

Gait and the breed standard

by Lavina Diamanti

If a dog is made correctly it will move correctly, or so the saying goes. But just because a dog is sound and moves well doesn't mean it is moving correctly for its breed. The low head carriage and stealth-like gait of the Border Collie is very different to the brisk gait of the Belgian Shepherd Dog and you wouldn't want either of them moving like a German Shepherd. Likewise, we wouldn't want a Bulldog to move like a Staffordshire Bull Terrier and the high stepping, hackney-like gait of the Miniature Pinscher is just so wrong in most other breeds. As judges, we are expected to understand sound movement and it is expected that we wouldn't reward a dog that was unsound or lame. But how much should we penalise a dog that doesn't move correctly for the breed but is still sound?

One of the challenges we face in the modern world of dog showing is the tendency to show dogs at a fast pace with lots of flash, dash and pizzazz. Our challenge is to evaluate these dogs for correct movement, not just sound movement, and that isn't always easy to do when the handler and dog are moving at breakneck speed!

I believe that, partially as a result of this, we are seeing an increase in "generic" show dogs because that is what is often winning. Some breeders will invariably focus on breeding to win regardless of whether it is correct for the breed. So back to answering my original question: I believe we, as judges, have a responsibility for the future of the breeds to reward correct movement, not just sound movement.

Long before I was a judge, my breed was Pyrenean Mountain Dogs. They are a majestic breed, capable of covering long distances at an economical gait. Picture the mountains and hills of the Pyrenees in France and these magnificent dogs constantly checking the boundaries of the flock for predators. The breed standard calls for a gait that is "unhurried" and this aptly describes the breed's typical movement. To my delight, I had judges who understood the breed and complimented me on moving my dogs at the correct speed. However, on more than a few occasions, I had judges comment that they would have preferred my dogs to move faster. Huh? This experience taught me not all judges understand the difference between sound movement and correct movement.

We see so few examples of some breeds that it isn't always easy to identify which of the exhibits (if any) show correct gait as there is little to compare against. We also have cases where the correctly moving dog isn't being recognised because it is the odd one out. The stilted gait of the Chow Chow is an important characteristic of the breed but Chows with reach and drive are being seen more frequently. So how much value should we place on the correctly moving dog? One experience sticks with me while judging overseas. The standard of this particular breed calls for single tracking and it gives a detailed description of what is required. One of my entrants

was a beautiful bitch with super breed type but she failed to single track and moved quite wide both front and rear. What to do? My decision was to award her reserve of breed. However, the judge the following day took her all the way through to Best in Show. Who was right and who was wrong? You can decide, but I chose to place a bit more emphasis on the movement as required in the standard whereas they chose to reward all the other qualities she possessed.

Living in the 21st century gives us a huge advantage over judges of previous generations. Dog shows are being live streamed around the world and YouTube has a huge collection of dog showing videos so study material is only a digital click away. We know that we have the power to influence a breed and where we see a decline in breed type then I believe we, as judges, have a duty to place a lot of value on dogs that display those traits that are in danger of being lost. Here are my thoughts on how we can assist:

- Study beyond the written standard the requirements of the correct gait for the breeds you are judging.
- Talk to breeders and specialist judges. Keep questioning until you have a clear picture in your mind of what is correct.
- Don't be fooled by fast-paced handlers. If necessary, request they slow down to the speed you want to see the dog gaited at.
- Be aware of trends that are heading a breed in the wrong direction.
- Don't be blinded by a dog's reputation and previous wins.
- Be aware that the odd one out may just be the correct one. 🐾

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Important Dates

17 March	Theory exams
27/28 June	Auckland practical exams
4/5 July	Christchurch practical exams
11/12 July	Wellington practical exams (if required)