

NZDJA NZ Dog Judges Association Inc

History and the breed standard

by Lavina Diamanti

In recent years, NZDJA examiners have put a greater emphasis on the history of the breeds and candidates are expected to be able to explain how that history dictates the form and function of the breeds they are being examined on.

Some may question the importance of breed history and why judges would need to know this: after all, it is a dog show. Experienced judges, however, will tell you that without the history and knowledge of a breed's original purpose, one cannot truly understand the form and function and the intention of those early breeders who wrote the original breed standard.

New Zealand breed standards vary in content and description from the very simplistic Foxhound to the detailed Boxer and everything in between. Many contain general descriptive words such as 'fairly', 'good', 'sloping' and so on. Often this doesn't give us sufficient direction. Define fairly. Or good. Compared with what? And what about sloping? How sloping? 30 degrees, 40 degrees? Even with the most detailed standards, there seems to be an expectation that judges and breeders will have an understanding of the form and function of a breed, and if the Foxhound is your specialty, then I would think you have been expected to be a 'hound person' to truly understand what was required. The total description of the head in the New Zealand Foxhound standard is 'Skull broad' and there is no comment about temperament, coat, colour, size or gait. So without delving into the origins and history of the breed, how would we have any chance of understanding what a Foxhound should really look like? I do not believe we should base this knowledge solely on what we have seen in the show ring. This is where history comes into play, and this is where we, as judges, must understand the history, the breeds' origins, and their intended purpose to ensure the characteristics and breed features are not lost forever.

To be fair, the history of some breeds is a little obscure and has become embellished over time, but the majority of breeds have evolved in the last few hundred years and these beginnings are reasonably well documented. All dog breeds descended either from dogs that were of certain type — such as sighthounds — or created by people for a specific purpose by crossing various breeds to obtain the required characteristics. All breeds have some written records of their origins and it is these that give us direction on how we should judge them in the ring today.

Our relationship with dogs determined that breeds were developed for a purpose and, even if they were bred to be a companion to royalty, their breed type was dictated by that purpose. When we start delving into breed history, we get a much better understanding of the breed characteristics. For some breeds their original purpose

has a strong bearing on their construction, the Dachshund being a very good example. The gamekeepers of Germany some 300-plus years ago required a dog that could go to ground and hunt the badger and other farm pests. The ability to dig while underground, back up to exit the badger setts, navigate around rocks and tree roots without getting stuck plus have the extra lung capacity to cope with the limited oxygen and have its own armament of jaws and teeth when confronted with its adversary, determined a very specific breed type. Add to that the requirement for a pliant skin, ears that could fold back out of the way, a tail that would allow the game keeper to hold if rescue was required and we have a dog built for purpose. A prime example of history and function influencing form.

It is not just the construction and anatomy of our breeds where history dictates type but so many other parts of the dogs as well. A Chesapeake Bay Retriever without the required thick, oily double coat would never have survived in the chilly waters of Maryland and a pack hound with a sharp, unsociable temperament that couldn't work closely with other hounds wouldn't be tolerated by the Huntsman. A Tibetan Terrier navigating the snow-covered terrain of its homeland would struggle with anything but large, round, flat feet to act like a snow shoe and the breeds originating in the Arctic regions would die if they didn't have the required coat for protection including the required length of tail which would act as a mask to filter the frigid air while sleeping curled up in the snow.

Every breed has its own story and unique features. Even if the breeds will never again be expected to perform the tasks that they were bred for, the history behind each breed dictates the origins of breed type and that is what we, as judges, have a duty to uphold. 🐾

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