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Changing Estimates

Those who win are bred more often than those that lose.

by Dr. Carmen L. Battaglia

Each year there are hundreds of exhibitors who leave the ring unhappy about the placement of their dog. Some are disappointed because they did not win others because of a comment made by the judge. Here is an example of a comment that will upset many owners and handlers. "I liked your dog but it was too large". Most owners and handlers translate that in ways that would upset most judges. The dilemma is this. Does it mean that their dog was too big based on the standard or that there was another dog that was closer to the standard for its height? This is not always an easy problem to understand and emotions run high when judges make these remarks.

The facts are that the judge and breeder are central to making breed improvements and there are rules that control the judging process. These rules are important because they can influence a breed's function, the quality of those that win and to some degree, the destiny of a breed. In this respect, it is fair to say that there are certain aspects of the judging process that are not perfect. For example, if a judge questions or doubts the size or weight of a particular entry this could become a disappointment for the handler and owner depending on what the judge does or says. The judging guidelines require that an estimate be made about height unless there is a disqualification for size in the breed standard. For the breeders and the owners of dogs who know their dogs to be within the standard, making an estimate about this trait can often times result in not winning. These owners and handlers believe that estimating size is not a satisfactory way to interpret the standard.

While most breed standards do not make height or weight a disqualification, they do place great emphasis on these traits with specific language that speaks to gender with words like "the ideal or correct" size or weight etc, etc. Given this language it might seem strange that out of 153 breeds only 31 have a height disqualification. Of these only twenty disqualify for under size, eighteen for over size and sixteen for both under and over a specific size requirement. The remaining 122 standards do not have a disqualification for size. Some believe that the lack of a

disqualification is to be interpreted as only guidance to the judge. This leaves the subject open to a wide range of interpretations. When a standard refers to a trait with words like "the ideal or correct", should one wonder what the intended meaning is or what interpretation should be given the trait? Would all clubs agree on how to interpret these words? Probably not. Some would point out that there are breeders who knowingly breed and exhibit dogs that are too large or too small based on the standard. Does this mean that because there is no disqualification that anything goes? When a judge suspects a dog to be over or under the standard most use the time accepted ritual that has been passed down over the years. Some call it the "guesstimate" procedure because they are not allowed to measure or weigh. In a study reported by Willis, judges were asked about their procedure. Later the dogs were actually measured using a wicket. To everyone's surprise, Willis found the error rate to be very high even among the most experienced judges. When Willis asked these judges about their procedure most said they marked a place on their skirt or pant leg so they could stand next to the dog, look down and make an estimate about the dog's size. If the breed was examined on the table most said they spread their fingers and determined height by looking at the distance between their thumb and little finger. A third group said they could estimate size by observation alone. They simply "eye balled it" based on their "years of experience".

It seems strange that in this age of advanced technology, it would take a simple study by Willis to demonstrate that this procedure is out dated and fraught with error. Many have asked if it wouldn't it be better to allow judges to measure any dog they believe to be too large or too small since the purpose of the wicket is to measure when there is doubt. If judges were allowed to measure or weigh, they would have more accurate information on which to base their decision. A dog that is a little too big or too small might still be the best one in the ring for its over all quality. The dilemma for what happens next is called judging. The disgruntled prefer to call it "guessing or estimating". At the end of the day it all boils down to a judgement. Should judges be denied the right to know when the breed standard calls for a specific size or weight? Related to this is the reality about what we should not forget. Those that win are the ones who will be bred to the most.

Under current AKC policy, breeds without a disqualification for size or weight are at the mercy of a judge's ability, skills, experience and interest at making estimates. Willis demonstrated that even the best could oftentimes be wrong.

When I asked several judges about this, they remarked that the estimate has always been the tradition and to "change it now after all these years would only delay the show". If we think out of the box for a moment and admit that the wicket and the scales are superior to making estimates, there just might be a better way. Suppose that judges were allowed to use wickets or scales at specialty shows as a way of testing the idea. Would this not be an improvement over the current method?