

To Improve or To Perfect?

By David Harris, "Brummagem"

For most breeds, the Standard of Perfection is not cast in stone, it is a target shaped by fashion and riddled by the whims of the show ring. Over the years, the tendency is to accentuate those features that distinguish the breed – in other words: TYPE.

The Bull Terrier today bears precious little resemblance to the White Cavalier conceived by James Hinks well over a century ago. No longer does the Standard demand the most critical of original characteristics – the pure white coat. Many are colored and even the whites are permitted patches of color on the head. The primary requirement is now the egg-shaped head, preferably exaggerated beyond the product of any normal chicken. Bone and substance continue to advance beyond the dreams of earlier generations of breeders. Even proportions such as height and length have changed subtly but definitely.

Yet there are breeds that have remained constant in concept and purpose. The Irish Wolfhound, for example, enjoys a Standard little changed from the one defined by Captain Graham, when he rescued this companion of kings from near extinction in Victorian times. The aim of breeders is not to "improve" their dogs, but to perfect them. The few changes to the Wolfhound's Standard have been motivated by the need to clarify not to redefine.

In the world of Bull Terriers, we have been taught that each generation of dogs must be better than the last – better meaning superior in type, not necessarily closer to the Standard of Perfection all around. Here we come up against a fundamental law of Mother Nature: If we improve one characteristic, it tends to be at the expense of one or more other desirable features. It used to be said that any fool could breed a tremendous head together with a bad mouth; the skill lies in producing that fabulous downface whilst retaining correct dentition.

In the past few years, British dogs have excelled in power of head, together with great bone and substance. Unfortunately, in many cases these improvements have been achieved at the expense of sound construction (and hence movement). A number of top breeders also feel that temperaments have suffered.

Today, in America and Canada, we have wonderful profiles and superior type in greater depth than ever before. But teeth are in disarray, with judges forgiving every variety of dental fault – incorrectly placed incisors, canines growing through the palate, teeth crowded out of

alignment – at the top level of competition. Make and shape have taken a back seat, with topline in particular losing ground. At times, it seems almost that we are in a rat race to accentuate our personal interpretation of type at any cost.

For there is “type” and Type. The capital “T” precedes only the recognized Standard of Perfection. There is no other valid definition. Each of us, however, has prejudices which emphasize particular virtues and play down certain faults. Thus, as breeders, we define personal versions of the ideal Bull Terrier, which differ from the official one.

We are in the hands of those few great breeders that grace the world of Bull Terriers at any given moment. It is upon their talents that we depend to advance the breed overall – to perfect those critical virtues, without loss of balance, soundness, movement or temperament.

There is no law that says we must keep “improving” the Bull Terrier. Indeed, some of us question whether we are really improving the breed, when so many faults are commonplace. Would it be heretical to suggest we might spend the next few years perfecting the Bull Terrier as he is defined in today’s Standard?

The Reagan years are at an end. The principles of the Yuppy generation are becoming increasingly discredited. As Dylan wrote, “*For the times they are a-changin.*” Perhaps this is the time for us to retrench and to focus our efforts on perfecting the breed we love.

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(Note: Webster’s definition– to Perfect - To make something completely free of faults or as close to such a condition as possible; As good as it is possible to be, having all the required or desirable elements or qualities.)