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PART SIX IN A SERIES

The Wild Stare is taking an extended look at genetics, selective breeding and how some breeding practices can adversely affect a breed. Let's look at how one breeder resorted to an extreme breeding programs to fix what she believed were problems in a beloved breed.

For my 13th birthday, I got a German shepherd, a breed I loved since watching Rin-Tin-Tin's heroics on television. Such a mighty, commanding dog. My dog King became my best friend and we roamed the hills and woods near my house every day, every summer.

I lived near Huntsville, Alabama, home to NASA and the military's Redstone Arsenal. The city had a strong German influence ever since Werhner Von Braun brought his team of rocket scientists there at the end of World War Two, and several of the soldiers on the base had served in Germany. German Shepherd, many of them shipped from Germany, were prevalent in the city.

Years later, I looked into getting another one. I loved the breed's near-human intelligence, intense focus, rock solid temperament and majestic look. I hadn't followed the breed closely for many years. So, I was stunned to see the modern version of the GSD. It's top line sloped so it looked permanently crouched. I read of aggression problems,

instability, fear-biting, an increase in hip dysplasia, genetic disease and a host of allergies. This wasn't the breed I knew at all.

Observers blamed puppy mills and backyard breeders, indiscriminate breeding for profits. I got an Irish wolfhound, instead.

Tina M. Barber tried a different solution. The New York breeder in 1974 launched a selective breeding program to recreate the German Shepherd she'd loved as a child in Germany. She ended up with the [Shiloh Shepherd](#), a thicker coated, larger, bigger boned and mentally and physically stable dog.

The Shiloh Shepherd isn't currently recognized by any major kennel clubs, but it's used in therapy work, search and rescue, herding and agility events.

For her program, she collected health data from as many littermate as possible, tracking generations of GSDs to see how their genetics played out before picking breeding candidates to move her closer to her idea of big, intelligent, reliable shepherd with good health, sound hips and straight, strong backs. Within a decade, her line was easily recognizable.

She withdrew her stock from the American Kennel Club and registered her line independently so she could bring in fresh genes to reach her goals. She introduced a malamute and a line of old Wurttemberger style German Shepherd known as

the Texas Woolies to boost size and bone mass and lock in the intelligence and calm temperament she wanted. Then, she continued to refine the breed through selective breeding.

The new breed isn't without problems. Like wolfhounds, because of fast growth and weight, young Shiloh Shepherds can't exercise heavily and their joints must be protected. Bloat is also a threat, as it is with wolfhounds and most big breeds. But overall, the new breed seems to be free of many of the health problems now plaguing GSDs.

It's one solution to genetic problems in a long-standing breed....