

"The Matrix" of Dog-Breed Characteristics

What essential characteristics of breed "families" fill in your mental matrix of breed traits?

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When I was first learning to judge dogs other than those of my own breed, I was very concerned to commit to memory all the specific characteristics of each standard. I feared I would make some terrible mistake, such as putting up a Pharaoh Hound without the signature amber eyes or an Afghan Hound without protruding hipbones. Those traits weren't part of what made up a Whippet, the breed which I'd raised and exhibited for many years, so I worried I might miss them while I was looking for arched necks, well-laid back shoulders, and spring of rib, things I knew because they are important to Whippets.

As I studied and judged match shows, those unfamiliar traits jumped out at me. Just how long and narrow should the skull of a Borzoi be? How harsh should the rough and hard coat of the Irish Wolfhound feel under my hand? Was that lilted movement the "easy, active and true" gait described in the Scottish Deerhound standard?

The only solution was study; watching how various experts selected the dogs in large entries; asking breeders for help to identify their best dogs; attending judges' education seminars; and paying visits to kennels to flesh out the language by applying it to real dogs. I needed a reference to understand the breed in more than abstract terms.

I realized that there is a sort of "sighthound matrix," or template that can be adjusted for each breed. The most important factor emphasized by each standard is the hounds' running gear. They need flexible topline and relatively long loins, good angulation, smooth muscle and well-knuckled feet to perform the sighthound's high-speed chase. But once you have an eye for one, you have a matrix to learn another. The matrix is not set in stone; it is a framework for a system of interlocking characteristics which serve as the formation of a sighthound.

All sighthounds need to run as fast as possible to snatch their game. The differences relate to exactly what the game is and the surface over which they hunt it. Whippets are small because they were brought down in size by poverty-stricken peasants to poach game from the estates of rich men. On Sunday afternoons, they provided sport as "the poor man's racehorse." Greyhounds were the big dogs of royalty. They needed longer legs and bigger bodies to hunt hare over the expansive land grants of nobility. Irish Wolfhounds needed to be heavier boned to bring down wolves. Scottish Deerhounds needed the same coats as the Wolfhounds but had to be lighter-boned to chase agile deer. Knowing a breed's history makes it a lot easier to remember and instantly note the breed's unique traits.

Just as important is going back to what they have in common. All need well-arched necks to bend toward prey. They need well-sprung, deep ribs that cover their large lungs and heart right down to the elbow. The double-suspension gallop is one of their common traits, in which all four legs are off the ground twice in a single stride. To achieve it, their bodies compress into a tight ball. That's why they have small waists. Their underlines tuck up in a way that brings to mind a bellows. Their topline have a slight arch over the loin but must be flexible so they can bend and reach. The arch is necessary to increase the tightness with which they fold their legs back up under them, like a spring, so there is more explosive energy when they launch into the next phase of the gallop. Long loins are imperative for the flexibility they need. Sloping pasterns are their shock absorbers for the intense pounding of the chase.

The matrix image that forms in my mind embodies the essential elements of a sighthound. I imagine a perfect Greyhound standing before me. To move to an Irish Wolfhound, I mold this imaginary model to be bigger and heavier boned. He gets a curly or wavy coat and longer head to be a Borzoi. He shrinks and his curves seem more pronounced to make him a Whippet.

There are eight American Kennel Club hound breeds the sighthound matrix can cover: Greyhound, Whippet, Borzoi, Scottish Deerhound, Irish Wolfhound, Saluki, Afghan Hound, and Pharaoh Hound. The ninth AKC-recognized sighthound breed is the Ibizan, but for him, the sighthound matrix is not useful. No matter how much I stretch my model, I can't put on him the short, straight upper arm of an Ibizan nor his shallow chest. Nor can the sighthound matrix cover the Ibizan's large, rhomboid-shaped ears. Those qualities put the Ibizan in a grey area beyond the matrix.

The matrix serves as a touchstone by which one can distinguish the cosmetic touches from the essential form of the sighthound. The dictionary will tell you that the word "matrix" originally springs from "mater," the Latin word for mother. The sighthound breeds are like the offspring of the same mother; they look different from each other, but are clearly

variants of the same genetic material.

Having a matrix is also useful in helping to see through ambiguities in the language of various standards, which can throw a novice judge off track. By applying the language to your "matrix" sighthound, you can see through equivocal passages and get back to what the form is truly supposed to be. The concrete image of the Greyhound supplies a tangible reference point for the often vague and relative terms you find in the standards.

The philosopher von Wittgenstein developed the concept of "family resemblance," which he wrote was not the essence of a sibling but a set of similarities. In other words, siblings don't all look exactly alike, but qualities in their faces, body language and gestures give them a certain unity. They possess shared characteristics.

Beagle, Harrier and English Foxhound breeders are to be congratulated for stressing the similarities in their breeds, all of which have to do with function. The differences are easily added on top of their "foxhound" matrix. Another obvious "family" is that of the spitz breeds, which have similarly pricked ears, stand-off coats and tightly curled tails. They include the Akita, Alaskan Malamute, Finnish Spitz, Keeshond, Shiba Inu, Chow Chow, Norwegian Elkhound and Pomeranian.

Pointing breeds, spaniels, retrievers; similar breeds with similar functions can be understood even more thoroughly with a matrix in mind. It gives a judge a basis on which to begin the evaluation. It helps judges uphold their duty to find the dogs best suited for the job they were built to do. That's what being a judge is all about.

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