

PUTTING UP GOOD FRONTS – BY PAT TROTTER

While breeders must concentrate on selecting stock with good fronts, so too must judges reward correctly-made dogs.

Analyzing the role that superior judges play in contributing influential "know-how" to breeders' decision-making has been the focus of my most recent columns, as well as most of my life! Among the experts whom you should treasure and whose opinions you should utilize are those who truly understand front-end assembly and who reward it in the ring whenever possible.

There are two reasons I place so much emphasis on judges whose opinions value correct front-end assembly. First, correct fronts are the hardest structural trait to keep in any family of dogs. Second, once correct fronts are lost from the gene pool, they are very difficult, if not impossible, to recover. To further complicate matters, there seems to be widespread misunderstanding about exactly what constitutes a good front.

The ideal front assembly is one that stands true when viewed from the front and that features a well-laid-back, correct shoulder, as well as good return of upper arm that brings the elbow well under the top of the shoulder blades when viewed from the side. In addition, correct lay-on of the front will ensure proper melding of the blades at the top of the shoulders. Most of all, these elements combine to allow a gait that has great liberty of motion, giving the dog tireless, effortless and efficient locomotion. The front foot moves well out under the head and stays close to the ground, which conserves energy at the same time it helps the dog to "cover a lot of ground."

Complications

Although this sounds relatively simple, it becomes more complicated when you factor in how the front looks when the dog is coming toward you. The fact is that a correctly made animal with functional and efficient side gait has much more opportunity for error when viewed coming toward you than a straighter-angled dog has. This is because the longer the length of the stride from front-most extension to follow-through under the rib cage, the greater the likelihood for deviation from absolutely straight movement. And consequently, the poorer-constructed front may often be rewarded because it is more likely to satisfy the judge's requirement for so-called "sound" front movement due to its more restricted range of motion.

Breeders and judges desire dogs that move straight coming and going. The constant challenge in achieving this is to find the perfect column of support on correctly angled dogs and avoid inadvertently selecting breeding stock with compromised angles just because the animal moves straight when viewed from the front. Although it may be easier to find straight-moving fronts (viewed coming at you) on straighter-shouldered dogs, isn't it counterproductive if a correctly angled front assembly has been sacrificed to achieve it?

In my December column it was noted that upright fronts, though undesirable, certainly do contribute to the impression of ramrod-straight, picture-perfect posture that is associated with the ultimate show dog. If straight fronts also make it more likely that a dog will move toward you with what appears to be "trueness," maybe we should ask ourselves this question: Are straight shoulders becoming such a facilitator of wins that we are subconsciously selecting for them? Are straight shoulders so seductive that all of us, breeders and judges alike, are falling into the trap of rewarding incorrect ones because they make winning easier?

World-class judges are unanimous in the belief that fronts are, across the board, the most faulty area of our breeds. Some even bemoan the fact that there are breeds that seem to have lost the gene pool for the desired front! This is a serious concern that merits our studious attention.

An interesting chain of events started in my own breed, the Norwegian Elkhound, about a half century ago, when the parent club started holding national specialties every three years. (Today the national is held on a biannual basis.) The Norwegian masters who came to judge our breed in the 1960s and '70s included the most knowledgeable people in the history of the breed, and they unanimously voiced their concerns about the stuffy, short-legged animals in America. It was not until 1968 that the standard was revised to elevate the size of the bitch from "about 18 inches" to 19½ inches.

Breeders started breeding for leggier puppies and seeking more stately, hunting-type Norwegian Elkhounds.

Unfortunately, many dogs were picked simply because they were taller. Little attention was paid to the fact that their straight front ends were contributing to that look. In essence, some breeders neglected to breed for more leg (length of bone) from the elbow down and were just selecting for the tallest puppies. Consequently, they were often inadvertently selecting open-angled animals.

Fortunately, as the decades passed and the dogs conformed more to the desired type with extra leg length, breeders began seeking correct front-end assembly and became less forgiving of straight-shouldered animals. Nonetheless, Elkhound breeders today acknowledge that continuing effort is required to breed animals that satisfy the standard.

Getting Better With Age

In our roles as guardians of our breeds, we must explore what we can do as fanciers to protect well-made fronts. The dogs with more angles require more work to be physically fit than their straighter-fronted brethren do because they are built for work and their structure accommodates exercise more easily. If they are not worked enough to learn body control, they are at a disadvantage. Furthermore, they should be "warmed up" before going into the ring. This will help them get into their rhythm as well as take the edge off any excessive exuberance. Interestingly enough, dogs with correctly made fronts get better and truer with more work and age, while those with straighter fronts tolerate long-term work poorly, loading up in the shoulders and getting stuffier and bulkier with time.

Exactly how successfully good shoulders tolerate hard work in old age was exhibited by a senior hunting bitch at a Plott Hound seminar we attended last year around the time the breed entered AKC competition. The students represented some of dogdom's most knowledgeable people, many of whom remarked that the dogs there, whatever other traits they displayed, all possessed excellent front-end construction. And, of course, they all were competent hunting animals. One judge's observation has haunted me since: "I wonder how long it will be before the American show ring takes its toll on these fronts."

Since the ultimate goal of the dedicated breeder and judge is to select correct functional working type, built to endure and to stay healthy well into old age, it makes sense from every point of view to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to retain correctly made animals in our breeding programs. The instant gratification associated with "flyers" who win big at dog shows is simply not worth the long-term sacrifice of valued traits in the gene pools of our beloved breeds. Competent breeders and judges working together to insist on correct fronts will be the trustees of the breeds as we begin a new century.