

## 2 x 0 - (Is Better Than Mediocre Good Enough?)

(by Gay Dunlap, as published in the Canine Chronicle)

It's a lovely day and I am watching Terrier judging from outside the ring. I am sadly disappointed in the quality of the dogs. Later that day I am asked to evaluate a dog, one I had co-bred and not seen since puppy hood. I try to be as gentle as possible in my assessment of the dog. The bottom line is the dog is not of sufficient quality to consider as show or breeding stock. "But I don't understand," the owner says, "He's as good as what was shown today." "Perhaps," I respond, still struggling to speak with compassion. The owner's friend chimes in with, "Yeah, he's certainly every bit as good as what was in the ring." I can stand the drift of the conversation not one second longer. Inside, my Sagittarius nature screams for release. "What's 2 x 0?" I ask. The hue and cry of mediocrity in the show ring seems to be escalating. Exhibitors challenge our senses; many are quick to allege that judging has reached an all time low. I think it is fair to assume such allegations have been around since dog shows first took form. What's a judge to do when faced with a ring full of mediocre dogs, unless he chooses to withhold ribbons, other than to mentally wring his hands and place the "best of the worst"? But there's another sad and dreadful truth here. Some judges don't recognize mediocrity when it stares them in the face. Let's say, for the sake of argument, however, that our judge does. Let's say he or she chooses, rather than withhold, to put up this "best of worst". Following this, might our judge pray the winner will not want a picture? If a picture taken, is a prayer then offered up that it will not be printed? Might this be the criterion for withholding ribbons ... if you wouldn't want your picture taken with the dog, withhold! It's a thought. But I am straying from my subject here. Why are we finding this overload of mediocrity in so many of our breed rings? Where do we put the blame? Certainly, the complexity of the situation is not lost on those of us who seek answers. For starters, with the proliferation of dog shows across our huge country, often as many as five shows in a week's time, anything with four legs and a little money behind it can finish. Not only can it finish...it does finish. Obviously mediocrity must be laid at the feet of the breeder. The truth of the matter is that breeders are not only producing dogs, they are also producing other breeders. It is happening so fast (like breeding rabbits!) that breeders not yet dry behind the ears are mentoring those still in diapers. This in turn creates a state where down-line education is hopelessly flawed. How can an "intermediate" breeder, especially one producing second-rate dogs, be expected to educate a "newbie"? Yet, it is happening, to the detriment of our sport. How much insight into a given breed can someone who's been breeding for 15 minutes offer the novice? Take a look at some of the show win ads in any one of our myriad publications. One telling measure of our exhibitors' knowledge of their particular breed might be to note their ads. How do their dogs appear to stack up vis-à-vis correct breed type? Do we think, 'oh what a lovely specimen' or do we think, 'ye Gods, how could anyone in their right mind print that photo'? Returning to my opening paragraph, the owner of the dog that was "as good as what was in the ring" appears to have reached the conclusion that the dogs being currently exhibited are valid measures for determining quality. Doesn't this become a clear formula for mediocrity when many of the dogs in the ring are themselves run-of-the-mill? However tempting to presume the "newbie" simply does not care, I do not believe this. Most of them simply do not know. Judeo/Christian belief has it that you are not a sinner if you don't know your action is a sin. Buddha, on the other hand, taught that the sin is in not knowing. I tend to agree with the latter teaching. There should be no excuse for not knowing, no excuse for ignorance or for stopping short of striving for perfection. The imparting of wisdom to our neophyte breeder/exhibitors might be as simple as encouraging them to look to the successful "old timers" as a source for clarifying breed type and strengthening their perceptions of correct structure and movement. It is shocking how many of our intermediate breeders have not so much as a cursory knowledge of even the simple basics of canine structure. Recently, following my judging of a national specialty, a relatively new breeder/exhibitor called to tell me she was fascinated sitting ringside and watching my hands. She said that for the first time ever she really understood the process of going over a dog adding that she thought she could almost

feel what I was feeling. Of course, we all know the old adage about “leading a horse to water”... a prime example of this presents itself in the following scenario: “Newbie” asks for the advice of an “old timer” as to the breeding potential of her bitch and is told the bitch was not of sufficient quality to be bred. “Newbie” informs “old timer” she is going to breed the bitch anyway. The dog she has chosen for stud is himself far from quality. “Have you seen the dog?” she is asked. “No,” is her reply. “Have you seen any of his progeny?” Again the response is, “No.” “Why have you chosen this particular dog?” She replies, “Because he is OFA Excellent.” This in a breed hardly beset with hip problems. How about this scenario ... “intermediate” breeder comes up with a health problem in what he calls his “line”. He is three generations down from his foundation bitch. Old time breeder suggests he start over. He is devastated at the thought. No way can he throw away everything he’s worked so hard for. Excuse me folks, but bitches can be bred safely at eighteen months. Gestation period is two months. We are not talking about a lifetime of wasted effort here. Several years ago a very successful and well-known “old timer” shared with me his own devastating tale of the best bitch he ever bred producing a litter of eight pups all of which, having detached from their placentas in utero, died. This, coupled with an earlier problem, led him to the decision to start over. Now, I ask you, how is it that an “old time” breeder can make such a painful decision while the “intermediate” breeder feels his “line” too valuable to lose? Another contributing factor leading to mediocrity is the perspicacity many breeders have to produce large numbers of champions. It’s almost as though there is a race going on. In frenzied fashion, breeders become convinced they have entire litters of show dogs and proceed to create show homes for each puppy. How many champions can I grind out this year? Often they are able to convince those who “only want a pet” to “join in the fun”. If the buyer is well heeled, campaigning their “show dog” becomes an added expense and often includes the price of a professional handler. If the buyer balks at the cost, some breeders will offer a puppy gratis in exchange for allowing it to be shown, the breeder then paying show expenses in order to feed their habit. In the latter case, the breeder is often recompensed with stud fees if it’s a male or with puppies back if it’s a bitch. And the cycle continues, more often than we would like, with unsound dogs of inferior breed type entering the ring. Another day, another show. I am ringside watching a large class of lovely Welsh Terriers. Someone next to me says, “I am green with envy when I see a ring filled with such superb breed type. Wish we could see that in our ring.” So, it’s not all bad news. Where do we look to find a solution for this mediocrity? Many parent clubs incorporate into national specialty weekends an in-depth educational program dealing with basic breed-specific anatomy and conformation presented by an acknowledged authority. We must be ever vigilant in our search for new tools and new ways to improve breeder education. One example of an innovative breeder educational tool is the Pedi-Score Tool Kit, designed by Basset breeder, Claudia Orlandi. It is a recording system that allows breeders to evaluate the conformation features of their own dogs. It also can score genetic makeup and health. Brittany’s Jordean Kennels devised a program entitled THE WINNING FORMULA, How To Establish A Breeding Program. In it is a questionnaire that asks, for example, “Have I found the best possible specimens for my breed?” “Do I understand the breed standard and function?” “Have I read widely on breeding, genetics, whelping and rearing puppies?” “Do I have an eye?” “Have I really done my homework and research?” A comprehensive and well-designed judges education program can suitably double as an instrument for educating breeders.

Only when breeders truly understand the components of correct breed type and sound structure, only when they have the perspicuity to strive for perfection might we stand ringside and be awed by what we see. Only when breeders and exhibitors offer judges excellence do they have the right to complain when the judge doesn’t find it. Post amble ();