try to select 20 traits, you won't get progress in any of them. You have to figure out what is the most important thing. If mentality and health are in order you can concentrate on other traits; if they are not, you cannot.

### *What do you ask your puppy buyers?*

A lot! I ask them to take care of the puppy in the best possible way, whether it's just a pet or a show dog. I ask them to be sure that they feed and rear it properly. If it's a show quality dog, I ask them to invest in training from an early start: a puppy will never develop into a show dog if it isn't well taken care of. So we have had to say "no thank you" to quite a few people that we don't think will provide the best possible home to a puppy.

I expect the dog to be in perfect condition, and to be kept in the house. We don't sell our puppies to kennels, period. This is a breed that doesn't thrive in a kennel. The dog is miserable, and the owners are miserable because the dog becomes stupid and unclean. The owners hate the dog and it hates the owners. So a Greyhound has to live in a house. Period!

It's also very important to match the quality of a puppy with its home. It's a very stupid thing to sell all your best ones to pet homes that don't show them or promote them; and selling pet quality puppies to show homes gives you the worst possible publicity, because they'll be showing bad dogs. It's important for any breeder's success that the dogs find the right homes.



*Which are the highlights of your career?*

Actually the highlights are every time a litter is born! That is when you harvest the fruits of your brain and your artistic eye. It's the same when judging dogs: it's a combination of your brain and your heart.

You watch as those puppies grow and you see how they fit in the bigger picture, in the puzzle of your breeding. Did you get what you wanted? Did you improve those traits you tried to improve? There is never an absolute match, but did you get closer to what you have been trying to achieve for so many years? That's a real highlight!

There's a certain thrill in going to dog shows, too. Watching Åge win BOB at Westminster with a totally unknown home-bred bitch was something special, and also winning BOB at Crufts with another home-bred. Winning BOB at several World Winner Shows in a row, and going Reserve BIS at the World Show in Dortmund was really fun, just being in that big ring with a big moving dog. The BIS at the Helsinki Winner Show and at Stockholm International have been great experiences. We have bred more than 30 individual BIS winners and have had almost as many national specialty BOB wins – always a thrill.

I must admit, and I'm not even ashamed of it, that in order to go on year after year I'm inspired by the successes. I don't see anything wrong with that; you need a little reward every now and then. There are breeders who keep on breeding generation after generation and then come out with something great. Good for them! But I'm so simple minded that I need some rewards at certain frequencies. It keeps me going, and it gives me feedback that I'm going in the right direction.