

## Behind Dog Breed Standards

### How conformation judges interpret what a dog breed standard does and doesn't say.

*Betty-Anne Stenmark*

Regular readers of this column keep hearing about breed standards from each judge-columnist. In fact, you've heard about these standards over and over again and are perhaps wondering what is so special about a breed standard?

The breed standard is a written description – a word picture – of the ideal specimen of the breed. The early architects of a breed got together (I picture a group of gentlemen farmers sitting around a smoke-filled room) and put down in words what each of them thought the breed should look like. No doubt back then, as it is today, this word picture was tempered by various opinions and heated discussions. It was a hard-fought consensus that was hammered out and recorded.

In the purebred-dog world today, the breed standard is sacred and not to be tampered with. In fact the American Kennel Club makes it difficult for a breed parent club to alter the standard by considering changes only every five years. This ensures that the standard cannot be changed to suit the dogs currently running around the home of an important breeder. We must breed to the existing standard, not alter it when it no longer suits us.

There are people who take the words of the standard as gospel and believe that these words are not open to interpretation. Others feel there is room for interpretation. I am one who falls in that latter camp. Breed standards and their interpretations are subjective. What the word "slight" means to one person may mean something slightly different to another. It takes years of involvement in the purebred-dog world to grasp all the nuances and interpret those words as they were intended.

#### Judges' jargon

Most breed standards have words and phrases that are peculiar to that breed. We call these breed-specific words. In my own breed, the Dandie Dinmont Terrier, the body shape is called "weasely." Where do you find the meaning of that? Two other terms in the Dandie standard refer to the coat: "piley" and "penciled." A student can't consult the dictionary to find the meaning of those words as they apply to dogs. Thankfully, an Australian all-breed judge, Dr. Harold Spira, solved that problem. In 1982 he published a book, found in every serious dog fancier's library, called *Canine Terminology*. It is the dictionary of the purebred-dog world and contains the language of the sport.

Although breed standards contain words and descriptions that apply to most dogs, the breed-specific words guide us to define breed type and judge accordingly. You will sometimes hear a critic say, "She judged that breed generically." That means the judge applied basic dog knowledge to every breed and just picked out the dog that loves to show. This eye-catching dog flies around the ring, but does it have good breed type? If that dog came into an animal shelter, would a shelter employee readily recognize that it was, for example, an American Staffordshire Terrier, as opposed to a Staffordshire Bull Terrier? There are many breeds where only subtleties distinguish it from another.

Some breed standards are so detailed that no bone goes unmentioned. The Dachshund standard even tells us each foot has five toes, four in use. On the other hand, the Saluki standard is so abbreviated that one must do a great deal of supplemental work to understand correct Saluki breed type. It is a standard that has been in place since the American Kennel Club first recognized the breed. The "General Appearance" paragraph states that the breed should give "an impression of grace and symmetry and of great speed and endurance coupled with strength and activity to enable it to kill gazelle or other quarry over deep sand or rocky mountains." This is a description that could apply to many breeds and most sighthound breeds, so how does a student guard against judging generically?

#### Mentors matter

My Saluki mentors, Richard and the late Barbara Webster (Urray Salukis), took me out onto the beach with a few of their dogs, and I was treated to the gait unique to the Saluki. It results from bladed bone, straight forelegs which are long from elbow to knee, slightly sloping pasterns, moderate length of foot with toes that are long and well-arched (not cat-footed). The Saluki hunts by sight using a reconnaissance gait, reaching forward with just a tiny bit of lift as if putting his foot down onto hot sand and picking it back up quickly. Would you know that from reading the ancient breed standard? No. That information comes from a breed mentor, reels of film George Bell (Bel S'mbran Salukis) has shot of Salukis out on a hunt, and many classes of Salukis being judged at breed specialties outdoors on grass.

Another Saluki mentor of mine was Jackie Bruni. Years ago we were discussing the breed nuances, and she talked about

a particular Saluki dog she thought common and another she thought elegant. I asked her what makes a Saluki elegant? Underline, she said with conviction. Sure enough – almost without exception – the Salukis who win under breed specialists and at big Saluki specialties have in common a most beautiful underline, great depth of chest and a smooth cut-up at the loin, a very defined waistline as viewed from the side.

When the beautiful Saluki bitch Ch. Sundown Alabaster Treasure was being shown in the late 1990s, her clever breeder/owner-handler Karen Black would set her up with her front feet pointing just a little east and west. Nowhere in the Saluki standard will you read that this is a common position of the front feet on a standing Saluki, but this is how you will see a Saluki purist place those forefeet. I often wondered how often the approaching judge then thought the front was faulty since the bitch wasn't standing four square? I suspect she lost occasionally because of that, but shame on the judge for not knowing the breed nuances.

It is the ultimate compliment when you step into the ring to judge a breed that you haven't owned or bred yourself and the entry is filled with knowledgeable breeders showing their best efforts. You know you're on the right path as a judge when this group of breeders thinks that you have the knowledge necessary and entrusts you to distinguish between the dogs with excellent breed type and the common generic specimens.

Betty-Anne Stenmark is AKC approved to judge all Sporting breeds, all Hound breeds, Saint Bernards, all Terrier breeds, Cardigan and Pembroke Welsh Corgis and Best in Show.

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