

An Eye for Movement

by Lisa Dubé-Forman



There are some who have an eye for fluidity and easy motion. **Z**There are many more who do not. Understanding or better yet, recognizing artistry of motion is not necessarily something that can be taught. The innate ability, or gift, is similar to the creative abilities within artists, composing works of art in oils, pastels, with words or on musical instruments.

Margaret Wolfe once penned 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder' and is apropos to the process of observing dogs. Albeit, when it comes to locomotion there is a deficit of the exceptional who instantly espy fluid gait. These select individuals possess an eye for movement.

Under ideal circumstances, structural components are taught with the students shown gait and footfall in slow motion so they understand the sequences. After time, the rate of speed is increased so that a student should be able to recognize correct timing in 'real time,' but this is a schooled skill, it is not in-born or intuitive. The judging pool has those who are schooled in gait and footfall, and then again, many who aren't and are simply winging it. For the former, I cannot estimate the percentage of those who are skilled in assessing motion because, disappointingly, now there are just a scattering of memorable individuals.

Interestingly, there is a further subset of those skilled in footfall timing. These include persons whose eyes are unable to recognize fluent motion. Although, on the outset, this statement may seem like a contradiction, indeed it is not. A judge proficient in footfall can identify correct timing, however, that is all they see. Their eye does not take in the whole picture, rather the important details such as the posture of the neck and head and the extent of top and back line movement above and below the static, and the effects this has on fluency. They do not comprehend suitable range of reach and use of the foreleg and metacarpal's lengthening — as opposed to excessiveness. Nor in the appropriate breeds, do they look for or at the comportment of the rear feet in thrust. As an example, the rear digital and communal pads are practically curled during the phase of an excellent hunting hound's follow-through drive. Doing so is not exaggeration, but demonstrates the muscles pull on the tendons causing such snap, as the hound has quality of backward reach and flexibility.

For those judges capable of assessing footfall, many attribute this as the prime cause of their decision. Although correct footfall timing is, in fact, an indicator of the balance of parts, which is highly desirable, in truth this is just a measure of having an eye for movement. One must reflect upon the truth that precise, clean gait cannot be the 'be-all and end-all.' Artistry in motion takes into account the quintessence of the dog's type and form in action, and the other factors discussed previously. It is not unusual to see a sound dog lacking desired shape or distinctions for its breed awarded in the show ring. The term 'sound' describes a dog whose footfalls, construction of pasterns, and timing are all free from defects.

The ensuing opinion may not be popular, but a judge who is gifted with an eye for movement seeks not the soundest mover. Besides timing, there are other imperfections and weaknesses that

cloud an automated or inelegant judge's objectivity. These may include being close in the rear, hocks turning in somewhat, a degree of toeing in, or moving slightly wide in the front as the forelegs do not completely converge on the centerline of travel. While true that these are shortcomings, the specimen portraying lovely breed essence, whose side profile has easy, smooth bearing is, in my opinion, superior to the sound moving dog with generic, mediocre type or the sound but indistinctive dog with superfluous action.

'Beauty is supported by opinion,' and few can argue with Mr. Benjamin Franklin. However, today it seems that the subjectivity of dog show judges has its roots more from learning by rote; having acquired sets of rules and mindlessly following them. Similar to painting or coloring by numbers. Adjudicating dogs is more art than a science. There are so few today that can instantly recognize the full worth of easy, gliding, shapely movement. I have been willing to sacrifice sound, precise movement for a dog endowed with breed essence or nearly as enriched, but has weaknesses. I base my reasoning on old-school style of tutoring; sadly many old masters are no longer with us today. I will not forget thirty years past I was granted an audience with a widely known, elderly dog authority who afterwards proclaimed to me, "Young lady, YOU, have an eye for movement," as she turned on her heels and walked brusquely away.

I remain unaffected by the general debate that one cannot have soundness without type. I do not believe they are interchangeable as evidenced at dog shows around the country. Choosing between the two, I would first go to type. First though, the adjudicator must be well-schooled in that breed's unique design and traits. Gaits are not the same for all breeds and one size does not fit all. The various breeds demand various locomotion conducive to their function and are dictated by their form. It is a serious mistake to attribute a generalized concept of gait to all the general breeds, excepting the obvious such as the Bulldog or Pekingese.

Frankly, there are always compromises that must be made when judging dogs, but foregoing breed characteristics for absolute soundness is unacceptable. It would be a disservice to the breed to award an Irish Red & White Setter who shares more breed similarities with an Irish Setter, based upon their movement being clean coming and going. Another would be selecting a workmanlike, plain Deerhound in competition over another who has flowing shape with a spring forward gait, who may be close in the rear.

An honest, introspective judge may realize he does not possess an intuitive eye for movement. As a result, they will take every opportunity to reflect upon the archetypal qualities of the exhibits as a primary consideration rather than approach the responsibility with mechanized determination. It bears reiterating, judging is more art than science.

"Beauty is supported by opinion."

— Benjamin Franklin



Lisa Dubé-Forman
Ballyhara Irish Wolfhounds and AKC Judge
lisa@lisadubeforman.com

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