Coffee and Dane-ish

By Bill Stebbins

Fault Judging

The topic of this article is one which most people have heard but also creates some of the more frequent misunderstandings with regards to decisions at a dog show. A judge's job is NOT to find faults in a dog. Rather, they are expected to compare the dogs in a class against their understanding of the ideal dog as described in the breed standard. Although some may think it to be true, I don't know of anyone that has been blessed with an ideal Great Dane. There are those that have no problem finding fault in other people's dogs but not necessarily in their own.

I doubt that there is anyone reading this article that has not sat at ringside and wondered or even complained to a fellow exhibitor along the lines of … "How could the judge put up that dog? It has too much of_____ or not enough of _____." To be fair, the ability of a ringside observer to identify a weakness in any dog is usually correct. The problem comes when an individual feels that because they have found something that is not correct in an exhibit that should be enough reason for that particular animal not to win the class. The judge, on the other hand, must adjudicate the ENTIRE dog and weigh the good and not so good to determine if that dog, in their opinion, is the OVERALL best specimen.

Another primary and sometimes overlooked aspect of fault finding is the impact of a particular fault on the overall dog and its ability to do the work for which it was bred. There are faults which may cause a knee-jerk reaction on the part of almost anyone due to the impact on the appearance of an animal. Everyone at the show could easily identify a poor topline. This is a fault that would also have an impact on the dog's performance by reducing its endurance. There are other faults which would be of less importance but some individuals will continue to harp on a fault that might not affect the dog very much. I will relate a true story that occurred at the National. I have told this story a number of times but never in an article. At the National I was in charge of both Breeder's Ed and Judge's Ed. One aspect of the Breeder's Ed was to have the attendees experience a hand's-on segment. I had hand-picked several dogs for this event and the dogs and attendees met in the show ring for the hand's-on. After examining each of the dogs and watching them move they each made comments on which dogs they would put at the front of the line and which ones they would not. One of the dogs in the class was a fairly obvious selection and was picked #1 by all but one person. The lady that did not select that dog told me that she could never use him because---wait for it--- he has a white toenail. This is obviously an extreme example but far too many people can identify faults but not necessarily how that should be weighed in the overall outcome of a decision. When we utilized a Pointed Standard we also had an addendum known as the Gradation of Faults. This simply classified various faults into three categories… minor, serious and very serious. These documents are no longer used since the AKC disallowed pointed standards in any breed. There were several breeds that once had pointed standards. The reason for this decision was simple. A judge could not be expected to memorize all of the percentages in all areas of a dog's anatomy in any number of breeds.

In conclusion, I hope that all of you continue to do ringside judging. Lord knows I did plenty of that in the years I was breeding and exhibiting. This is a great way to improve your eye and hopefully you can learn more information about particular dogs or their bloodlines. I would ask that when you see something that you may not like, consider the impact of that issue on the entire dog. Some of you reading this article will be our next judges and applying your observations to the entire dog will be a future requirement.