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WHAT IN THE WORLD



Over time, changes in the look of a purebred animal — whether it be dogs or horses or cattle — can become accepted as the norm.

In 35 years of judging, I have seen some fairly radical changes in the Arabian horse. In the following essay, Andrew H. Brace, a well-known judge of all dog breeds recognized by the Kennel Club in the U.K., does a superb job of explaining how these changes occur.

It's food for thought for all judges, exhibitors, and owners — a reminder of the value of functional ability and longevity of the breed.
— Cindy Reich

Why Breeds Change

by Andrew H. Brace

I wonder how often we — as breeders, exhibitors, or judges — stop to consider how easily we become accustomed to changes within a breed? In some cases these changes can become so engrained in a breed that they are elevated to the level of desired characteristics, even though they might be quite alien to typical and necessary traits.

How do changes come about? They begin with the breeder who produces a litter that gets to an age where the puppies need to be evaluated. The breeder who fully understands his breed is looking at every puppy in terms of the breed standard and what is correct for the breed. In most breeds “moderation” is a requirement that is desirable in many aspects, and it is the consistency of moderation throughout any animal that will contribute significantly to its balance, harmony, and the impression that everything fits. However, occasionally there will be a puppy who has something about it that catches the eye, and invariably that “something” tends to be an exaggeration of some kind or another — too long a neck, too refined a head, excessive rear angulation — and here is where the danger lies. The steeped-in-the-breed breeder will see exaggeration for what it is and will dismiss that puppy as being alien to correct type. Many others, however, will be realistic enough to acknowledge that the exaggeration that is catching his eye will also catch the eye of the judge when the dog hits the showring. And so the puppy is kept, nurtured, schooled, and groomed.

As soon as a dog whose type deviates from correct form starts winning, the ball is rolling. That dog appears in the big ring and other judges comment on its great bone, long neck, fabulous angulation, ultra-short back, high tail set, great open side-gait or whatever, even when these may not be breed-specific attributes. They reward it, and others follow suit. In due course breeders see this dog and all the winning it is doing, and they rush off to use said dog. Within a matter of years the rather deviant type has gotten a foothold in the breed.

Soon, judges arrive at a situation where they get a class of six dogs — five of them are of the “new” rather off-beat type, and one is completely correct. The knowledgeable and constructive judge will know enough about the breed to be able to say with conviction “This one is right — the others are wrong,” and judge accordingly. Many other judges, however, perhaps lacking depth of knowledge of that breed, will take the easy option, assume that the five must be right as they form the majority, and the sixth dog gets left out of the awards.

This particularly applies to size in a breed. So many of our breeds have, over the years, gotten bigger, maybe because of improved nutrition, and gradually size has crept up. As there are only a handful of breeds that have more than one variety determined by size, this increase is barely noticed. However, when some dedicated breeder puts in the ring a dog that is of absolutely correct size in terms of its Breed Standard, it is criticized by other exhibitors for being small. In truth, this is the correct sized dog; it's just that the others are over size.

At this juncture the dedicated breeder who has been intent on maintaining type and intensifying quality begins to get frustrated. He knows what he is breeding is correct, while other breeders and exhibitors are drifting away from type, and judges seem to be going along with them. This has happened in several breeds in Britain and beyond, and I have seen many “old time” breeders reduce their exhibiting activities dramatically, simply because they feel it is pointless to show dogs under judges who don't understand breed priorities. These are the very breeders who SHOULD have stock in the ring, so that those who have independent minds can see and appreciate it.

In most breeds “moderation” is a requirement that is desirable in many aspects, and it is the consistency of moderation throughout any animal that will contribute significantly to its balance, harmony, and the impression that everything fits.

When dogs with major faults — usually of the “attractive” kind — continue to win and be bred from, newer breeders will see no reason to correct and improve. Why should they? These dogs are winning. Those who own the “modern” dogs can usually talk the talk, and provide convincing arguments as to natural evolution and obvious improvement. In some cases strong-minded individuals can actually be instrumental in persuading breed clubs to change the breed standard to fit these new dogs ... a crime in anyone's book. And then of course there is the power of advertising!

Sadly, many of the breed changes we have witnessed are pleasing to the average eye — so what if a dog is too necky, too hairy, too upright, too short, too long? It looks pretty and the judges like the look!

Although showing dogs today is more about chasing Challenge Certificates, ribbons, and points than it is about preserving breeds, the showing should remain the breeders' shop window. It would be sad to think that genuine breeders who are keen to maintain true breed type could not find the dogs necessary to perpetuate correctness in the next generation.

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