

NZDJA

A matter of type - Take two

by Lavina Diamanti

In my column for September 2017, I wrote about the 'flatcatcher' in the show ring. You know the one: all flash and expertly handled, which often does a huge amount of winning, but due to its departure from breed type is not a great representative of its breed.

Given the commentary around the shows at the moment it seems timely to re-visit this subject. Breed specific knowledge is vitally important if we are to preserve breed type, and we, as judges, have more influence on the direction of a breed than you might care to realise. I will re-iterate that a must-read is Louis Donald's article on the changes to the German Shepherd breed and how this came about. It is significant in its demonstration of how judges' decisions can change a breed so dramatically. This article is on the NZDJA website under Resources/Training tools and Articles, www.nzdogjudge.com/member-resources/.

I am not, or never will, advocate that we 'all rounders' should have the knowledge of a specialist judge in all the breeds we are licenced to judge. It is just not possible. And if an exhibitor wants a specialist's opinion, then the specialist shows are the place for that. But... we do have a duty to preserve breed type and in particular the 'not negotiables' in the breed standards.

To be fair, in some cases the breed standards are what I would call flowery and vague and really leave it to the judges' interpretation. But most standards will include commentary about what are the not negotiables and in doing so they will use words like 'must' and 'important' as opposed to 'should' and 'desirable'. The term 'must' is commonly used to express any unavoidable requirement or obligation. On the other hand, 'should' is used as a probability, obligation, advice, recommendation.

So when we see that a breed standard uses these strong expressive words for description then we need to take extra notice of these points when judging. For example, when a standard states "The coat is a very important feature" or "The nose must be black" then we have no option but to penalise exhibits that deviate from what is required in the standard. How much we penalise will depend on the description and the deviation.

Now I am not advocating that we all start fault judging, and I'm not saying for one minute that I know it all — far from it — but I am suggesting that we should all know what are the important features in a breed and reward those that excel in those features. Talk to any long-time breeder and they will tell you what characteristics judges are not checking for and what is changing in their breed because of it. In my own breed, the Shetland Sheepdog, we don't very often see judges correctly assessing the head and yet the head, together with the correct eye shape, are points that the standard

gives particular emphasis to. As a result, we are in danger of losing that sweet expression which the standard states is one of the most marked characteristics of the breed.

It is easy to blame the breeders: they are the ones selecting the progeny they keep for breeding and showing, and we can only judge what is in the show ring. But the breeders are often influenced by what is winning and, after all, isn't that why we show dogs? But if the judges don't reward deviation from correct breed type or the flatcatcher doesn't constantly win, then in many cases, breeders will also follow that trend. We all know that isn't easy, especially when you have a breed which has already departed from type, and we have become very familiar with what is being exhibited. But we must always remember: sometimes the odd one out is the correct one.

So how do we learn and who is responsible for educating our judges? Is it the breeders, the judges or the NZDJA branches? I think we all need to take responsibility. If you are a breeder, do you host kennel visits and lectures for judges' education? Do you enter your dogs at NZDJA Practical Examination shows? Do you offer to discuss your breed with new judges? I have heard many reasons (excuses?) given as to why a breeder won't support our judges' education process but if our breeders don't support us, how can we learn? If you are a judge, did you read the breed standard just enough to get you through the examination process or do you really try to understand the breed with research and reading beyond the Dogs New Zealand breed standard? Do you approach breeders to get an insight into their breeds and study the really important features?

This is a subject that has been debated for years and there is no magical answer. But if we all made a commitment to supporting our judges and their education and similarly, all our judges made a commitment to become masters in the craft of dog judging, we just might be able to preserve breed type as per the written breed standard. Now wouldn't that be a wonderful thing? 🐾

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