

NZDJA NZ Dog Judges Association Inc

Heads... you win!

by Lavina Diamanti

How important are heads when we are judging? Should the head be given the same consideration as say, construction or movement?

"But it doesn't run on its head" is a saying I have heard many times during discussions regarding dogs and judging where the head is not the dog's best asset. And that is true: a dog doesn't run on its head. But for so many of our breeds the head is the hallmark of breed type — think Bulldog, Pekinese, Bull Terrier and so on. And for some breeds, the head is what distinguishes them from other, similar breeds.

Many of these breed standards contain very detailed descriptions of the ideal head, and when we see this much detail, or words which direct us as to the importance of the head, then surely we are required to give extra consideration to the quality of the head. When we are consistently seeing exhibits with lesser quality heads, we know those breeds are heading in the wrong direction. So who is responsible: the breeders, the exhibitors?

I think the buck stops with us, the judges, for we are the inspectors in the process. We are the ones who 'sign off' on a dog's adherence to the breed standard. Our role in judging purebred pedigree dogs is to reward correct breed type, and that includes the correct head. Yes, we want sound dogs, and yes, it is a dog show so there will be some measure of showmanship, but fundamentally, at the forefront of our decisions should be breed type. If judges fail to award correct breed type, and that includes correct heads, then as the inspectors in the process we are failing in our job!

Over the years I have heard many reasons as to why judges failed to take head properties into consideration with their decisions. One I have heard many times, "I'm a movement judge". Really? So, you are saying breed type doesn't matter? Another one was, "He was so well presented and handled, and he showed so well." Oh dear, so breed type didn't matter here either? And the most recent, "What does it matter? It's a beauty show." Ouch!

In every judging decision we should be guided by the breed standard. Sometimes, the head and expression is referred to in the General Appearance or Characteristics for added emphasis. The Smooth and Rough Collies and the Shetland Sheepdog all refer to the expression, obtained by the correct head, being an important characteristic of the breed. The Bull Terrier refers to the head shape as a 'unique feature'. The Bracco Italiano states the head is one of the elements giving distinction to the breed. Then there is the Field Spaniel which states that "The head should be characteristic as is that of the Bulldog or the Bloodhound...". In other words, it should be instantly recognisable and distinct from other Spaniels. The Boxer standard devotes over one third of its

description to the head and states in the General Appearance that "Special attention to be devoted to the head."

In each of these breeds the writers of the breed standard added instructions that judges (and breeders) should pay particular attention to the head. But even if the standard doesn't specifically direct us to pay particular attention to the head it doesn't mean we shouldn't. The head of the Great Dane is distinctive and should never resemble a Mastiff. A Keeshond without its distinctive spectacles, well... it just isn't a Keeshond.

As breeders and exhibitors, it is nigh on impossible to get everything we want into one dog and because of this we will compromise. Sometimes the dog with the best conformation and movement doesn't have the best head. As breeders, we will often retain these dogs in our breeding programmes and as exhibitors, we take our chances knowing that sometimes we will win despite it, and sometimes we will lose because of it. As judges, we have to decide what we will reward and what we will forgive. If a breed is in trouble, and heads are lacking type then we have a duty to the future of the breed to reward those exhibits with quality heads. Sometimes an exhibitor or bystander will wonder why we didn't reward the best moving dog in the line-up. Perhaps we were doing our duty to preserve the breed type for future generations.

Happy judging. 🐾

NZDJA National Board

Patroness:	Annette Buxton	Annette.buxton@outlook.com
	Betty Parker	betty.parker@outlook.co.nz
Patron:	Brian Harris	caerlaverock@xtra.co.nz
President:	Ray Greer	shelton117@outlook.com
Vice President:	Keith Brown	parkavon@xtra.co.nz
Secretary:	Robynne Trainor	secretarynzdja@gmail.com
Treasurer:	Mark Lawrence	treasurerNZDJA@gmail.com
North Island:	Linda Strongman	lynmar@xtra.co.nz
	Ashleigh Donaldson-Rogers	ashleighrogers@hotmail.com
	Bronwyn Murdoch	bronwynmurdoch232@gmail.com
South Island:	Lavina Diamanti	lavina.diamanti@gmail.com
	Anna Ansell	annajane.ansell@gmail.com