

In the Ring

Rick Beauchamp on the in's — and out's — of judging procedure.

Richard G. Beauchamp

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Setting type is of primary consequence in the less-advanced breeds. It is easier to ultimately produce sound, typey dogs when selecting soundness from among dogs of great type than it is to achieve type from dogs whose primary claim to fame is simply soundness or an ability to perform. Novices in a breed simply breed to the winning dogs. If a judge proceeds to acknowledge type in his placements, he contributes to the growth of the breed.

As I progressed along in my Bichon Frise breeding program I found several very interesting things. First, the individuals of great type were more apt to be bitches than dogs. That was the up side. The down side was that those exquisite bitches (arguably some of the best the breed has produced) lacked the consistency of charismatic personality that today's show dogs must possess. There was no problem with their temperaments, but they had good days and bad. Good days brought group and Best in Show wins, but good days could suddenly turn bad by merit of a few degrees change in temperature or by their deciding that the day's judge was not to their liking. In other words, my bitches were just that bitches. Logic would dictate that breeding out to more outgoing personality types was the way to go. Certainly a sensible plan, but in the early days our gene pool was limited and real quality was pretty much confined to the lines that I had used to create my own line. Impaled on the horns of a dilemma, I had either to outcross to an inferior line for showmanship or concentrate on type and hope to find individuals within the line that might help me out of the bind.

I chose the latter approach, and those who worked with similar lines did likewise. We were extremely fortunate in that a good many of the judges who passed upon the breed knew and appreciated type, and in many cases gave it priority over showmanship in lesser specimens.

Today there is no reason to excuse phlegmatic temperament in the Bichon. Breed type has been firmly established and we have reliable show ring temperaments as well. Although there is no doubt that breeders worked very hard to achieve this state in the breed, they would not have been so successful as quickly had they not had the help and encouragement given them by judges in the ring.

When quality, or type if you will, is poor in a breed, selecting breeding stock which is what judging is really all about is definitely trickier. All sorts of quandaries will face judges in trying to arrive at decisions that are in the best interest of the breed concerned.

When judging breeds that pose problems because of a general lack of merit, confining oneself to the essentials of breed type (breed character, silhouette, head, movement and coat) can be enormously helpful. Rather than thinking details, however, one must decide which dogs give most overall in the distinguishing essentials of the breed.

This approach to judging requires more than simply holding a dog up for comparison to the words of the standard. It takes genuine interest in the breed and a keen desire to help that breed step forward to excellence.