

Parent Club Mentoring

CHANGING THE DIRECTION OF THE BREEDS?

by Lisa Dubé Forman

Observer experiences, such as they are now called in American Kennel Club (AKC) verbiage, are important components in educating oneself on an additional breed(s). It is tremendously helpful for an enthusiastic judge to sit with, converse on and observe new breeds with a knowledgeable, seasoned fancier. Many times, this experience includes subsequent and beneficial hands-on examinations of selected entries. Ringside mentoring, in plainer terms, is still allowed under the new judging approval process although the regulations have been toughened up.

First, the brief, newly revised and implemented requirements. AKC states as of March 2012, "Formal observations will be allowed with *parent club approved mentors* at National or Regional Specialties..." The form further requires that, "Mentors verify that the judge has completed an AKC® approved observation." In contrast, the previous requirements in place up until March 2012 stated, "Observer may observe with Parent Club approved mentors **or** individuals with a minimum of 12 years experience breeding and exhibiting. Approved judges with regular status in the breed for 12 years may also mentor ringside." (My bolding and italics.)

The AKC has permitted ringside mentoring since January 2000, and it is a highly successful module of the Judging Approval Policy. I take no issue with the new revision that observer experiences submitted with and on an additional breed application may now occur only at a regional or national specialty. This new re-write supposedly eliminates the possibility of judges sitting ringside at typical all-breed dog shows briefly having one or more "mentors" in smallish entries. Perhaps

abuse was inevitable, even at large supported entries, as I witnessed fellow participating judges stand, not sit, for a very brief time and then request the designated mentor sign their ringside observation form. I do take issue with these actions because observer experiences, also referred to as tutoring are important to me and other like-minded individuals. I go to great lengths to attend these breed shows to engage with and be tutored by knowing individuals of that breed. In most cases, I attend all days of a multi-day specialty soaking up as much information as possible. My intent is to learn what makes that breed tick, namely what are the deficiencies in the breed that many are not going to glean by simply observing from the sidelines. I am not holding myself up as a martyr because there are a few occasions that I can only attend one or two days of a multiple day event. Nevertheless, I typically observe all the action until the completion of Stud and Brood Bitch classes. I harvest a tremendous amount of information from the non-regular classes such as Veterans which is near and dear to my heart. These classes illustrate where the breed has been and after watching regular classes, where it is going.

continued on page 152

PARENT CLUB MENTORING, CHANGING THE DIRECTION OF THE BREEDS?

continued from page 150

Having said all this, I do object to the AKC rephrasing containing the condition -- parent club approved mentors -- for all formal observations. It bears repeating, AKC's prior stipulations permitted breed mentors to participate in ringside observing experiences if the mentor had 12 years or more breed experience. Ringside observations did not require a person with a formal stamp of approval by its breed parent club.

This is a provocative revision. At the heart of the matter, parent club approved mentor lists are at the whim and mercy of whomever is in charge. It is not unimaginable that collectives of like-minded people elected to serve as Officers or Directors of their parent breed clubs may have a tendency to shut out other individuals with differing opinions, especially if it were a highly contested, close election. I liken it to, "It's my turn now" mentality. Such heated personality conflicts result in labeling, justifiably or not. Those disadvantaged persons are deemed difficult, inflexible, controversial and are disliked, not surprisingly, by the powers that be. Thus, because of their contrasting opinions, those who have fallen out of favor are not welcomed to serve on judges education committees and some may not serve as a parent club approved mentor. In other words, a shameful loss for breed clubs and future judges as many have extensive experience in canine anatomy, health & genetics and even animal husbandry.

Some parent club approved mentor rosters are questionable. In certain cases, those serving in these key advisory groups have considerably less knowledge than the aforementioned vilified persons. Frankly, there are an unknown number of people appointed as formal breed advisors who could not identify basic skeletal anatomy and its proper usage when applied to its function. They would not be able to point out the ilium, the zygomatic arch nor expound on the importance of the thorax. Yet, these people are approved as parent club mentors mostly due to relationships, their malleability to pre-conceived ideology which strengthens the 'powers that be' vantages and interests. Even more, some breed mentors may be precocious newcomers to the sport who not long ago bought a dog and aligned themselves with that breeder. They are also members of that special, "I already know everything there is to know" club. With such alliance and breeder's support, the newbie is made-up as a full or active member, together with its voting privileges. When the need arises, that breeder may politic with other like-minded people to stack the board with their supporters or friends. Hence, the newcomer is socialized into political leanings, their adulation cup runneth over towards the breeder and those who rallied behind them. These loyalties in combination with their infinite breed wisdom (tongue-in-cheek) and mismanaged priorities enable them to be in the position to make decisions concerning the breed's welfare and future. This may sound harsh, however, we club members in the trenches call it "politics."

There is still yet another smaller, disadvantaged segment regularly excluded by new and old regimes. These fanciers are not affiliated with any clique, they have qualified, seasoned breed experience and are or were active in breeding, exhibiting and/or judging. However, they do not mix socially with board

or many club members, they have their own opinions and make their own decisions without being influenced. Quite often they do not subscribe to chat lists with mind-numbing, endless banter about cute puppy photos, who won what and where, or she said/he said exchanges. Furthermore, some may no longer be members of the parent club. Many are on the periphery, mostly because they deplore the aforementioned politics and avoid irrelevant controversies because they lead full and busy lives -- they have a balanced perspective in work, hobbies, and personal pursuits. Some donate to or perform rescue efforts and they may support specialties with breed entries but what they will not do is lower themselves into the clubs infighting quagmires. When all is said and done, they are disgusted with, nor do they condone or wish to be involved in such toxicity. Despite their wealth of breed information, these people also lack official approbation by the parent club, therefore they do not meet the revised criterion set forth by the AKC and are ineligible to fulfill Formal Ringside Observations. Most importantly and highlighting the irony, a few of these people are AKC breed judges in which the AKC considers them breed experts.

I consulted with an AKC Executive Field Representative on the matter in which they pointed out the alternative for such discriminated groups (my words, not theirs). Since we no longer are required to fulfill and check off specific components during our learning progression, the AKC supports an additional opportunity in breed counseling. The AKC supplies a Mentoring/Tutor form on their website. Breed experience can evolve with a Mentor/Tutor who is considered a guide for the aspirant breed judge. This Guide may fulfill one of two definitions dependent on the time they spend with such person. Mentor is defined as a long-term relationship having numerous experiences in on-going education in the applicable breed. Tutor is defined as a casual in-depth discussion with a breeder/judge or knowledgeable experienced handler in the applicable breed. In short, these "unaccredited," although competent person(s) not ordained by the breed parent club may still fulfill mentor or tutor positions, just not at formal observations held at Specialties!

This brings us full circle to this article's topic -- parent club approved mentors, are they changing the direction of our breeds? I believe mine is not an aberrant opinion, as parenthetically, one person recently opined, "You write what everyone is thinking." Delving into this subject, I contend that specific control groups can and will influence breed course and I maintain that when a particular group of like-minded individuals come into power they wield significant influence over that breed's future and prosperity. One such area that is modified or updated is such administration's interpretation of the breed standard. Along with the official breed standard, the three other important tools the parent club uses to disseminate breed type and characteristics are the Illustrated and Visual standards and a Judges Education Committee with its supplementary Approved Mentor List. Accordingly, the revised printed and electronic educational material may reflect such administration's personal interpretations of the breed standard, regardless if it varies from long-accepted authoritative presentations. Theirs is a new version, a white paper without inviting opinions upon themselves. At times trans-

continued on page 154

PARENT CLUB MENTORING, CHANGING THE DIRECTION OF THE BREEDS?

continued from page 152

parenthood suffers, along with an open consultation process -- instead, it is select individuals with an opportunity to steer, to frame or influence, most often in their favor. The last delivery mechanism for the new dogma is the club approved mentor roster stacked with friendly faces. This is indeed happening across almost all breeds. Incidentally, I was informed there are a few savvy parent breed clubs that are implementing or attempting to establish that current approved mentors cannot be removed from the official list at the whim of a new administration without reasonable grounds such as suspension.

Irrespective of the few clubs who see the writing on the wall and who have or are preparing to deal with such possibilities and upheavals, this still leaves a number of parent breed clubs who are blissfully naïve this would never happen in their club. Some administrations are shortsighted, they lack willpower to implement protective policies to prevent future administrations from taking control and modifying illustrated and visual standards that may influence their breed's future, its shape and type. These potential changes may be aligned with established trends reshaping the configuration of that particular breed showcased in the show ring. There is always a risk that breed standards, educational material and tutoring are changed to reflect prevailing tendencies. I refer to it as "breed drift." We are well-aware that AKC parent breed clubs own their breed standards and they retain the right to maintain, oversee and administer them, however they see fit. They are the legal guardians. I certainly am not an advocate of any kennel club owning breed standards such as The Kennel Club in England. Thankfully, the AKC does not. On the other hand, we must admit that many breeds have metamorphosized before our eyes. For instance, one need not look further than the Cocker Spaniel (the oldest parent club in the U.S. since 1881) or the Bulldog to grasp an understanding of reshaping. Over the course of one hundred thirty-plus years, it appears these examples underwent renovation to reflect new visions, to the point that breed drift established the current version today. Both appear in one or more particular aspects markedly different from the such previous eras. Accordingly, extremes won out in the end.

Setting aside the very real possibility that some parent clubs have been or are being used as catalysts to advance a set group of individuals personal priorities, I urge parent club's to employ constant vigilance. Many times whether purposefully or inherently and therefore innocently, parent club approved mentors inflect their preferences as they instruct. As I stated earlier, some of these mentors are ill-equipped to advise aspiring judges due to their own lack of maturation in the breed under a skilled mentor. Now they find themselves mentoring judges who are, for all practical purposes, future caretakers of the breed in AKC's show ring. Without sound understanding of their breeds structural necessities, how can they impart and logically advise new judges during formal observations without appearing idiotic? Yet, it does happen and quite often. If you have not pursued a judging career and attended ringside observations this is not familiar territory for you. However, this is old news for most astute judges who have sat through countless ringside observations. What happens though when the judge being mentored is not astute or seasoned? Frequently, approved mentors are instructing budding breed judges in their formative

stages and this can have lasting, sometimes detrimental effects. Examples of mentoring gone awry: club approved mentor(s) counseling prospective judge(s) that they prefer greater to extreme angulation in a hound because it is more graceful, yet the official breed standard demands overall moderation. They casually and erroneously refer to it as "another type." Others tutoring the desire for a slightly off-square shape, short loin in a hound breed whose standard cites 'long' as a desideratum no less than thirteen times. In other instances, breed counselors staunchly ignore, or worse, gloss over very serious faults such as a short sternum, short-ribbed backs and steep thorax's on galloping, endurance hounds. Further, another related mentor shortcoming and one of my particular vexations is the lack of tutoring, incorrect instruction, or forgiveness on the requisite topline of a galloping sighthound. If a breed mentor does not possess the knowledge, is unable to recognize a properly constructed topline, or roundly minimizes a badly flawed contour then they are doing that sighthound breed a serious injustice. I digress quickly to announce that the need is greater now than ever before for educational drilling in this area. There is an obvious trend in which we are seeing flatter to flat toplines on many greyhounds and greyhound-like breeds. This is not only observed in stasis but in locomotion as well with some hounds who may have a modicum of shape however, they lose their contours as they drop their heads to parallel planes while flattening out on the move.

Finally, I find this all vexing and exasperating. It is helpful to rehash my mentor panel's advice who unsurprisingly and independently of one another, all expressed similar sentiments to counteract the volley of misinformation. All we can do is keep talking about fundamentals, keep going over the details in the hopes that maybe somebody will listen and learn, and continue showing the correct breed type no matter how many changes are seen in the show ring. In short, as one mentor shared while paraphrasing an acclaimed dog fancier, we need it shove it down their throats.



"GOT ONE! IS YOUR HUNTING DOG
READY TO GO INTO THE WATER TO
GET IT?"