

Separating the Wheat from the Chaff_ by Gay Dunlap

(published in the *CANINE CHRONICLE* February 2008)

It starts in the whelping box, the art of separating the superior from mediocre and the evaluation of all that fall between. Or at least it should. The truth of the matter is that, if it did, we judges would not find our job so painful at times. Withholding ribbons is not for the faint of heart. For many, the heart cannot quite cope with handing down such a seemingly cruel verdict. Disqualifying an entrant is yet another issue. Spelled out by the parent club, we are mandated to disqualify when a standard requires it. But even this proves difficult for many. Often a judge's comfort zone is in conflict and speaks louder than the parent club's edict. He may choose to remain in his comfort zone by putting the entrant at the end of the class, ignoring the parent club's mandate, and in doing so is able to walk away from the ring, suffering neither anguish nor guilt.

I recently suffered a bit of both when I found myself in the onerous position of having to measure a dog out. He was, to my eye, noticeably over the standard. To make matters worse, a lovely, beautifully dressed and very competent junior handler was showing the dog. Adding insult to injury, someone in the next class informed me that he dog needed only one point to finish. God, I thought, doesn't this amazingly talented young girl deserve a dog that has no disqualifying faults? Doesn't she perhaps even deserve a great one? I also wondered how this dog, obviously over-sized, managed to get so far. But we all know how it happened, don't we? And my guess is that he is probably a champion by now. It has been months since that incident occurred and the deed still lays heavy on my heart.

This is what exhibitors don't understand. It is painful for many judges to comply with parent club mandates. Those who bit the bullet and comply, often do so at the expense of their own emotional well-being. Likewise, it is never easy to abide by AKC's call to withhold ribbons for lack of merit. Certainly we have seen it done but perhaps never so often as it should. It takes courage of conviction and dedication to maintaining quality breed type in the show ring to withhold. More than that, we have an unspoken responsibility to conduct ourselves in a kind and gracious manner, showing obvious concern for the exhibitor's feelings, the action we hope never taken as mean-spirited. We must have the emotional wherewithal to be sensitive to an exhibitor's bruised spirit.

But, back to where the blame truly should rest. Back to the whelping box and breeders who can't seem to distinguish between good and bad...between show quality and those meant to grace a loving pet home. I don't mean to imply that this is a new phenomenon. But it does seem to have become more prevalent as the AKC pushes to involve more people, in more breeds and involved in more activities.

I spoke recently with a friend who has been breeding, showing and judging for longer than I. She shared with me her experience with a breeder who had contacted her for an opinion of his six month old pup, considered by him to be pick of the litter, photos included. He was hoping for a show home. She said she was appalled that this breeder could not see the pup's faults, so obvious by a mere glance at the photos. The pup totally lacked the correct silhouette so necessary for making such a determination. Without a correct silhouette, is there any reason to look further? My friend felt certain this pup would end up in the show ring anyway and that, sadly, it would eventually finish. The operative word here is eventually. We know, unfortunately, that almost anything can finish if it has four legs, looks like a dog and has sufficient money behind it to achieve the mission. Just today another breeder confided in me that so and so (name withheld) had spent \$17,000 to finish a bitch.... not an unheard of scenario!

Perhaps I have beaten around the bush here. The message I want to convey is, when a judge disqualifies an exhibit or chooses to withhold ribbons, don't blame the judge. Blame the breeder! I love the story of a judge, long since gone, who had a marvelously sane and sensible response when an exhibitor asked for his opinion. He would ask simply, "Did you buy this dog as a show dog?" If the answer was no, he said, "Well, you got what you paid for." If the answer was yes, he

advised the exhibitor to take the matter up with the dog's breeder. I wondered what would be his retort had the exhibitor also been the breeder. And we are back to the core of the problem. It was a sad commentary indeed to see a judge breathe a sigh of relief when the two Bred by Exhibitor winners (winning by default) failed to return for Best BBE. That's how bad they were.

While judges are consistently in the learning mode, many in the throes of educating themselves through seminars, ringside mentoring, attending specialties, visiting top breeders and picking their brains, what are our breeders doing to educate themselves?

In my breed and many others, correct silhouette is being thrown to the wind. My breed standard specifically states SQUARE IN OUTLINE. Body is described as compact. It also says the neck is to be moderately long. The head is to be rectangular in appearance and moderately long. Currently the breed is replete with dogs that are low slung and long in back with upright scapulas and subsequent short necks, necks that meet backs at a right angle, rather than blending smoothly. However, since it is a coated breed, this is easily camouflaged with a bit of backcombing and some hair spray though few know enough to do it. Heads are more square than rectangular, as wide as they are long. Our bitches are to be 17" to 18" at the shoulder. A bitch measuring 17-1/2 inches is often dwarfed by those that would be considered large for a male. As a result, other than under judges astute enough to gage correct size, such a bitch is odd man out no matter how correct her make and shape, how sound her movement or gorgeous her coat. We are so caught up with health concerns that no one seems to care that the breed type is going six ways from Sunday.

This is not to say all breeds are in bad shape and those of us who have been at this for a while know all too well that the pendulum has been known to swing. Most breeds can boast great ones, those breathtaking examples of canine pulchritude. But, having seen them, why don't our average breeders make them their pin-ups? Why can't they compare these dogs to theirs and get that their breeding programs are failing to produce even those close to the same quality?

With the increase in numbers of fanciers, we find a new "breed" of breeder, those that think they are "dog people" when they buy a good dog and meet with success. They breed the dog and suddenly become experts. And why are they breeding? They are breeding to win. They are no longer satisfied with Winners Dog or Winners Bitch. God, some are not even satisfied if they win both! Best of Breed becomes simply the stepping-stone to a group placement. After that, they are not happy unless it is a Group 1. Finally, in the end, Best in Show is all that saves their egos. Such success does not a dog person make!

For real dog people, dedicated breeders, the significant game is played at breed level. They have no grandiose plans for winning groups or bests in show. For them the breed ring serves as a showcase for presenting their finest stock. Win or lose, they are proud of what they bring to the plate. It's the breeders that never did their homework, have not a clue about conditioning, those that try without success to finish an inferior bitch and then breed her anyway to their own dog; those that breed by the eenie-meenie-miney-mo method, that pick a stud dog out of a hat; that, no matter the quality, keep what they breed and show what they keep, that create the judges nightmare. forcing him to play the heavy by withholding ribbons and disqualifying dogs that should have never entered the show ring in the first place.