

Looking Forward By Patricia Trotter

*A longtime GAZETTE contributor offers
advice to breeders in her final column*

Long before I was privileged to write the Better Breeding column for the akc gazette, I appreciated the magazine and the column for efforts to serve the concerns of dedicated breeders of purebred dogs. Over the decades, various experts shared their thoughts about preserving the purity of their breed as they offered words of wisdom to guide countless fanciers in our ongoing efforts to breed better dogs. Because this will be my last column on breeding in the gazette, I want to summarize some of my soundest advice on the subject.

Paramount to protecting the future of purebred dogs is guarding the purity of the breed while emphasizing one's selection skills in pursuit of perfection. New-age thinking lauds "crossbreed" dogs such as Labradoodles in defiance of the centuries of development that went into the creating and perfecting of purebreds. Even the concept of protecting the purebred dog is persona non grata in some circles. "Animal-rights" people think as long as there is any dog available for adoption breeders should have few rights to breed purebreds. This is tantamount to saying as long as there is a child in need of adoption, potential parents should not give birth to a biological child.

Preserving the purity of the breed means studying the history and original job description of each breed in order to understand the traits that made the breed itself and not something else. Traits that contribute to the dog doing his job are virtues; traits that interfere with the dog doing his job are faults. Always keep in mind that, with few exceptions, breeds were originally bred to work—not to show. Breeds that have morphed into soft, open-coated specimens that are enhanced by blow dryers and other modern cosmetology would simply be compromised if called upon to work in severe and changing weather conditions. If you breed Arctic dogs, this is a heads up for you to prize the correct harsh coat.

Troubling Trends

Perhaps one of the biggest losses to traditional purity of breed type is seen in the Afghan ring, where the primitive-patterned Afghan is almost an endangered species. Breeders tell me they are no longer treasured as in the past because most judges do not reward them. Consider how much better it would be for the breed if the parent club educated, publicized, and emphasized retaining patterned animals in the gene pool to the breeding and judging community. Parent-club members uniting for the common cause is in the best interest of protecting the purity of the breed.

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Another subject troubling world-class dog experts in a number of breeds is the worship of the cat foot, which is desired in only a few breeds. When a breed standard calls for either an oval foot or hare foot (where the two center toes are longer than the two outer toes), it's a clear message that a cat foot is not correct. Yet both exhibitors and judges often reward the smallest, roundest cat foot in breeds that should not have it, because the cat foot is considered pretty and showy. Parent clubs must alert judges to these situations that actually restrict proper-working functionality.

This means collectively appreciating all those traits that contribute to breed type—the original type or form that the breed evolved into to best allow a given breed to perform its job. In the case

of the aforementioned Afghan Hound, the breed's squareness is a unique trait for a sighthound. It enables the dog to make sharp and repeated turns in pursuit of his quick-turning prey. Though we know there will always be animals with uncommon heart that outperform their physique, it is accepted that those dogs best structured to perform a particular job will find it easiest to perform that job, and are therefore the most valuable to a breeding program.

Thus our selection skills must be based on keeping sound and competent animals in our gene pools that exhibit the correct form (type), allowing the correct function for the breed. Modern breeders have more tools than ever before in assessing soundness and anatomical correctness in the selection process. Yet breeders can be seduced by seeking dogs who are winners, even though they do not represent the essence of the breed. Conscientious breeders must reject generic dogs as breeding stock, for they are unable to keep the breed on course.

Avoiding Generic Dogs

Imperative for our future is the recognition that not all breeds move the same, show the same, or have the same character. Reach and drive on one breed might be incorrect on another, just as a stilted gait is incorrect on most. Keeping the lumbering gait of the Neapolitan Mastiff is just as important as rewarding the trotting expertise of the Rottweiler, for they have very different job descriptions.

When breeders and judges start selecting for a generic dog, the essence of the breed is compromised. The very nuances that create a specific form to perform a designated job are the elements of the purebred. Protecting the purebred is a must for us all.

Thus breeders must perfect their selection skills for the canine as a species and as a member of a particular breed. They must respect that Mother Nature was the original breeder unable to tolerate weakness in the family. When a favorite dog does not belong in the breeding program, breeders must enjoy that one as a pet instead of talking themselves into breeding it in spite of his weaknesses. Breeders must always keep in mind that the key to success lies with selection skills. In acquiring your first bitch to breed, deciding which sire to use with her, evaluating the resulting litter, and picking those (if any) to carry on in future generations, selection skills will determine the success of the breeding program. Master breeders are those with exceptional ability in utilizing selection skills.

Difficult times such as these require us all to make informed decisions. Learning what is important in assessing your breeding stock is your personal responsibility. Because our sport is influenced by subjectivity, it is all the more important that the breeder remain objective and able to make tough calls. Such calls require that you do your homework. I wish breeders the best of breeding luck in the future as we say a fond farewell to our favorite magazine. Please keep in mind the words of a true dog woman, breeder, and judge, Dr. Edna K. Martin: "Our job as breeders is preservation, not innovation."

Patricia Trotter is approved to judge more than 80 breeds. She is a regular contributor to the gazette. This article first appeared in the August 2011 AKC GAZETTE and is reprinted with permission in Lighting the Way, Fall 2011 issue.