

The Importance of Beauty by Catherine McMillan



In an email list I belong to that is devoted to canine genetics, I was involved in a discussion that revolved around the condemnation of all things show ring. "The show ring is responsible for exaggeration. The show ring is a false and artificial place that is sucking in our breeds and ruining them for all eternity. It's just a beauty contest."

Just a beauty contest.

I had never been a strong advocate of the show ring, though I did compete with enthusiasm. I was familiar with the extremes that can result from the almighty ribbon chase, the sad fact that breed standards can become secondary to fashion and sires promoted to serve egos at the expense of breed health. I knew of the abuses. I knew all of that.

But now things were different. I rose to defend the show ring, and to challenge the statement, for now I have an appreciation that I did not before.

"When," I found myself asking, "did beauty become a pejorative term?"

For 20 years my small breeding program had met with some success. I worked within a fairly tight family line, introducing new blood carefully, and discarding dogs who failed to meet both my competitive standards and threshold for health problems. There was steady progress while I set a few distinctive traits into the family. Not only were the dogs becoming known for their type and movement, but we were carefully pulling together and preserving the genes of an important family of the past that had fallen into disfavour when PRA was discovered in the line. Only a few pockets of direct descendants remained in the breed and our dogs represented one of those - and the dogs here defied the odds and remained (as they have to this day) free of PRA.

In the mid 1990's my veterinarian's wife asked to breed a bitch she had of my breeding. She was bred to a dog from an entirely different background that had been given to me by a friend in California. I had great fun showing him, but had never used him myself. The breeding resulted in a male puppy who became mine in lieu of stud fee. He was to give my dogs the turbo charge of style they needed.

He finished his U.S. title with an unprecedented sweep of the majors at AMSC Great Western. He won a specialty his first day as a special in the U.S. as well as several groups in Canada. He was crossed back into my original bitch line with immediate success, creating one of those rare nicks in which the virtues of two lines combine and then remain intact in successive generations. His first son completed his title at Montgomery County, and began to rack up the Best In Shows. He drew the interest of color breeders, as he also happened to be a black, and rarest of all, a black who had never seen the dye bottle. Sons went to Australia, to Brazil, bitches were bred in the U.S. and Canada and offspring went to Europe. His grandchildren began to spread across the globe, winning groups and Bests In Show both here and abroad.

Then, in routine puppy eye exams, a litter out of one of his daughters was diagnosed with retinal dysplasia.

As I had crossed him back into my line he was quietly creating carriers across the spectrum of the family and seeding them into others. As the weeks and months passed, breeding after breeding proved dog after

bitch after dog to be carriers. The dog who had helped make my dreams come true was poised to bring them crashing down.

So many breeders in the past, when faced with genetic disease, have fallen on their swords. They have packed up their breeding programs, spayed and neutered, started over or taken up golf. When the 20-20 hindsight of breed history has examined the consequences, the cure has often been worse than the disease. Dogs were lost to the breed for defects that could be tested for just a few years later. Dogs were condemned for disease less serious than their surviving competitors were found later to be spreading. I decided to take a page from history and learn from it. The breeding program would continue with the same goals, the same dogs as before, but with an additional task - to remove the gene, taking as many generations as necessary to do so without compromising type and other health considerations.

To halt the further spread of the gene, I did what I could to get the word out - released the information for publication so that others would know where the risks were. Known carrier dogs were pulled from public stud, possible carriers available only to breeders whom we could trust to manage the risk. We have the luxury of early diagnosis - the defect is easily spotted in a puppy eye exam. No buyer will ever purchase an affected puppy. Test breeding using affected dogs is currently underway to detect carriers and supporting DNA research that, if successful, may provide powerful new tools for our breed and others in the fight against eye disorders. While these are the darkest of days, there are several lights at the end of this tunnel.

Meanwhile, life here and at related kennels goes on. We are still breeding the dogs we love, still loving the dogs we breed. Show puppies are being trained and prepared, litters are being planned, champions finishing. Interest in the line has increased, buoyed by the confidence others have in us to be honest and forthright about our problems. Last year we won our first U.S. National. A grandson took the breed at the AKC/Eukanuba Invitational in December. There were Best In Show wins in Australia and here in Canada. The quality that the line is producing provides perspective and balance to the disappointments that are inevitable when battling a genetic defect. Those wins have become more important than I could have ever imagined in less troubled times.

And so this is how I have learned the importance of beauty.

To those of you out there who feel that it is right and proper to sacrifice beauty to restore health - I am here to tell you that you must not. Health is good, health is important, but it is not enough. It is enough to sustain a dog, but not enough to sustain a breed or a breeder. We need something more - something for ourselves. We need beauty, just as we need air and water and sun. Beauty is the visual representation of good, of value, of virtue. Beauty inspires, it gives us courage.

Get out your old ribbons and dust them off. Spend an afternoon cleaning the tarnish off the trophies. They are meaningful. Those dogs of generations past linger in old show photos to remind us that they once filled the eye as purely as they filled our hearts. They remind us that the dogs we fight for today are here because their ancestors inspired someone to believe in them. They convinced others that their genes were worthy of preservation and continuation, because one day, long ago, they were standing in line when beauty was contested and rewarded.