

## **BREEDING AND WHELPING**

By Dr Peter Larkin – Booksale Bull Terriers  
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First ask yourself one question. Should you breed from your bitch?

What are your motives in wanting to breed from her? If she is a show bitch and you have had some success in the ring with her the motive is obvious because you have become at least a potential breeder, in which case my warning that your hobby will keep you poor, lose you most of your more sensible friends (but can make you some other very good ones) and drive you insane with frustration will have no effect on you. But never try breeding from your bitch in the expectation that it will make you money, or because that nice couple down the road say you should, and that they would love to have a puppy from the litter - when ten healthy puppies arrive, what do you do with the other nine?

Neither should you breed from a bitch "because it will do her good". It won't. There is no evidence whatsoever that having a litter will improve the bitch's later health or that it will "settle her down", although I acknowledge that a litter will sometimes help to mature a bitch physically - but that is something that should be better left to the decision of an experienced breeder.

There are more myths and legends about dog breeding than almost any natural phenomenon, and I have met most of them as a veterinary surgeon, so most of my comments are about what usually happens, not some sort of absolute rule.

A young bitch will usually come into season for the first time at about nine months of age. But plenty will have their first season as early as seven months and an occasional bitch will miss her first season all together and wait until she is over a year old. If she shows no sign of "coming in" by the time she is eighteen months old veterinary hormonal treatments are sometimes prescribed and will usually result in eventual season, although the fertility to this season is often low. But may "kick start" normal cycles. Bitches should not be bred until they are over a year old.

Coming into season may or may not be marked by previous swelling of the vulva, but it is considered, for timing purposes, to begin on the first day that blood is seen at the vulva. From then on the "correct" day to mate the bitch is extremely variable. The problem is that there are two hormonal systems in action. The one controls the signs of heat - bleeding, swelling, acceptance of the male while the other system controls true oestral activity maturation and release of the ripe eggs in the bitch's ovary. And the two systems are not always in perfect synchronization. Occasionally true oestrus may occur early in season, even as early as the seventh or eighth day, and equally may occur very late in the bitch's season. Under natural circumstances the bitch will be mated from the first day that she will accept the dog until she refuses, and conception rates in those circumstances are usually high. But in controlled matings it is not enough, even for the experts in our midst, to choose the day on which they "always mate the bitch" and leave it at that. There are signs that a bitch is receptive without actually trying the dog; she will stand, flick her

tail and generally behave in a flirty (not to say embarrassing) manner, and experienced breeders recognize these signs, which commonly, but by no means exclusively, start to occur at about ten or eleven days into season. But if she shows signs earlier, try her earlier. From the day the bitch will accept a dog she would ideally be mated every second day until she refuses, but conception rates rise dramatically if a bitch is mated at least twice, again at forty eight hour intervals, from her first acceptance, rather than being satisfied with a single mating on the "correct" day. It is not necessary to mate the bitch each day because both the sperm and eggs have a reasonable length of life in the uterus. But it is necessary to continue to mate the bitch until she refuses the dog because occasionally, and quite normally, she may not ovulate until late in season, sometimes as late as the seventeenth or eighteenth day.

Pregnancy lasts about sixty three days from ovulation. And when does ovulation occur? I don't know. So it is assumed that pregnancy lasts for sixty three days from the successful mating. And which one is that? I don't know. But our experience suggests that if the bitch is obviously in whelp and she shows no sign of whelping by about sixty seven days after her last mating, consult your veterinary surgeon. You will I hope already have let him, or her, give the bitch a checking over. Many old fashioned vets can usually tell at four weeks into the pregnancy that a bitch is in whelp, if she is reasonably cooperative, and this is not a bad time to have the check-up. But in these days of scans you may be asked to wait a little longer. And do not believe the number of puppies that the scan indicates. Two situations may cause an abnormal delay in whelping; if the bitch has a very few foetuses, they may not cause sufficient distension in the uterus to stimulate whelping. And if the bitch has a very large litter the uterus may be over-extended and unable to contract properly. In either case a caesarian section may be needed to produce a healthy litter.

Don't be afraid of a caesar. But do decide early. This is something that you need to discuss with your veterinary surgeon will before the day. Most Bull Terriers whelp naturally, but leaving a caesarian until the bitch is exhausted from trying, or is not trying, results in not only loss of the litter but often enough in the loss of a much loved bitch. Modern surgery, and especially modern anaesthetics, nearly always result in a healthy dam and litter.

Natural whelping almost invariably takes place at the most inconvenient time. If the bitch could have her way it would also take place in the most inconvenient place, but this at least we can control to some extent. So you make the choice, well ahead of time, so that the bitch can get used to her new accommodation. The ideal is a whelping box of adequate but not too large proportions with a top if provided that can be easily lifted off. We have always used a box with "pig rails" to prevent the bitch over-lying her puppies - some Bull Terrier bitches can be very clumsy, and I have made a whelping box for our bitches that can easily be taken apart for storage. (The assumption I suppose, is that we shall have other litters, but not so often that we need to clutter up the bedroom all the time.)

Approaching whelping is supposed to be indicated by the bitch going off her food. But this is a Bull Terrier. She will either have not eaten at all for six weeks, in which case you won't notice anything different, or she will continue

to eat right up to, or even throughout whelping. Fairly reliable though, her temperature will drop slightly for a few days before whelping, and then rather dramatically twenty four hours before the event, perhaps to as low as thirty six degrees. She will usually scrabble her bed up before whelping, but again, she may start to do so several days before the event, mainly to ensure that you get not sleep for as long as possible - you will certainly get none for a few weeks after the event.

Whelping is usually divided into three occurrences, but without distinct intervals. Stage one is normally accompanied with a great deal of panting and restlessness. It is the time at which the birth canal is enlarging and opening under pressure from the uterus, and Bull Terriers often expect lots of comforting from their owners. The first sign of real activity is the appearance of the first placenta which pushes out of the vulva like a dirty fluid filled bubble of some plastic material. The fluid has a function, it is helping to enlarge the canal, and stimulating contractions, so do not puncture it in the hope of speeding up the process. After sometime some very heavy pushing part of a puppy will appear within the placenta. It is quite normal for the puppy to disappear again, so don't panic if it does. And puppies will be born head first or tail first, and the latter is not the dreaded "breech birth" of Victorian drama.

The rules of whelping are, first, interfere as little as possible (but nobody ever obeys that one), and second, so long as there is activity, and the bitch seems to be making progress, do not panic. And as even the most experienced breeder invariably panics at this stage, my advice can only be to ring the vet. This will be at 2.00 am and he will tell you to let him know how things are in another hour. By which time she will have produced her first puppy. Ideally the bitch will clean the placenta off the puppy herself (only now it is called the afterbirth). She may eat the afterbirth, and disgusting as it seems this is a good thing. The placenta contains hormones that aid the post-whelping contractions of the uterus.

In first litter bitches in particular there may be quite a long interval between the births of the puppies, even an hour or two, but rule two still applies: if there is progress, do not panic. This is frankly a difficult decision. If the delay between births is prolonged it may indicate that a caesarian is necessary to remove a puppy or puppies from an exhausted bitch, and exhausted bitches are poor anaesthetic risks, so the decision has to be taken before it gets to that stage. The problem is fortunately rare.

The third stage of whelping is the expulsion of the afterbirths. This is usually accompanied with very little effort by the bitch. Many experts will tell you that you must count these afterbirths to make absolutely certain that none are left behind. If you are very lucky you will be able to convince yourself that you have counted the same number as there were puppies. I never have. The bitch may have eaten one or more while you had momentarily turned away to have a sip of your coffee, she may have produced twins in a single afterbirth, or you simply didn't see what had happened. By this stage you will be too tired to panic and if it is any comfort, I not only have been able to count the right number of afterbirths, I've never seen post-whelping metritis either, although I am assured it can happen. Perhaps in my next forty eight years as a vet.