

# The Best of the SIMILAR

By Lisa Dubé Forman

Cultural anthropology suggests that the nature of humans is intrinsically connected with several basic drives, one being social factors. Human nature is best described as fundamental dispositions and traits, and because of the influence of social factors, consequences or outcomes are effected. As such, the colloquialism, 'Go with the tide,' moving along with the prevailing forces and accepting the prevailing trends are, not surprisingly, promoted and cultivated. This tendency is frequently seen in our sport, particularly judging.

Social factors indeed contribute to conformation judging results. Experiences, personality and attitude have a great capac-

ity to affect the behavior of judges and, in turn, the development of our dog breeds. I speak about what is to come hereafter. I speak of the successes or failures our breeds will experience after having been subjected to the trend of events – that being a large part of AKC judges are selecting the best of the similar from the entries in their breed rings. First, what does this mean? Selecting the best of the similar is the adjudication process frequently observed when judges select and award dogs who are much of the same. The judges are unconcerned if 'much of the same' is rarely in accordance with the breed's acknowledged or accepted standard. There are in-

*continued on page 180*



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## THE BEST OF THE SIMILAR

*continued from page 178*

stances when this method of choosing from the similar is appropriate and necessary, such as stamping uniformity into rare breeds. The Foundation Stock Service breeds benefit from a lack of objectivity during their critical processes of improving and development, but it is wholly unnecessary and unjust in the show ring of established and long recognized breeds.

This is an unsettling trust and trend to select only from the similar entries. Coherency is encouraged and strongly desired because it is viewed, mistakenly so, as displaying competency and proficiency. I debate which is more alarming, the number of judges who are afraid to award an entry who does not fit into the current trending molds, or reportedly the AKC Executive Field Representative evaluations which are supporting, nearly demanding such uniformity. Such commercial uniformity has not gone unnoticed as recently one of my many hound mentors, one with more than 50-plus years invested in dogs, plainly stated her observations. Today's AKC all-breed dog show is a competition of uniformity, a production involving generic show dogs, and is a process in selection amongst dogs that differ little but in color.

Indeed, I know there are many AKC judges who have privately discussed this ongoing trend. For many, it simply boils down to a tough choice as they perceive it as being between a rock and a hard place. Many oblige to most likely ensure advancement in their judging careers while sacrificing their open-mindedness, or they can 'rock the boat' incurring the attention and displeasure of a Rep and a risky negative assessment(s) of "Marginal" or "Does Not Meet" Expectations. For the uninitiated, three unsatisfactory evaluations of "Marginal" or two "Does Not Meet" from AKC Executive Field Representatives in any combination of breeds places a judge on probation for those affected breeds. It is naïve to believe that these consequences are not influential in many judges placements and awards.

Judges who select only the best of the similar are the bane of the skilled, wizened, breeders existence. At the very least, those judges who do know better have made a conscious choice and are not willing to take a risk. They move along with the prevailing forces as they ask themselves, "who are they to buck the trend?" In my opinion, the most favorable adjective to describe such performance is distasteful, but what I find to be even more egregious are the judges who do not know any better. Those who are seemingly relaxed, carefree and blind to their inadequacies -- inadequacies that betray their multiple shortcomings which are obvious to the nowadays minority of seasoned, veteran fanciers and breeders. These limitations are noticeable: scant breed knowledge reflecting only recent years study of dogs bred and styled to prevailing fads and trends. Judge's demonstrating a lack of care and interest not having studied photographic essays across a breed's history; and the inability to grasp the importance of breed specific characteris-

tics and anatomy. Envisage the judge who awards a Golden Retriever, though primarily an upland game dog, with so low an ear set that if the dog were to water retrieve, his ears would be well below the waterline and fill with fluid. Alternatively, the unforgivable indiscretion awarding short-legged, galloping sighthounds whose only hope of catching and dispatching large quarry would be for them to hide behind a rock and jump out at the prey as it went by.

If one observes ample all-breed competitions, you most likely will see numerous illustrations of selecting the best of the similar. It does not discriminate between breeds. The unskilled judges only recognize a difference between the majority and the few -- so few we cannot even call them a minority. For example, in the wolfhound show ring, these judges only detect that the majority are low-slung, flat-backed, tubular wolfhounds, in contrast to a few or just one who is 'well up on leg,' substantial with flowing, curved top and underlines, and strong trunk. These unknowing judges ignore the latter hound that sticks out and award only from the majority of similar entries. The Poodle ring is not immune either. This dog is required to have a light springy action; despite this, almost all the exhibits are raced, not gaited but raced around the show ring. As opposed to the poodle entry who is gaited at the ideal pace featuring breed correct, springy, forward momentum without over-reaching. Yet this dog does not get a second look because the unknowing judge considers him too slow, he is not using himself! Consider the plurality of flat-backed greyhounds with no rise over the loin, just about tabletop flat or even worse, having ski-sloped toplines with hips lower than the withers. Side note: we see this occasionally in wolfhounds and refer to it as the Hyena. If amongst the entries there is a classic, old-style greyhound displaying symmetry, with under and over flowing curves from the nape and brisket, to the muscled arched loin and sweep of stifle; he is considered a dramatic departure from the others. Both amusing and sad, some judges have fleeting looks of bewilderment that something is physically wrong with the correct hound before they award the best of the similar from the majority. It does not dawn on them that many times the standout dog(s) was the superior specimen.

A bit of profound wisdom -- it is always easier to breed a dog that does not adhere to its breed blueprint than breeding one who does. A majority of entries in the ring are non-conforming, but uniform in their atypicalness; the minority or even sometimes just one entry who is typical, but not uniform with the majority, may very well conform to the breed's blueprint.

Mine is not the lone voice in the wilderness about this phenomenon. The American Whippet Club recently disseminated a treatise *Special Aspects of Judging the Whippet* in the AKC Judges Standard. In the opening paragraph it comes straight to the point being that the topline of the Whippet is the area of greatest difficulty for new and aspiring judges. It's detailed in-

*continued on page 182*



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## THE BEST OF THE SIMILAR

*continued from page 180*



formation is plain and simple declaring that judges will see in their ring some dogs that are too flat-backed or too long in loin, but many that are too short and too steep in loin, as well as dogs which have an arch which is peaked, not smooth without a noticeable break. They continue by exemplifying that the arch should be slight (not too accentuated) and graceful, and while it continues through the croup, it should not be steep or tilt abruptly downward from the top of the hip to the croup. They explain that too short, too steep construction is nonfunctional in a way that the slightly too flat topline is as well. Notably, they stress these fundamental points for function and ability of the Whippet to perform well as a racing and coursing breed. Quite predictably, judges continue 'going with the flow' here as well, as evidenced in their selections of homogeneity, even though this is the antithesis of the breed's blueprint. Either we see awards from the majority of whippet entries with peaked arches and steep croups -- 'slap-assed' -- a somewhat crass, but descriptive breed specific term, or we observe the judge sifting through the flat-backed entries for their placements while the hound with great elegance and grace of outline is disregarded.

This parent club communiqué is an excellent example of how our parent breed clubs need to speak out and rail against the status quo. It is just one acknowledgment that, to be sure, a problem exists in the introspection process of our show rings. It targeted judges, who willingly accept the solemn responsibility of breed guardians, the custodians in championship conformation competition which is a role that all judges should be taking to heart. However, the troubling reality is that many find this entreaty as histrionic, trite, and pay no heed.

My intent is not to make an impression as a censorious individual, but it is a risk I am willing to take. On the other hand, we all need to speak out on these very consequential, momentous matters. If not you, then who will? Shall we sit back and watch achievements of our lifetime, the culmination of our blood, sweat and tears be swept away in short order? We all need to go back to our parent breed clubs and engage them in creating an official dispatch speaking out against the prevailing trends. Trends that we see in almost all breeds and the media vehicle these dispatches are nearly guaranteed to be read is in the AKC Judges Standard. For those exhibitors who stand with me, the next time you are at a dog show seek out the AKC Executive Field Representative and suggest AKC put into practical effect mandatory judges critiques. A required system of Judges ratings expounding on their placements and awards and a brief grading technique that demonstrates accountability may very well end the methodology of the best of the similar.

After a busy day of judging, no matter if or how a judge comes to terms with his decisions, for some the method of selecting 'the best of the similar' is a cop-out, and for others, it is a thin veil shrouding the reality that they are uneducated, which in my opinion, is the most offensive censure.



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