

Checks and Balances
By
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Recently I read an article in a judge's newsletter that suggested the need for some fundamental changes in dog shows. The writer argued that dog shows are out of step with our times because they are no longer the place to go to evaluate breeding stock. The judge who wrote the article claimed that breeders no longer needed to meet at shows to see what others have bred.

She writes, (parenthetical) "the dog show has become a community of dog lovers where information can be shared; a place where the sport requires training and competence in the ring; a place where one goes to see dogs from other bloodlines that may compliment their own". She further explains, "I think we have become more of a sport and less of a gathering of people who evaluate breeding stock. To that end, I would be totally in favor of allowing neutered or spayed dogs to compete with fully intact dogs. Many people don't have the time, facilities or the talent to breed a litter, yet they enjoy showing their dogs. Why create pressure on them to breed their bitch".

Others would disagree and argue that the fundamental need and purpose of dog shows has increased since their inception over a 100 years ago. We know that the early breeders first used dog shows to compare and test breeding stock. If anything has changed, the shows are bigger, involve more people and include over 150 breeds. These changes suggest that they have not lost their place of importance or their sense of direction. What has changed are the number of venues and the quality of the competition. In addition to conformation and obedience, clubs are hosts for hunting, agility, lure coursing, tracking, herding and earth dog events. When taken together, these venues attract larger entries and they also present new challenges. For example, each year there are more novice breeders who are beginning to test their skills. There are also growing numbers of exhibitors anxious to learn about the sport. In 2001, the AKC reported that entries for all venues exceeded 1.8 million. While there may not be total agreement about the role of each venue, breeders and judges continue to use them as their central place to meet and see the improvements made in breeds.

Before we consider abandoning or changing this time-tested tradition and all of the core values that have successfully been used by breeders for decades, let's examine a few of the key issues. Has the purpose really changed and should dog shows as we know them be abandoned for something else? Let's begin by looking at some facts and some of the ways that shows can be improved.

No one would argue that there are many positive social values and interactions that continue to be an important part of every dog show. The public, exhibitor, judge and breeder each attend for a variety of reasons, but common to all are the dogs and the competition they provide. First and foremost, dog shows remain the place of choice for breeders to see what others consider their best stock based on a breed standard.

On the other hand, not all shows are the same. Some limit their entries to one breed in order to attract those whose common interests and appreciations are focused on a single breed. These are the specialty shows. They are unique in that they provide opportunities to see not only the breadth of a breed, but also its depth and strengths along with the individual characteristics of the best dogs. They are the best places to find a majority of a breed's specialists discussing what corrections are needed and what improvements have taken place. Specialty shows are regional and national in scope. They produce a gathering of people who are all involved with the same breed standard. The All-breed club serves a different purpose. They serve a diverse group of breeders, exhibitors and judges. All-breed clubs host shows that attract more than 150 breeds.

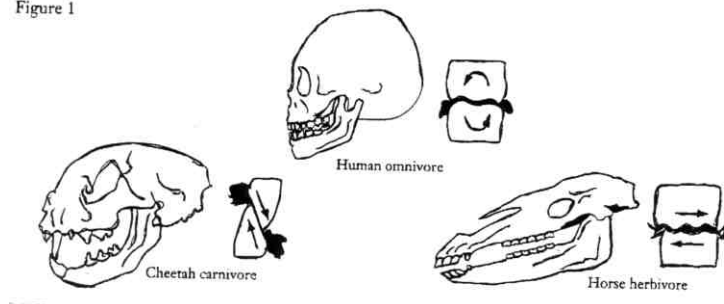
Their goal is to provide a venue where all of the recognized breeds can be observed and judged. In some ways the specialty and all-breed clubs are similar. Both recognize and appreciate the role of the breeder who is central to every event. They recognize the importance of the breeder because they determine what bitches will be bred and which stud dogs will be used. They are key to every event because they produce the pups and provide the puppy buyer's with information about the breed, AKC registration, the importance of positive identification (microchip), DNA, etc. This places them and the shows they attend in the center of the dog world and the sport itself. The common denominators at every event are the dogs, judges, breeders and exhibitors. Common to all of the breeds are their special characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. Many clubs offer continuing education activities, which range from seminars to clinics. These activities continue to make the dog show the key place to meet and discuss dogs. They also produce the opportunities to see the best animals and those who breed them.

Improvements:

There are other reasons for dog shows to be the meeting place for breeders and judges. When a breeder shows a faulty dog in the hopes that it can win, it becomes the judge's job to keep the faulty one from winning. In this sense, the show and the judge become part of a check and balance system. Let's take an example that is a common problem for many breeds such as missing teeth. If breeders ignore the problem it will become worse. After a few generations, missing teeth will spread throughout the breed and over time it will have its adverse effect. In some breeds it will first affect the lower jaw, then the shape of the skull. Once it becomes wide spread there will eventually be a noticeable shift in the appearance of the head.

We need only to look at some history for insight into this matter. Without a doubt, one of the major steps in the evolution of mammals from reptile-like ancestors was the development of their complex chewing apparatus. Unlike fish, amphibians, and reptiles, mammals have four kinds of teeth: incisors, canines, premolars, and molars. Each type plays a different role in food processing and the structure of each differs from species to species according to the diet of the species. But teeth are only one part of the dietary picture. Muscles are needed to put teeth into action. They are designed for breaking particular foods, which explains the size and arrangement of their chewing muscles. Teeth and muscles also vary from species to species in relation to their diet. The size of the head muscles, jawbone and teeth all serve to provide shape and appearance to the head.

Figure 1



For many breeds, the problem begins when breeders and judge's over look a fault. At first, they consider it as just a small and unimportant problem. You should become suspicious that a problem is about to get worse when you hear breeders describe it as "a minor, slight or insignificant deviation from the standard." In the case of missing teeth, the typical expression first begins with the sentence; "they don't walk on their mouth". When repeated often enough, it becomes the rationale for not faulting missing teeth no matter the number that are missing. After the problem has been allowed to spread throughout the breed, certain things about the head begin to change. Usually it is the expression and shape of the jaw. Once this has occurred, a new phrase is used which is also repeated. This time it is of a more serious tone. It sounds something like this.

“Missing teeth have become another serious problem of the breed and our heads are no longer what they used to be”. Scenarios like this involve many traits and are not limited to just missing teeth. When they are heard, there is usually a long track that leads back to a large number of breeders and judges with relaxed attitudes about the breed standard and the purpose of the show.

The old timers know that unless breeders and judge’s work together to make improvements, a breed will slide down hill. It is the judge who determines what is acceptable, who will win and how the standard will be interpreted. When judges become lax in their attitude about breed standards or fail to appreciate a breed’s function, the breeds they judge will suffer. This is why clubs should be careful to invite only those judges to officiate at their shows who they believe will provide a service to their breed. For example, judges who forgive more than they should in areas of temperament, structure and other important breed characteristics, contribute to breeds problems by allowing the less desirable specimens to win and thus perpetuate their faults.

Some judges when they notice a trend will call it to the attention of the breeders through their critiques. Recently, I spoke to a judge who had just finished judging 47 Great Danes at an all-breed show. By the end of the puppy classes he had noticed an unusual number of youngsters with missing teeth. It prompted him to begin to keep count. By the end of his assignment he had totaled 19 out of 47 or 40% that had two or more missing teeth. In conversation with another judge, he learned that she also had a similar experience. At her assignment she noticed that 12 of 21 or 41% had missing teeth. If both of these judges had passed their findings on to the breeders or the parent club, they might have raised the level of awareness before the problem gets out of control. When judges and breeders understand this relationship and how they fit into the equation for making corrections and improvements, a breed can improve. If they don’t, the breed over time will suffer. When I mentioned this scenario to some judges at a judge’s institute, I was surprised by the reaction of a few. One said, “The Great Dane Standard does not fault missing teeth so why should I check them”. Another replied, “That’s true, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t look and give feedback to the club”. *As the reader of this is material, which one of these two judges would you want to judge your breed?*

The notion that the show has lost its place of importance for evaluating breeding stock cannot be supported. With the growing number of inexperienced breeders and the decline in the number of large breeding kennels, the dog show has become the best and most suitable place to evaluate dogs and one of the best places to learn about a breed.

There are always opinions on a subject like this and I would be interested in knowing what the readers think about the future of dog shows and their purpose. Those who would care to comment should drop me a note in care of the editor.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carmen L Battaglia holds a Ph.D. and Masters Degree from Florida State University. As an AKC judge, researcher and writer, he has been a leader in promoting ways to breed better dogs. He is the author of many articles and several books and is a popular TV and radio talk show speaker. His seminars on breeding dogs, selecting sires and choosing puppies have been well received by breed clubs all over the country. Those interested in learning more about his articles and seminars should visit the website <http://www.breedingbetterdogs.com>