

Superficial faults and their significance – Raymond Oppenheimer from the Bull Terrier Club Bulletin Spring 1969.

The appearance in the ring last year of a dog with a mark on his tail, the award to him of a challenge certificate and of a reserve best of sex card and his selection as a competitor for the major trophies has, as might have been expected, set off a fresh controversy.

As usual those who are most alarmed and excited over the problem are the same sort of people who used to froth at the mouth over ticks, over a few misplaced teeth, over slightly soft ears or any other of the superficial faults.

The truth of the matter is that pink noses, incorrect mouth, soft ear, light and wall eyes, unilateral cryptorchidism and marks behind the collar are only seven different facets of the same problem, that of the polygenic recessive and how to deal with it.

Events over the years have proved beyond a doubt that a policy which puts a taboo on any single fault is disastrous so far as breed progress is concerned. In fact, it is only fair to say that had some of the breeders not been more far seeing than some of the legislators, our breed certainly and many others probably, would be thirty years behind the advanced position it and they have now reached.

An appreciation of this fact is absolutely fundamental to progress and what is most required of judges is that they shall calmly and dispassionately assess the virtues and the faults of each animal which comes before them, balancing the one against the other. I have said that a variety of shortcomings in our breed are only different facets of the same problem. Let us now examine the lessons of history in this respect and see if they bear out what I have written.

The great Brigadier, when he first appeared in the ring, had an extremely pink nose. The superficialists, in other words those who could not see the wood for the trees, made just the same fuss over his pink nose as has since been made over other similar defects and if they had had their way he would never have won a prize and would therefore scarcely have been used at stud, yet this pink nose caused no concern whatever in subsequent generations.

Twenty or thirty years earlier in fact a dog with such a nose never would have been seen in public.

Let us pass on from there to incorrect mouths. Mrs. Schuster never bothered to show Contango Cobblestone because he was undershot and in the then climate of opinion, he would never have won a prize not been used at stud except by the percipient breeder. Miss Montague-Johnstone was one of the far seeing and by using him produced Romany Rivet, dam of Reliance. Miss Weatherill and I never troubled to show Souperlative Soap Bubble because of her mouth, many people would never have bred from her either for the same reason, magnificent bitch though she was. Had she been discarded there never would have been a Snowflash.

Next let us move on to light and/or wall eyes – the Knave had a light one, the dam of the Sphinx and of Starshine had wall eyes. What a tragedy it would have been if these three first class animals had never been used.

Before the last war ears such as Princeling's would have condemned him to life as a pet yet if he had not been used there would never have been a Barbelle, a Rheingold, a Silver Bob and a dozen others.

Exactly the same principle applies in the case of Bar Sinister, from one of whose normal brothers more unilateral cryptorchids are descended than have come down from Bar Sinister himself.

Over the years I am happy to say a more rational attitude has been adopted towards the first five of these defects with great success and profit to the breed and we must hope that increased knowledge will help the Kennel Club to a more sensible and constructive handling of the testicle problem in due course.

Let us now return in conclusion to the point of which started us off, namely to the question of marks behind the collar.

Souperlative Amelia Bebe was a good bitch but she had a black spot on the root of her tail, she was mated and produced the great Spurrell. I cannot, offhand, remember anything by Spurrell nor indeed anything descended from him in the first two or three generations which was marked behind the collar yet, in total contrast, I could name at least a dozen animals descended from Ben, of which Tracval's Barney Boy is indeed one, which are marked behind the head yet there is no mark behind Ben, known to me anyway, for endless generations, in fact not till we get back into the dim ages with Hampstead Heathen.

What this demonstrates, as do all other similar cases, is that there is no sense whatsoever in refraining from breeding from really top-class animals carrying one of these polygenic recessives unless one is able also to avoid using any of their relations since these, even if on the surface unaffected, are very likely to transmit the defect. As this is the case no good but actual harm is done if first class animals are debarred from the ring or the prize list while their less good contemporaries can win the highest honors.

There is, moreover, the basic fact which should never be lost sight of in addition to the foregoing and that is that for very straightforward genetic reasons a dog with outstanding virtues and outstanding faults is arithmetically more likely to transmit his virtues than his faults, because the virtues in our breed anyway, are in the genetic sense of the term "dominant" while faults are "recessive". In fact, at the very worst if one mates together two animals one of which has one of the defects of which I have written it could only be even money on it reappearing in the puppies whereas again at the very worst it is three to one on such an animal transmitting a virtue, therefore those who will not take the chances in breeding are always stacking the odds against themselves as compared with breeders who will take chances. To sum up then fanciers should maintain an entirely dispassionate attitude to all faults and to all virtues and breeders, judges and critics alike should bear in mind that the entire problem revolves round a sensible balancing of the faults against the virtues.

The breed standard makes the position extremely clear when it states very plainly and simply that any departure from the list of desired points is a fault and that the seriousness of the fault should be in exact proportion to its degree.

In other words, how badly undershot or overshot a mouth is, how soft the ears are, how pink the nose is, how big is the mark behind the collar, how blue or how light an eye or how abnormal are the testicles has to be balanced by breeder or critic against the virtues of any animal which carries such a fault or faults.

The basic point at issue is quite simply how bad are the points, superficial or indeed anatomical, carried by an animal and how do they compare with his or her virtues.

The good judges and clever breeders will work out the answers to the best advantage and history in the vast majority of cases will support the decisions which they reach.