

Foreign Countries, Foreign Dog-Show Lessons

Judging foreign dog shows and foreign dogs helps judges see the bigger picture.

Jeffrey G. Pepper

The AKC/Eukanuba show held in December 2007 in Long Beach, Calif., offered an innovative event called the World Challenge. The top dog from 40 countries around the world was invited to compete in a special event. There was but one representative of the United States, the English Springer Spaniel that was Best in Show at last year's AKC/Eukanuba show. The judging panel for this special event was an international one, which brought the opportunity for American judges to observe the priorities of some of their peers from other lands.

Naturally, there were differences between the overseas dogs and the dogs judges are accustomed to seeing here. This raises an interesting questions: Do judges benefit from observing foreign dogs? I think so.

Standards and practices

A new perspective often brings to light concepts that have not been considered changeable. For example, in Europe tail docking and ear cropping on dogs is illegal. Therefore, breeds that we are accustomed to seeing with docked tails or cropped ears are seen in their natural state.

A number of AKC-approved judges are regularly invited to judge overseas. When in another country, the judge is expected to judge by the breed standards of that country, which may not be the same as AKC's breed standards. The prohibition against cropping and docking presents a clear distinction. Differences in grooming techniques and customs from country to country can be much less obvious. How will this affect the judging process?

The observer may focus on an obvious difference, and this can become a trap if the judge is not mindful of the change in his focus. Standing outside the ring during the judging of the European contingent of dogs, I couldn't help but notice an American Cocker Spaniel (as the breed is called everywhere in the world other than in the United States) that had an undocked tail.

It would have been fairly easy to focus on that tail, decide it was different and dismiss the dog from consideration. It's an easy trap to fall into. Remember, the undocked tail is the norm in this dog's home country. I continued to look at this Cocker, and the more I looked, the more I liked what I saw. Before very long, I had decided that I liked this dog very much. So did the person judging. The dog won his sectional competition and, later, was named Best International Dog at the show, a richly deserved win.

This experience points out a major potential benefit for the judge who is invited overseas – and a reminder for judges who are not: Don't be fooled by one outward difference. The dog you dismiss might well be a good one. Consider the whole dog and evaluate the positives. Do not just focus on the negatives. When judging, it is the virtues that count, not the lack of obvious faults.

Head of its class

This same lesson can be applied to judging at home. I remember doing a specialty in English Springer Spaniels early in my judging career. A dog came into the ring and stood out as being unlike the others. He was marked very differently than the English Springers we are accustomed to seeing. Instead of a shawl of white coat at the base of his neck ending with a blanket of solid color, this dog was marked with spots of color on a white background. Instead of the more-often-seen white muzzle and solid-colored head, this dog had more of a parti-colored look more often seen in this country on an American Cocker Spaniel.

My first thought was – what breed is this dog? Is it even an English Springer? If not, I needed to excuse him from the ring. I quickly decided that the best way to tell what breed the dog was would be to look at the dog's head without paying any attention to the color and markings of the head. Doing so, I decided it was a pretty head very typical of an English Springer. So the dog certainly belonged in the class.

Since I'd decided it was a Springer, I started looking more critically at the rest of the dog as the class went around the ring together – and found a lot to like. Upon individual examination I discovered a very nice dog in the uncommonly colored jacket. Here was a very typey, well-balanced English Springer Spaniel whose markings were different than the norm but still very acceptable under the breed standard. In the end, he was awarded first in his class and went on to be named

Winners Dog.

Coat critiques

Grooming techniques and norms can also vary from country to country. For example, in this country the Golden Retriever breed standard calls for an “untrimmed natural ruff.” In the breed’s home country, Great Britain, the standard does not have this requirement – it calls for much of this ruff to be removed, resulting in a different look. An American judge (or exhibitor for that matter) must be careful not to fall into the trap of dismissing the dogs as inferior quality. He must look beyond this and judge the dog, not his haircut.

The moral here is very clear. Evaluating dogs, whether overseas or at home, requires judges to put aside preconceived notions which might block them from looking at the overall dog. The best judges look at the quality and balance of the whole dog, not just at his parts, when making their decisions.

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