

# Interpreting the Standard

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This Standards Issue of DOG WORLD suggests a double-barreled question: "What's a Standard, and how to interpret it?" This is something like the question involving the prior origin of the chicken or the egg.

So far as we know, very few breeds, if any, existed in theory before they did in practice. The typical pattern of breed separation has been a process of development, by long selection of breeding stock for functional superiority. A similarity of appearance resulted from a similarity of structural elements best suited to the various purposes.

At some time along this historical path, owners of dogs being developed for the same purpose consulted as to the best achievements of the functional objectives, and as to best means of attaining those objectives, during more pragmatic discussions of which dog should produce the best-functioning puppies from which bitch. Out of such consultations developed breed clubs, and among other objectives of breed clubs have been the formulation and supervision of breed Standards.

It therefore appears that the living and functioning dog antedates the written word of the Standard, which often was arrived at in committee by trying to describe the most perfect aspects of several currently outstanding animals, and then elevating the sights toward a goal of perfection.

Fanciers who have been through these processes realize that a Standard is reduced to words for record and for transmission. By this time, in many breeds, the early fanciers who worked at breed development and standard formulation have been gathered to their ancestors, and current fanciers may think of the specifications (rather than the functional objectives) as having come first, like the plans before the house was built; but such was not the case.

Words do not always mean the same things to different people, particularly when there has developed a vocabulary of specialized application which only has been defined by usage. In the compromises by which the Standards were often reduced to writing, many phrases can scarcely be considered specifications. We find examples of "neither too long nor too short" . . . "neither too coarse nor too fine" more often than can be explicit to the beginner.

After a parent club has formulated a draft of a Standard, it is submitted to the American Kennel Club for ratification, before it becomes effective, and so must be any subsequent revisions.

Except to an artist trying to interpret a Standard with graphic freedom of expression with pen or paint, the real use of the Standard is in comparing living examples of each breed. When two or more animals stand or move in comparison, which qualities of type, balance and performance should be regarded superior to variations of differing degree?

And let me mention, before dismissing that digression to the artist, that I remember a series of whimsicalities in another magazine a few years back,

when the editor typed out what amounted to the anonymous Standard of an un-named breed a month, and sent it to an artist competently experienced in depicting purebred dogs, to have the words reconstructed into a drawing . . . with true-to-word results, but too often not even suggesting any existing breed.

Another function of a Standard is to set forth any faults which may have been determined to be so damaging and so persistent as to have been designated as disqualifications, and other serious faults dealt with by the scarcely more tolerant formula: "while not exactly disqualifying, shall prevent a dog from high placing at a show." Such classification of faults usually is based upon difficulty of elimination in breeding. And while it is well recognized that good judging proceeds with comparing the dogs' virtues, nevertheless the negative aspect cannot be neglected in a fair pro-and-con appraisal.

Intelligent interpretation of a Standard consists of applying each word or phrase to the form or performance of a living animal. A person at ringside with a copy of that breed's Standard in his hand, or in his mind, will find that the variations before him can bring the printed words to life. As a competent judge works his way through class after class offering some choice, the spectator should be able to see a convergence in type toward the animal specified in words in the Standard. This convergence should continue through the winners and special classes to the animal most nearly embodying the Standard, in that day's competition.

Such a pursuit at show after show will iron out the differences in the way individual judges visualize the meanings of printed words. In fact, some differences in interpretations must continue, or there would be need for only one official appraisal of the quality of each dog, except as it matures, and as to condition and training.

Many breed Standards assign numerical significance to various components of the Standard, usually on a scale of 100. These are intended to guide a breeder or judge as to the relative emphasis to be placed on various elements. Heads may be assigned 25 in one breed, and 10 in another. But a head, itself, is composed of ever-so-many features, both of structure and of expression; and each of these features can vary by so many degrees of perfection vs. imperfection that an electronic computer would scarcely be able to program and reduce all the impressions a judge must take in, within the three minutes usually assigned for judging each dog.

In two succeeding winters in New York, I attended monthly sessions of instructions in interpreting and applying the Standard of a breed which I'll not name, at which, each evening, student judges would appraise a volunteered class of dogs, and then give oral reasons for the placings, as is done for live stock by 4-H and agricultural college student teams on Thanksgiving weekends in connection with the International Livestock Exposition. After

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