

WHAT IS A SHOW DOG?

by Steve Wolfson

While out and about, I will sometimes encounter a person on the street walking their Rottweiler and after inquiring about the dog's background the owner most often adds "I bought it as a show dog, but decided not to show it. Not wanting to burst the owner's bubble, mentally I will conclude the dog was never intended to be of show quality, and for all concerned I let the owner remain with the fantasy. Thinking about this particular problem, I thought it appropriate to discuss and define what exactly is, a show dog.

Many new exhibitors in their zeal to purchase a show dog can be easily confused by breeders and or, sold a bill of goods as to the attributes, the "showability" of the pup they have just bought. How useful a tool it would be if we all had a template by which to define and measure what a show dog is before we put money down to buy one.

A variety of strange things occur to dog and owner on the way to the show ring. Sometime, somewhere down the road the show specimen which came with a high price tag turns out not a show dog at all, but merely a nice family pet. Is there a way to prevent this from happening? Not completely, since things which are made of flesh and blood don't always turn out the way we want. Nonetheless, a new prospective buyer, or even a old prospective buyer can profit with a solid definition to work from.

The problem lies in the semantics of the definition. What one person calls a show dog may not be the same for everyone and because there is no actual definition of a show dog out in the field, the following occurs:

1. The breeder is a novice and has not yet developed the skills to pick a potential show pup from the litter. The new litter is from two champions, therefore the novice thinks success is guaranteed and calls them all show dogs.
2. The new owner has little skill and has not yet formulated a definition of what a show dog is.
3. There is a percentage of hungry handlers that will parade an unworthy dog in the show ring, get it points, even a championship, from judges who are friendly.

We've all been at ringside and noticed on occasion (I think lately with more frequency) a dog or bitch that a handler or owner is representing as a show specimen, but in reality is no more than a family pet. I believe this happens with honesty and a sincere wish to make it a champion, however, few will step up and tell the owner the show dog which they paid "bucksdeluxe" for is not a worthy specimen for the competition ring. The actual responsibility is not for the spectators to say what is or is not a show dog, the place and time for this decision is in the ring with the judge. It is the judge's job to excuse, for lack of merit, any specimen which does not measure up to the standard. Unfortunately few judges will do this seemingly dirty deed because they either don't want to make waves, just don't know, or even care.

I had argued this very point a while ago on an internet chat room and requested the definition of a show dog from the people on the subscriber list. The answers I got were somewhat surprising. Some refused to make any commitment towards a definition at all, yet a few specified that "a show dog is a dog which has no disqualifying faults".

This to me is a flimsy and very liberal interpretation of what a show dog is since many, many dogs could easily fall into this category, yet in my opinion, never do well under a knowledgeable judge. Here is my definition:

A show dog is a dog that exhibits the following qualities:

1. No disqualifying faults, according to the standard.

2. Possesses breed type.
3. Faults are minor in nature and would be defined as "could use more of" rather than "lacking in".
4. Show attitude, a willingness to perform under pressure of the show ring.
5. Can place in the ribbons in any show, under any judge at least four out of seven times.
6. Has balance.

Let's examine in more detail the above points since I don't want to be misleading or vague on any of them. As for point number one I don't think there needs to be any discussion about a show dog being required not to have any disqualifying faults, as by definition it would eliminate the dog from competition.

2. Possesses breed type.

Type, to me, is the paramount attribute I look for when selecting a pup or adult as a show dog. It is prerequisite, the characteristic which makes it stand out as a representative of the breed, what a judge looks for. Admittedly, few breeds have such high requirements to pass as show dog like that of the Rottweiler.

A dog cannot be competitive if it lacks overall breed type* (see end of article). A pup or adult must possess: a correct Rottweiler head piece, dark eye, correct dentition, dark gums, good bone strength, correct short back, good color of markings, correct Rottweiler gait, overall balance, and in that order of importance. Without all these important ingredients together it may do reasonably well in the show ring, win some ribbons, even become a champion, but will never climb to the top of it's class without them.

I have seen many successful show careers based on a single aspect of the dog, be it a great head piece, excellent movement, good top lines. Yes, these dogs did possess a great single attribute, but under closer inspection were in need of other important aspects to complete balance.

The single attribute problem can be observed in the "specials" class. After the dog/bitch has become a "Champion" the owner now embarks on the campaign trail to promote their new champion. However, sometimes after viewing the specials class we observe there was nothing special in it.

3. Faults are minor in nature and would be defined as "could use more of" rather than "lacking in"

In the area of structure the prospective show pup or adult cannot have outstanding construction problems since possessing a major fault would render it unworthy for the show ring. Faults I would consider major and render it noncompetitive as a show prospect are: easty-westy, out at the elbows, fiddle front, weak, strongly bouncing topline, hocky, sickle hocked, steep sloping croup, splay feet, inadequate angulation, roached back.

Structural faults I would consider minor are: slightly soft pasterns, moderate sloping croup, slight softness in top line, slightly turned out at pasterns, moderate angulation, barrel chested, elbows standing a bit away from chest, etc..

Another area which I think demands attention are the so-called "cosmetic and or type faults". I'm not sure where the term "cosmetic faults" came from since it implies something which can be removed easily. I have heard it used many, many, times and frankly I think inappropriately used to rationalize almost every fault under the sun. Having seen quite a few show pups which have had a structural fault, I often hear the owner/breeder minimize by calling it cosmetic, nothing to worry about. A panacea excuse for many problems incorrect.

A cosmetic fault to me is a fault that can be improved upon, easily, in the next generation. Lightness in gums, mottled gums, lightness in markings, sooty markings, coarseness in coat, too fine in coat, these can be improved upon in the next generation.

A type fault is a fault which diminishes the overall look of the breed. Narrow skulls, long muzzles, light eyes, (I have also overheard many say that eye color is merely a cosmetic fault, on the contrary, dark eye color is so fundamental to breed type, light eyes should never be considered cosmetic), long backs, long on leg, too short on leg, pink gums, narrow snipey muzzles, spindly bones, no fill under eyes, shallowness in chest, these are type faults, serious in nature and should be avoided with zeal.

Any structural fault which has manifested itself in the bones takes many generations to improve upon and should also not be considered cosmetic.

4. Show attitude, a willingness to perform under pressure of the show ring.

Every show dog must have a an "up and ready" attitude, a willingness to perform, since without this key ingredient why bother? Even if a show potential pup or adult were to be flawless in structure and type, how unexciting the dog would be if it entered the show ring and exhibited an attitude with ears down and no expression.

I was told many years ago the best show dog was one that may have a few faults which were somewhat undesirable, but could compensate for this inadequacy with "fire and pizzazz. Always remember the show ring is a competition, therefore attitude and posture is a good percentage on what a dog is going to be judged. Most dogs don't have that special attitude which separates them from the others, but on occasion it is abundantly evident with certain prospects.

5. Can place in the ribbons in any show, under any judge at least four out of seven times.

How, you may ask, did I arrive at 4 out of 7? It is understood that even the best dog will not win every show or place under every judge. Even the great race horse Secretariat lost a race now and then, so I allowed for this possibility by giving it a reasonable 4 out of 7.

But after reading # 5 you may also ponder and say "what does this have to do with the qualifications of a show dog, or perhaps you may think it too demanding a request. Either one, I feel it is integral to the definition, let me explain.

Placing in the ribbons is vital to my "definition of a show dog" because it spells out the dog's function, it's purpose. Why buy a show dog if it cannot fulfill it's job in the show ring? Why buy a race horse if it isn't competitive? (some do buy show dogs just to say they are the owners of one, but that is material for another article). In order for it to be called a show dog, should it not win or at least place in the ribbons?

It's not specifically the function that the dog must fulfill which I am somewhat critical of, I added this part to the definition in order the seller of the dog is held accountable. By making the seller define the capabilities of the show dog they are selling , it forces them to be more selective in what they call a show dog since it must also accomplish a function.

We all know there are politics in the show ring which make it easy for some, tough for others to finish a dog. Included with this political complexity are the dogs which are excellent and finish fast, dogs which need mercy from the judges and a gray area wherein a dog has been campaigned for a long time, even years and just doesn't seem to finish. Why?

The problem lies most likely because this type of dog has some major problem i.e.: structural, type fault , or perhaps it just has a lack luster performance in the ring (conditions #2, #3, or # 4). Either way, the owner spends a great deal of money, time and doesn't get what they bargained for.

What does the owner do when this happens? Unfortunately they can't do very much unless a definition of a show dog was specified in the contract.

I have seen this scenario occur time after time. A person buys a dog from a breeder in good faith, pays \$1,500.00 \$2,500.00 for the dog and it never ever gets a ribbon, yet in the contract it was specified a show dog. Without the exact meaning of what the breeder calls a show dog, much is left to mere interpretation as a subjectivity call by the breeder. Who can argue with an opinion? I once asked a breeder what he called a show dog after reading his contract of sale, he replied, to my amazement, "any dog that has no disqualifying faults is a show dog". That would be equivalent to saying "all cars are race cars as long as they have 4 wheels and an engine".

Most of us have seen dogs in the show ring, which by the lowest of standards, just makes the grade (personally these types should be excused from the ring for lack of merit) hardly what I would call a show dog.

Fortunately for me being involved with the Rottweiler and dogs in general for many years, puts me in an advantageous position when choosing a new prospective show dog. I know what qualities are necessary to make that caliber of dog. My expectations are high, but the expectations of the novice may not be, therefore it would be easy to sell a show prospect to someone who's criteria is limited.

6. Has balance

Balance, a term I hear so seldom these days is ultimately important to a show dog. As in part 2 of the definition, I mentioned singular attributes of type which some dogs possessed i.e.: spectacular heads, super top lines, great movement. I would like to define "balance" as an overall harmonious symmetry which a dog exhibits. A dog which when all parts are considered relate to each other in correct proportions, producing symmetry.

Dr. Alvin Grossman makes an interesting point on this by saying in his book "The Standard Book of Dog Breeding" (Doral Publishing):

"Far too many breeders seem overly concerned with the individual parts of the dog. Many breeders subconsciously feel that when they know, to their own satisfaction, what a good head is, what a good front is, what constitutes good neck and shoulders, what a wellangulated rear looks like, etc., that there is nothing more for them to learn. The concept of relating the various parts of the dog to each other and viewing this relationship as a whole, rather than as a series of individual good or bad traits, is the key that so many breeders never grasp."

There have been some very good examples of this concept in show dogs which were not outstanding in any singular area, but did possess a balance in relation to themselves. This balance propelled them further in the competition because of their unique symmetry whereas so many other dogs are no more than "dogs of different parts", as one my mentors would say. In these less fortunate dogs the different parts if critiqued separately were good, but because they were so poorly matched in the sum total of the dog they can not attain symmetry.

An area which has become very prominent as an example of this mismatch is angulation. So many dogs are well angulated in the front but poorly angulated in the rear, or vice versa (this is a problem I see in many Rottweilers in the show ring at present). A harmoniously built dog where angulation is equal front and rear is becoming more and more rare.

Objectivity is essential when selecting a dog for competition, since ultimately the judgment of your show dog is rendered on an objective basis. By using "definition of a show dog" as a template, objectivity can be applied in evaluating the dog the same way a judge does . Whether it is used as a tool for grading a litter or buying a prospective show pup or adult, it can eliminate the temptation of measuring the dog on an emotional level and getting stuck with a dog that was really not equipped for the show ring.