Having an Eye for a Dog

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The wide range of quality in the dogs produced in any breed tells us that not everyone is born to be a breeder. Experts feel that one of the most accurate predictors of a breeder’s potential to produce animals of high quality is whether he possesses an "eye for a dog." Grossman (1983) tells us:

"The importance of having an ‘eye for a dog’ cannot be overstated.... There are some extremely knowledgeable breeders who ...can ‘talk a great dog,’ [but] are not able to produce an outstanding specimen....The consistent breeding of show quality dogs should be considered an art. To some breeders this comes naturally with little effort, others have to learn this art, and still others will never achieve success in this most important area of purebred dogs."

WHAT IS AN "EYE FOR A DOG?"

An "eye for a dog" is an old dog man’s expression referring to a person’s "almost instinctive ability to know what is true quality in animals and what is not" (Nicholas, 1979). Grossman (1992) defines the term as "the ability to select a good dog without a lot of effort" and concludes that this attribute, more than any other, is the most important thing a breeder can possess. In addition to having a greater ability to visualize the potential impact of various ancestors in a dog’s pedigree, breeders with an "eye" tend to more easily grasp abstract breeding concepts such as balance. The following analogy by Grossman (1991), which refers to coated dogs, offers a clever explanation of an "eye for a dog" than I am certain both men and women can appreciate!

"What do I mean by an eye for a dog? Let me draw an analysis for you. When my wife goes shopping she flips through acres of dresses on racks. To me, they look like floppy things on hangers. To her, knowing her measurements and what color and style flatter her build, it’s easy for her to visualize the necessary accessories to finish the outfit. You, as a breeder, need to do the same sort of things: What kind of build do you want your puppies to have; what should their color be; what accessories, texture and length of coat, ear set, etc., do you want. You have to be able to
visualize the sire and dam and their parents and grandparents. Then you can create by breeding one almost like the ones you have visualized."

CHARACTERISTICS OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE AN "EYE FOR A DOG"

1. As breeders, they consistently produce animals of high quality.
2. They can evaluate any dog quickly and easily.
3. They have an instinctive ability to recognize quality and soundness in almost any breed.
4. They place a high priority on, and can recognize, the intangible element of "balance."

ACQUIRING AN EYE FOR A DOG: A MENTOR CAN HELP

"To some breeders, 'having an eye for a dog' is second nature. Breeders lacking this natural talent can become self-taught provided they have the intelligence and motivation to discern between the good and poor specimens put before them." (Grossman, 1983)

Breeders who consistently produce fine dogs may have a natural eye for a dog, while other persistent, dedicated individuals have taught themselves to have an "eye for a dog." The artist has an eye for balance and elegance. So too must the breeder of dogs. For those needing to train their "eye," working with a knowledgeable mentor can put you on a fast track to acquiring an "eye." An experienced mentor can literally place your hands on various parts of a dog's anatomy and expertly guide you through many aspects of evaluating a dog's physical make-up.

"TRAINING YOUR "EYE"

Breeders can begin to train their "eye" by learning to evaluate a dog's outward appearance or phenotype. Several things helpful in evaluating phenotype include: (1) a copy of your breed's official Standard and Illustrated Standard; (2) A list of faults in your breed that are considered Very Serious, Serious and Minor; (3) an illustration of the anatomical parts of the dog; (4) a scoring system and (5) a recording system which allow you to keep your evaluations for future use.

The process of training your "eye" to evaluate the conformation features of a dog involves the following steps:

1. Locating the parts of the dog
   Knowledge of a dog's basic body parts is an absolute necessity for any dog fancier. Study your breed Standard and illustrated standard and with the help of an anatomical chart, locate on a "living, breathing" dog each conformation feature. Locating each part on your dog is essential to deciding if it meets the Standard for correctness and is a crucial step in training your "eye."

2. Evaluating the parts of the dog
   After locating the parts of the dog the breeder must evaluate their correctness based on the Standard. As Grossman (1983) notes: "The concept of relating the various parts of the dog to each other and viewing this relationship as a whole, rather than as a series of individual good or bad traits, is the key that so many breeders never grasp" – this is the all important crucial concept of balance. Training your "eye" to evaluate balance takes persistence and experience.

3. Annotating your evaluations
   Make notes of your evaluations for future reference. Many master breeders devise numerical scoring systems that are quick and easy to use when planning future breedings.
4. Formulating a plan
Based on your scores and notes, formulate a plan to improve features which do not meet the Standard. Scoring and making notes on the first 3 generations of ancestors in a pedigree can help a breeder "visualize" how a future mating might turn out. The ability to visualize the ancestors behind a sire and dam is an integral part of having an "eye" for a dog. A color coded stick figure pedigree can be especially useful in this regard. It is important not to breed two dogs who possess the same faults and to realize that closely linebred animals (i.e., those having a common ancestor behind the sire and dam in the first three generations) may be more apt to pass their physical features on to offspring.

AN "EYE" FOR THE IDEAL
A starting point in strengthening a breeder's "eye" is the ability to locate and evaluate the conformation features, unique characteristics and structural balance which define a breed. Having the "eye" to visualize a sire's and dam's ancestors, combined with the use of scoring and recording systems, can provide valuable information on the traits parents are likely to pass on to offspring.

A breeder's goal is to create his ideal dog. Having an "eye," that is, having the ability to recognize quality in a dog, as well as the ability to visualize ancestors in a pedigree, is one of the most important things a breeder can possess in order to create his ideal.

REFERENCE: