

THE BEAUTY OF MODERATION

by Andrew Brace

From the time when dog shows first began, breeders have striven to produce examples of excellence in their given breed, given the historical purpose of the breed and the written blueprint of perfection in that breed, namely the Breed Standard. Whilst breeds were being developed, the main priorities would have been functional construction, correct and sound movement for the breed, the specific coat type and right sort of temperament. Initially it was a case of getting the “nuts and bolts” right, and then when dogs reached a certain level of correctness, other factors would have come into play – the level of presentation of dogs, the way they conducted themselves in the show ring and indeed the skill of their handlers. Once a breed had reached a plateau, these extraneous factors were bound to figure in the equation and influence judges’ decisions, and breeders found themselves looking for anything that would give them an edge over their competitors, and invariably that led to them looking for “excitement” in the dogs they produced.



The ideal dog, from the NCA Illustrated Guide

This excitement could manifest itself in one of several ways. To the purist, they could sense excitement from a dog whose overall balance was utterly correct for the breed, who had a head and expression that simply screamed the breed, and whose temperament was such that, whilst it handled the most rigorous of show situations, remained typical for the breed it aimed to represent.

To others, excitement was more easily identified in the form of exaggerating one aspect of the dog – a shorter back, longer neck, bigger head, longer coat or whatever, and invariably in a temperament which, whilst perhaps not being typical for the breed, lent itself to the show ring – the highly-strung dog, always on its toes, always looking over its shoulder, and never relaxing for a moment.

No matter how biased we may be, we have to admit that in the process of trying to breed a better one, some breeds have improved yet others have not. Exaggeration through putting appearance before performance has transformed some breeds into mere caricatures of their ancestors and given scant regard to the functions for which these breeds were

originally developed. Whilst we, as judges, are unable to say that any given dog can pull a sledge, retrieve a duck, or bring down a boar, we should with some degree of confidence be able to say that it has the mental and physical makeup to do so if required and appropriately trained.

In the history of many breeds, it is a documented fact that key dogs were produced that did in fact possess exaggeration of one kind or another, and that, when sensibly used, these dogs contributed to their breed's progress. However, when a breed improves to the extent that the majority of specimens have reached an acceptable level of type, conformation, movement, and temperament that bring them into close line with the relevant Breed Standard, then exaggeration in any form can no longer make a worthwhile contribution to that breed. In fact, to condone such exaggerations is to hinder and beleaguer the breed.

True fanciers and connoisseurs of a breed that is established to a high degree are much more impressed with classic breed type than they are with flat-catchers and fancy animals that so quickly take the eye of the uninitiated. Furthermore, they will be rightly concerned by the fact that dogs that are rather "offbeat" can so easily make their presence felt at group and Best in Show level, possibly at the expense of other dogs that remain more faithful to their own particular Breed Standard.



The ideal bitch, from the NCA Illustrated Guide

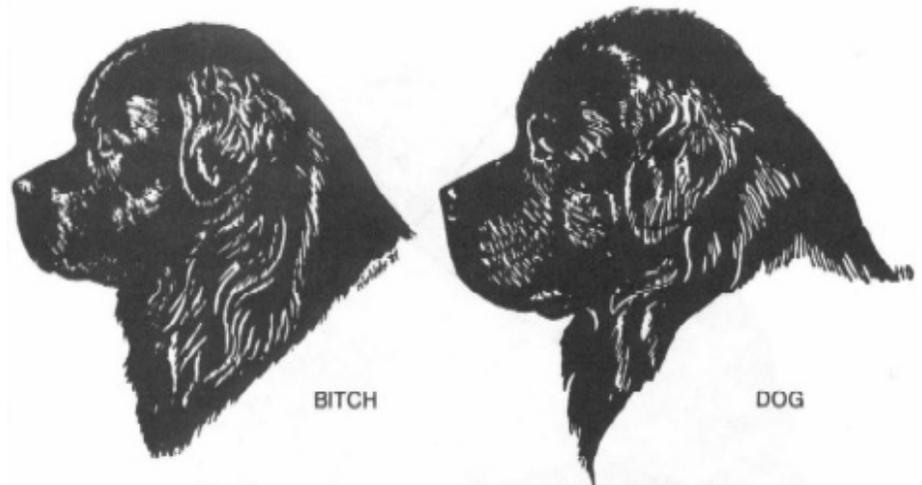
Thankfully, we still have amongst us many old-time breeders who have watched breeds develop, reach a peak, and then slowly drift away to join the generic masses. The comments of such people when they visit modern dog shows can be most enlightening and should always be listened to and considered. What may be thought of as superficial characteristics in the modern show dog are often considered to be hallmarks of the breed by the old school, and their regret at the loss of these characteristics should be heeded.

Whilst judges can only judge the dogs the exhibitors place before them, it is their responsibility to show loyalty to the breed rather than any individuals. Oftentimes we are told that all judges can do is interpret a Breed Standard, using their natural eye, which is a rather simplistic view of the judge's remit. It is true that the Standards give us a written description of perfection – some to a greater or lesser extent – but no Breed Standard

really goes far enough in giving any of its readers a real “feel” for the breed. That will only come through detailed study of a breed’s history, right through its stages of development. With careful study, and wherever possible consultation with our elders who remember past generations, Breed Standards can begin to take on a totally different perspective. Rather than simply reading that a dog should have a dish face with flaring nostrils, research should inform us as to why that breed required this characteristic. It is a simple exercise to mentally create a blank sheet and ask ourselves what this breed was developed for, and then clearly analyse what specifics would enable it to excel at its job – and even the most glamorous and utilitarian of breeds have good reasons “Why” if you look hard enough.

As our blank sheet begins to fill we can establish in our own heads what is important in any breed – what gives any breed its essence – and these characteristics should always be prioritized in our heads. Whenever we judge any breed we should be ever conscious of the “must haves” and rank the cosmetic and superficial much lower on our list of priorities.

In recent times one of the trends in so many breeds that take dogs away from typical is extremely over-angulated hindquarters and the accompanying dramatically sloping topline – in breeds that call for level toplines and moderate angulation. To some this dysfunctional fault may appear attractive and flashy but to those who understand balance and function it jars the eye because of its incorrectness. All too often dramatically over-angulated hindquarters go hand-in-hand with upright fronts that lack angulation and length of upper arm.



Correct heads, from the NCA Illustrated Guide

Of course, the Breed Standard is an essential tool of the judge, but the reality of the situation is that a deep knowledge of where a breed has come from is guaranteed to place any judge in a better position to be able to steer it in the right direction and contribute to where it is going. If our concerns are to be alleviated, it is imperative that the new generation of judges spend as much time understanding why breeds were developed to look as they do and how their original purpose contributed to what they should look like.

The reality is that the really great dogs are not necessarily those who possess one extreme eye-catching feature, but those who are so perfectly balanced and correctly constructed that everything fits and flows, no one aspect of the dog overshadowing the whole. These are dogs who draw the eye by virtue of their overall picture and their classic type; furthermore, these are the dogs who are more likely to contribute to their breed's progress. Unfortunately, only the connoisseur will recognize and reward them whilst many judges are fooled by the extrovert show dogs who may be inferior to the dogs who are far less extreme, yet much closer to their Breed Standard.

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