

A REMINDER AS TO WHY WE HAVE A BREED STANDARD

by Lori Price

In discussing breed “type”, I think it’s crucial that we don’t lose sight of the history and original standard established for the breed in the country of origin. There is a tendency for Americans to change breeds once they come into this country, evidence being the many breeds here in the USA that after a certain period of time, have changed so radically, they barely resemble the breed in the country of origin. (ex: Springer Spaniels, German Shepherds, various Retrievers)

Once upon a time, dog shows were events where breeders would take their prospective breeding stock to be judged on its suitability for the work for which it was bred. Standards were established by breed clubs in the country of origin as guidelines for breeders to follow so they would effectively perpetuate the breed’s proper type hence its ability to efficiently perform a specific type of work.

In America, dog shows have been beauty contests for the dogs as well as arenas for the raging egos of their owners! In Europe, dogs are still judged as WORKING dogs. Their conformation is judged on suitability for the work for which the breed was originally intended. I think it is particularly important to keep in mind that relatively few owners/breeders (of Swissies) in the USA are at present training or using their dogs for the all-purpose farm work for which they were originally bred: droving, carting, packing, etc.

Many breeders are furthermore reluctant to acknowledge the breed’s natural tendency to be “guardy” – protective of its property and people. It would be prudent to keep in mind the words of the standard – the breed should be “alert and vigilant”. Owning and producing winning show dogs have become the priority of many breeders. Consider this fact: It’s important to recognize that although everyone loves to win at dog shows, stacking a dog and gaiting it around a small ring a couple of times is not a true test to prove that its conformation and temperament are suited to the true WORKING arena. Therefore, many dogs, varying in structure and temperament are winning in the breed ring and getting titles. We all have our own ideas of what we feel the “ideal” Swissy would resemble if we could wave a magic wand. However, the correct conformation and temperament is directly related to the type of work these dogs were bred to do. If there are a lot of individual dogs that vary in appearance, it doesn’t mean they are legitimate “types”. The fact is they may be “typos”!

If Breeder A produces dogs that appear different from those of Breeder B, it only means that the individual dogs vary at different degrees and in different ways from the standard. It is not a reason to justify every variation as legitimate. Such is the reason why an official “standard” was written: so breeders would have a common guideline to follow. This was intended to keep breeders on a specific track – to prevent straying from kennel blindness.

Both the original (FCI) and revised (AKC) standards state that the Swissy “is a draft < and drover> breed and should structurally appear as such”. We need to remember that these dogs were used during the war and on farms primarily for pulling and carrying substantial loads as well as working with livestock. In order to do this kind of work, the dog should ideally have substantial bone and muscle – be a conditioned athlete with a sound temperament. The 10-9 body length – to – height ratio is important in order for a dog to pull substantial weight efficiently. It needs to have sufficient rear angulation and a relatively low center of gravity.

Lastly I present what I feel is a good comparison. Consider the Clydesdale. These tri- colored draft horses have been successfully bred for ages and are best known at the present time from the Budweiser hitch. There are other large horses out there that are bay with white blaze and “socks” (tri-colored) but may also look in some ways like a Thoroughbred or Quarter Horse – lighter boned with different structure, not ideally suited for draft work. Those individuals would not be considered “types” of Clydesdale.

No matter how closely or distantly our own dogs fit the standard, they are all “perfect” to us as their owners! There is no such thing as the “ideal” dog mainly because beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. However, if we as breeders would recognize and accept weaknesses in our own breeding programs and strengths in others’, we could work together through the exchange of both positive and negative feedback, when necessary to perpetuate this wonderful breed.

Let’s not let our “Swissies” become Greater AMERICAN Mountain Dogs!