

Application of the Bearded Collie Standard in Conjunction with Conformation Shows and Performance Events

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Those of us who make an intellectual distinction between “conformation” and the so-called “performance events” may be doing us all a disservice. If anything, conformation is the ultimate performance event. Not only is it based on how the dog historically was to perform, all the parts of the dog must perform *appropriately* in order for the dog to achieve its historical goal.

The earliest conformation competitions centered on choosing excellent breeding stock, and while we may pay lip service to the notion that that is still what we are doing, nagging common sense tells us that though we may have become more knowledgeable and effective groomers or handlers, in today’s conformation competitions we have become less knowledgeable and less effective judges of breeding stock. Competitive events introduce variables that challenge the integrity of any breed. Those can be as simple as fad and fashion or as complicated as politics and polemics. However, all the skillful grooming and handling in the world cannot change a mediocre dog into a top one; nor are cosmetics transmitted genetically.

The first arbiter of conformation was, of necessity, function and functionality. Those physical and mental aspects that allowed a dog to most successfully perform its primary function were valued and selected for. Those that in any way detracted or interfered with a dog doing its job were faulted and bred away from.

So closely intertwined are these tenets of form and function that it is virtually impossible to see where one ends and the other begins.

We look at our breed’s historical job description, then, to see the underpinnings of our breed standard and the modern-day basis for both conformation judging and whelping box examinations.

The Beardie’s “original” purpose was as a herder or drover over a variety of rugged UK terrains. Those early shepherds and drovers were most concerned with the dogs’ ability to do the job and to stand up to the weather in which they worked. Over centuries the breed was stabilized through selective breeding—simply by using similar dogs doing similar jobs under similar conditions from a number of different areas. In all likelihood, these early dogs were not otherwise specifically related. The shepherds and drovers simply selected breeding stock that best underscored and enhanced the dogs’ usefulness. The same basic tractable, intelligent dog with a long, harsh, water-turning coat suitable for the adverse working conditions of Scotland was valued *wherever* it was found for its ability to put in a good honest day’s work. And, it remains so to this day.

Beardies should still possess the concentration and intelligence, the steady dependability and perseverance, and the sane and sensible outlook that makes valuable teamwork

possible with his humans. And those qualities should be just as evident in the conformation ring as they should be in the field.

It is, after all, the history from which a breed has evolved that conveys crucial details that assist judges in their adjudication, details that the written standard was never intended to do. And it is the historical purpose and all the events that have led to the quantification of a breed's type that offer insight into the creation and evolution of a breed's standard. Type, after all, is functional. And without it, one breed is indistinguishable from another.

The written standard should be an affirmation of a breed's design. When a standard is inadequate or unclear it weakens the judges' and the breeders' ability to follow and understand nature's answers to problems of natural construction and temperament. The standard represents an attempt to quantify that which the eyes and hands have seen and felt to be true in any breed.

However, anyone who attempts to judge a breed solely on the basis of a written standard will inevitably fall short. What the standard helps do is to summarize and, to a certain extent, prioritize the important aspects of a breed. What it does *not* do is adequately address all the individual nuances of a given breed that define type.

The best judges are those who systematically study and learn the intricacies of the breeds they will be judging—by reading, by being mentored, by observing in and out of the ring, and by countless hours of discussion and debate with other knowledgeable people, breeders and other judges alike. Remember, too, that a difference of opinion is not necessarily a difference of principle. You *can* agree to disagree, and everyone may be perfectly correct.

Beardies present a conundrum: The breed is an ancient one, with an ancient heritage, no doubt about that. But the Bearded Collie that we all know and love today has essentially evolved from dogs from the late '40s and early '50s, most recognizably those bred and campaigned by Mrs. Willison (Bothkennar, UK). When we discuss the integrity of the breed, we are not necessarily speaking solely about those unknown Highland workers for whom a very different set of problems was reality. The earliest written standards—and they may well precede even the 1805 Scottish version many of us have read—reflected the dogs of the time, just as our does—or should do—today. In our breed, as for most breeds, the standard was created to define dogs in existence in an attempt to fix type. It is the original, inherent character qualities that defined not only the true essence of the breed, but the physical makeup as well.

It should be remembered, moreover, that we have, and society has, for the most part, essentially changed the job for which the breed was developed. For in spite of our sincere efforts to maintain the working ability of which we can justifiably be proud, it is that show ring with its various specific requirements, that has become the natural “working” arena for the Bearded Collie today.

And though change is inevitable—and not always an evil thing—the dogs in the ring today do not define the essence of the breed. Rather, they should be considered reflections of the breed's original intent. Consequently, to put up a dog with picture-perfect structural qualities, but inappropriate expression of temperament for the breed, does a disservice to both the breed and the standard.

Mental stability goes with physical ability. I know many of us perceive and like to promote our breed as carefree, loveable clowns. While there is surely that aspect to a good Beardie's temperament, there must be much more to it than that. Going back to our historical job description, what was required by the herdsman and drovers was considerably different than the canine equivalent of the proverbial dumb blonde.

So, while pretty much anybody, given enough time and perseverance, can read and re-read our standard, and quote it back verbatim, to correctly understand and appraise a breed requires more than a good memory.

Most good dog judges would agree that they carry a clearly defined mental picture of the ideal breed dog in their heads. Any dog can gait soundly. And there is a great tendency to define breeds only within the limited scope of basic structure. To be sure, you must know basic dog structure and its conformation in relation to all the moving parts. But even though the old type versus soundness debate still rears its ugly head from time to time, the two are simply not mutually exclusive.

Pitting the essence of the breed against the generalized biological requisites necessary to define the breed's overall balance and general appearance is counterproductive to good judging. You must examine the breed in breed-specific ways, and that means, as Anne Rogers Clark so succinctly put it, "make your first cut on type and then reward the soundness of your typical specimens." That makes type and soundness a continuum.

Balance and proportion are probably the most important aspects to be defined by any standard. Dogs must be considered as a whole and not as a large assortment of various parts. A dog can score well on individual points and still not be balanced. Our standard spells out a number of crucial points on balance and proportion, and your general education and dog knowledge fills in others. A Beardie considered to be within the guidelines set down in the standard is an acceptable animal to do the work for which he was intended.

When you examine a Bearded Collie in profile, you should immediately discern on a medium-sized frame the 5:4 proportion called for in our standard, which contributes to the suppleness and movement of a tireless herding dog. That the length of back should come from the ribcage and not the loin helps insure a firm, level topline, with no wasted energy expended on twisting or rolling. Such a topline connotes both strength and agility. An incorrect croup may cause or exacerbate the exaggerated rear kickup we see all too frequently in our breed. Or it may bring the rear foot too far under the body to allow the necessary balance front to rear to show good typical sidegait.

Excessive hock action is undesirable and keeping the hocks well let down avoids this problem. The correct slope of pastern is necessary for the quick turns of the herder and acts as an effective shock absorber. Legs and feet that turn neither in nor out, but remain straight even when flexed in movement mean maximum thrust, unweakened by joints being out of line. But don't confuse the relative narrowness of correct movement in a lean body with either hockiness or overcloseness. Corresponding and correct angles front and rear maximize reach and drive, and singletracking minimizes the possibility of any fatiguing roll.

Good depth of chest with the long uniquely shaped ribcage of a lithe body allows plenty of room for heart and lungs, lending endurance and stamina.

Coat texture and length of coat are important to a breed meant to work in harsh weather over unforgiving terrain. A soft or heavy coat cannot shed burrs or turn water readily. And of course, the characteristic beard from which the breed takes its name, should be present and accounted for.

The head should show plenty of flat backskull and a corresponding amount of well-filled foreface, allowing room for the particularly appealing and expressive eyes to be set wide and obliquely and for the jaws to hold a full complement of teeth.

A bright, enquiring expression is a hallmark of the breed. Bright, however, should not connote feverish or frantic, but rather an innate sense of intelligence and willingness to engage in a meaningful partnership with most humans. Ears should be of correct length and carriage, sufficiently mobile to facilitate hearing in less-than-optimum conditions. Acceptable color and pigment add to the beauty of the dog.

While there are no disqualifications in this breed, we do note a number of serious faults, and we would hope that you take these seriously into consideration.

Our standard is, by and large, a good one, I think and the opening paragraph pretty well sums up what I consider to be the essence of the Bearded:

“He is hardy and active, with an aura of strength and agility characteristic of a real working dog. Bred for centuries as a companion and servant of man, the Bearded Collie is a devoted and intelligent member of the family. He is stable and self-confident, showing no signs of shyness and aggression. This is a natural and unspoiled breed.”