

FROM THE SKEPTIC TANK

INSIGHTS INTO BREED STANDARDS

Dr Al Grossman

We have all heard a variety of references to soundness. It may be, "I don't care for so and so's dog but he is sound", or "isn't so and so lovely, and so sound too". Various words have been used to define "sound." Some of them are (1) free from flaw, defect or decay, undamaged or unimpaired, (2) healthy, not weak or diseased, robust of body and mind. Continuing, there are flawless, perfect, sturdy, dependable, reliable, etc. Are you beginning to get the picture?

Most breeds have been bred for a purpose, and as such, are required to have the stamina and traits necessary to perform that function, coupled with the necessary instincts. Thus, soundness should mean that the animal is able to carry out the job for which it is intended. It should mean the animal is free from flaw, healthy (both mentally and physically), capable of lasting endurance if required, and dependable. Theoretically, the basic purpose behind breeding dogs for the show ring is to produce specimens that most nearly approach this ideal. Thus type and style are also prerequisites for the title. However, type and style alone do not (and should not) make a champion.

I hear voices in the background saying "Oh yeah! I've seen some very typey, but basically unsound dogs attain their championship". Sadly that's true but not the norm. With enough money to show a dog FOR A LONG TIME WITH AN EXCELLENT HANDLER, IT HAS BEEN PROVEN THAT MANY A FLASHY BUT POOR DOG CAN FINISH ITS CHAMPIONSHIP.

It is practically impossible to divorce type from soundness completely, for it might be said that soundness is the cause and type the effect. I have always used the analogy from home building that soundness is the basement and framework of the building. Type is the goodies added on to make it a livable house. Expression, coat, etc, define your final impression of the dog.

It should be pointed out that a sound dog is not necessarily championship material, since the word "show" itself connotes that a little more is required.

Generally speaking, when a breeder describes a sound specimen, he means a dog without a major fault. Using the Standard as a guide, however, even the best dogs have traits that should not be perpetuated actively. It is wrong to conclude that because a top specimen possesses an undesirable trait, that trait can suddenly become good and desirable. Unfortunately, there are those who completely ignore and bypass the Breed Standard in frenzied attempts to secure winners or create a "novel" color to enhance puppy sales. Standards have often been criticised as being too vague, as being obsolete in sections, etc. However, it is one thing to read a Standard and quite another to discern what the Standard actually means.

It would be almost impossible for any one judge or breeder to render an interpretation of a breed Standard and say, "this is it!" However, there are certain traits actively sought after by breeders, even though the Standard plainly says those traits are not desirable. One that comes to mind is the excessively heavy coats on Cocker Spaniels, although the Standard explicitly states "excessive coat shall be SEVERELY penalised". There are also other prevailing ideas held by the fancy that has no basis in their Standard.

Dr E H Barnes writing in Australia's National Dog Magazine pointed out that that it is common at dog shows to hear the winners criticised for failure to meet the Standard. The critics quite sincerely insist that the rear angulation was not in accordance with the Standard's requirements, that the eye color was too light, and that the ears did not break as required, etc. No mention is made of the ways in which the losing dogs failed to measure up to specifications of the Standard.

It is, of course, unlikely that any specimen meets the requirements of his breed's Standard EXACTLY.

The judge has merely rendered an opinion that the merits of the winner are more important than his demerits. He has cast up a balance sheet and has concluded the assets of one dog exceed his liabilities by the greatest margin. Although these critics stop short of actually asserting that ribbons should be withheld from any dog that deviates from the Standard in any respect that really is the implication.

One also hears the "experts" criticise dogs with respect to fine points which are desirable in the breed, but about which the breed Standard is either non specific or silent. These experts are also found voicing their views in breed columns of various magazines but especially on the Internet. Theirs is a pontifical posture, with regards to the Breed Standard as merely a primer for the novice. They, the "experts," know what an excellent specimen should really look like. Too often the "ideal" characteristics can be seen only in one of their own dogs. Checking on the quality dogs they have produced one finds a paucity of top-notch dogs and abundance to dogs that have accumulated the necessary 15 points.

These attitudes are unrealistic in opposite ways. One displays a blind and naïve worship of the Breed Standard. The other treats it in a cavalier fashion. Both err in being extremes, one falling in a ditch on one side of the road, and the other goes off on the other side. One assumes the Breed Standards are immutable and eternally correct. The other ignores the fact that all of the requirements for a breed about which there is formal consensus are incorporated in the Standard. All other statements about the characteristics, which a breed "ought" to display or "should not" display, are not fact but opinion only. Such statements should be characterised clearly as such. Forming or voicing such opinions on matters not covered by the AKC Standard is neither wrong nor undesirable. On the contrary, forming or voicing such opinions is a good thing to do if done constructively.

There is objection, however, to those who would modify the Standards by personal fiat, those who attempt to use their authority or position to subvert the legislative process established for the creation of Standards.

There is such a process, and it contains safeguards against errors and excesses. Breed Standards by their very nature (and AKC's attitude toward radical changes) tend toward the conservative. Radical changes seldom appear, so stability of a breed is promoted. Just read the proposed changes in the AKC Gazette to assure yourself of this fact. Although provision is made for evolution and improvement of breeds, revolution is prevented. A dog that is acceptable today most likely will be acceptable next year.

Breed Standards are necessarily retrospective. They can only describe the most desirable features of dogs that have previously existed. They cannot anticipate the development of features that may occur and that may be valued as improvements. Any one who has seen pictures of great dogs of the past, and has compared them with pictures of current winning dogs cannot doubt that such changes have occurred in the past.

Contrary to popular opinion, improvements in the breeds have not been the result of breeders working toward the realisation of an absolute vision of perfection described in the Breed Standards.

Efforts to breed to type have maintained past improvements. They have been conservative rather than progressive. It has been the latitude provided by the Breed Standards, allowing the exhibition of specimens with minor deviations from the former ideal that has resulted in the evolution of the breeds. If the Breed Standards allowed no deviation from past ideals of perfection, no progress could be achieved.

Although it has been argued that many of the changes that have occurred should not be characterised as improvements, it is obvious that these changes could not have come about without the approval of the judges, the breeders, and the dog-owning public. However, it should be clear that it is the dog, not the Standard, which leads the evolutionary process. The Standard is the RATCHET that keeps us from slipping backwards.

In interpreting the breed Standard, a breeder or judge must draw his first impression in the evaluation of any specimen in his mind's eye. However, to understand a written Breed Standard completely, a true student of the breed must first have a clear picture of what he considers "ideal." This mental picture WILL VARY FROM PERSON TO PERSON of course, and will change considerably as a breeder and/or a judge becomes more experienced.

References: Beauchamp, Richard, Solving the Mysteries of Breed Type, Doral Publishing, 2002, Grossman, Alvin, The Standard Book of Dog Breeding, Doral Publishing, 1992, Grossman, Alvin, "Faults and Double Faults", The American Cocker Review, March 1980

Dr Grossman judges all Sporting Dogs and BIS.. He is the highly successful author of six books and over 100 articles about Pure Bred Dogs. His syndicated column "From the Skeptic Tank" is carried in many magazines in the US and in Australia. He has judged and lectured in fourteen foreign countries. Dr. Grossman was a four term president of the American Spaniel Club and also served two years as president of the U.S. Lakeland Terrier Association He is currently CEO of a website dedicated to mentoring the new and novice breeder at www.winningsolutions.info

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Dr. Alvin Grossman has been a highly successful breeder, and internationally famous judge, an author of seven dog books and the publisher of Doral Publishing, one of the top publishers of books about dogs. His column "From the Skeptic Tank" is syndicated worldwide.

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