

Norwich Terriers, 8-23

Title: Evaluating breeding stock: Insights from Leicester Longwool sheep breeders

This column is inspired by a passage in *The New Art of Breeding Better Dogs*, 14th printing published in 1980. Though the pages are yellowed and musty, author Kyle Onstott's insights are as relevant today as in 1938 when he penned the first edition and introduced early concepts of genetics into breeding dogs.

“All too many breeders blink the shortcomings of their own dogs. The desire to be believed to excel, the yen to win, is too often greater than the desire actually to possess and to breed excellent dogs. Owners of dogs frequently, in an effort to convince others of the perfection of their dogs, actually convince themselves—usually only themselves.” (p. 183)

Winning does not satisfy the serious breeder. We know show wins depend on the quality of the other competitors, the handler's skills in presenting the dog, the whim of the judges ... Ribbons are not criterion of success. Inferior dogs will become champions through luck or influence, and outstanding dogs may never attain fame in the show ring.

According to the AKC booklet *A Beginner's Guide to Dog Shows* (2014), “Dog shows (conformation events) are intended to evaluate breeding stock.” Perhaps that was the original intent. Perhaps today there are some who rely on the opinion of judges to evaluate their breeding stock or seek out stud dogs for their bitches based on ribbons won and competitive rankings. For the successful breeder, however, a dog show is not the place to select breeding stock.

To start with, the winner simply reflects one judge's opinion relative to the other entries on one day. In competitive judging, dogs are evaluated relative to their breed standard and ranked within each class: 1st 2nd 3rd 4th. Sometimes the quality is high and it's splitting hairs to pick the winner. Other times it's a question of picking the best of an inferior entry. A blue ribbon or best of breed win doesn't necessarily indicate an exemplary dog. Judges must sort the dogs in the ring; they don't have to like them.

There are other problems with using results from competitive judging to pick breeding stock. Showmanship is a big part of success. Handlers try to show their entries to the exhibit's

best advantage with sculpted grooming and skilled presentation to minimize weak points and accentuate the positive. But, covering up flaws to garner ribbons doesn't advance the evaluation of breeding stock, from inside or outside the ring. And we know professional handlers have an edge.

Livestock judging offers a different perspective. The dedicated breeders of Leicester Longwool sheep use "card grading," a different approach to evaluating breeding stock. This is a rare breed of sheep where breed management is critical. Breeders work together.

For the serious breeder of purebred dogs, the concept of card grading makes sense. The objective is genuinely to assess potential breeding stock. As in competitive judging the individual animals are evaluated relative to a breed standard and ribbons are awarded – blue, red, yellow, white. But in contrast to competitive judging, which rewards only a single "best" animal within a show class, in card grading more than one animal might be awarded blue, or depending on the merits of the animals, there might be no blue ribbons ("cards").

Applied to dogs, the top "blue card" dogs are obvious choices to keep in the breeding population. Likewise, the "red card" dogs usually are good choices, despite having a weakness or two in meeting the ideal breed standard. The "yellow card" dogs may have a single significant flaw or be moderately weak in several different characteristics. While not likely to win in competitive judging, these dogs may make a positive contribution to the breed. They can be mated to dogs that are strong in whatever single characteristic is weak; thus, the other strengths in the "yellow card" dog can benefit the breed. The key is that they must be used wisely. The conservation breeders of sheep are careful not to let a single flaw eliminate an animal from having a useful and important role in the genetic structure of the breed. To remove such animals not only removes their flaws, but also removes their good points. This requires understanding the breed standard and a deep knowledge of the pedigrees. At the bottom are "white card" animals, which deviate from the breed standard in significant ways and have less to offer.

The successful breeder of dogs makes breeding decisions to move in a direction of improvement in terms of health, temperament, and adherence to the breed standard. This means keeping the best for the reproducing population and removing others, decisions that require careful thought for breed improvement. There isn't usually a single "first place" dog or pick-of-the-litter. It's the wise selections and pairing up of dogs what will most likely produce that next generation that is better than the parents. It's important to breed "to the standard," however, for

the successful breeder, some points in a breed standard are more important than others. Soundness and type are paramount, whereas details of appearance that contribute to “breed type” may be less important. These decisions are not trivial. The breed standard is a blueprint to be used constructively and usefully. Knowing your pedigrees, generations back, including siblings is most important.

The “yen to win” will often deceive. Breeders who have a head-in-the-sand approach to “judging” a competitor’s entry from outside the ring will discount the truly superior entry. In fact, lacking the ability to see and appreciate true and valid superiority, they are likely to achieve little improvement in their own dogs. Although for many exhibitors, the conformation dog shows are more about competing to win ribbons, shows with large diverse entries offer an opportunity to see dogs produced by other breeders. Although Norwich terriers are not rare or endangered, maintaining a breeding pool of exemplary dogs is a responsibility of all who claim to care about the betterment of the breed.

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