

KENNEL BLINDNESS

by William Given

In the “good old days,” and I can still remember back that far, the term “kennel-blindness” applied to the man (or woman) who believed his or her dog(s) were perfect, could not be improved upon, and took every opportunity to share their opinion with all those who would listen. Today, the definition has seemingly become a bit darker and more biting.



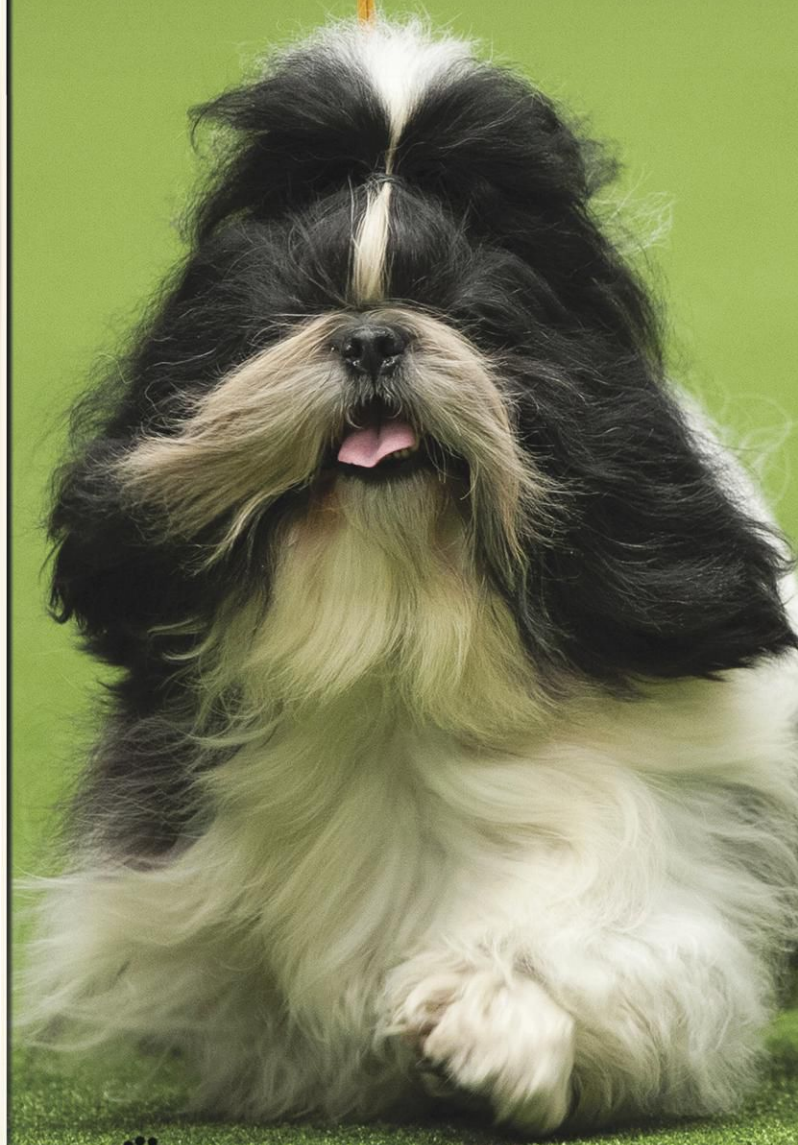
Only the most dimwitted neophyte would dare to suggest that his or her dog was fault free. Does this mean that today we have seen an end to kennel-blindness? Not on your life! Even though we are in a modern, high-tech era, this affliction remains as prevalent as ever and there seems to be no immunization for this dreaded disease.

Kennel-blind Breeders

The kennel-blind of today talk a good game, as if propriety and honesty were their guide, but have you ever truly listened to what they have to say? Let us consider Breeder A, a man who possesses a magnificent champion, with many highly exceptional qualities. However, since there is no perfect dog, this dog is not perfect either. In our example, we shall consider his dog’s most significant fault is that he has little forechest.

And, although Breeder A does not readily accept this fact, he *does not* boast that his dog possesses a wonderful forechest. He is much more subtle than that. Instead, he denounces every dog with a good forechest as being “contrary to the standard,” and adding “It is incorrect and is something that needs to be bred out.” When a bitch with a very satisfying forechest comes for a breeding evaluation, he looks her over quite carefully, mutters a bit to himself, and then makes his decision. “Yes, I will accept her for breeding to my champion, and perhaps he will help you to get rid of that forechest problem you’ve got.”

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Then there is Breeder B. She recognizes her dog's faults, however, only the unimportant ones, like missing teeth, a weak topline and cowhocks, etc. Yes, you've got my point. *All* faults that her dog possesses are "unimportant." However, she readily owns up to these "slight deviations" from the standard, thereby giving the pretense of an "open mind and unconditional veracity." Not on your life.

Breeder C is a first cousin of Breeder B, but he is a "trader." Does his dog possess the lightest bone in the history of the breed? Oh, and yes, he knows about it, mind you, just eavesdrop for a moment: "Yes, I know he has dreadfully fine bone, *but* at this point in my breeding program, I feel it is much more important that I concentrate my efforts on breeding for a stronger topline, and so, I am not going to focus my attention on bone right now. I will get to that in a few generations or so."

Breeder D goes for balance, and that is all that counts. You can show him that his dog has every fault in the book, but his attitude is most passive: "Well, I know *you* like a dark eye, or, I know *you* like a good level topline, *but* you must realize that overall balance is much more important." Really now, he should know by this time that even a mutt can be well-balanced, yet in no way be a purebred dog at all.

What about Breeder E? He would castigate the whole dog for the presence of one fault. He says, "Well, *you* may think he is great dog, but did you see those feet?" "SPLAYED, aren't they?" He forgets that no dog is perfect. This is the type of guy noted for "throwing out the baby with the bath water."

Then there is Breeder F. He is the little brother of Breeder E who says, "Well, of course, that dog is square, *but* it is only because his legs are too short...or because his back is too long." Or, "of course his feet are good, *but* it is only because he has weak pasterns." Is Breeder F an astute judge of structure? Probably not. Is he a jealous man with a little bit of knowledge with which to mask his ignorance? More than likely.

And last, but not least, there is Breeder G. He is the breeder who looks for only one thing, whether he is a "dentist," counting teeth; a "head hunter," studying the shape and planes of the head; a "chest-man," running around with calipers and tape measure, etc. No dog without his preferred characteristic could ever be considered anything but pet quality. His or her own dogs, or the type of dogs that he or she likes, are chosen by their "specialty." "Oh, he is a good dog because he has full dentition and a correct bite" or "Oh, he is good, look at that wonderful forechest." No matter what trait the dog has or has not got, as long as the dog possesses the *one quality* that this person feels is most important, it is a good dog. He or she will never consider the "whole dog."

The great hoard of the "kennel-blind" have many rationalizations, and I am sure you have heard a great many of them: "This is the type I prefer." But, of course, there is only one standard. Or, "He is young yet, give him time to mature" (and the young dog is six years of age), and so on.

Not I, Said the Blind Man

In my thirty-plus years as an exhibitor and breeder, I have

never once heard an owner or breeder say, "I am kennel-blind." However, on countless occasions, I have heard it said (by many) that "I am harder on my dogs than anyone else could possibly be." Or, "I have nit-picked my dog's faults all the way down to the last hair." You know this to be true because you have most certainly heard it yourself.

What you have also heard, either at a club meeting or sitting ringside is, "So and so suffers from an incurable case of kennel-blindness." Or, something like, "There goes poor Mildred, it is so sad that she is so kennel-blind. Her dogs have always had such wonderful heads, but from their incorrect shoulders to the cow hocks they are simply mediocre at best." With the be-reaved acquaintance often adding, "And, it is so sad that she doesn't even see it."

In my day, labeling someone as kennel-blind was, I think, a general dismissal of another breeder's breeding program. Today, it has taken on the added meaning that "Not only are Mildred's dogs grossly inferior to everything in in the ring, poor Mildred isn't even smart enough to see it." So, not only has Mildred's breeding program been discredited, it has been taken to the extreme of an undeserved personal attack on Mildred.

What is the Truth About Kennel-blindness?

In truth, it seems to me that it has more to do with priorities than anything else. I say this because I have looked, weighed and measured my dog's faults against yours. And, though your dog's strengths and weaknesses are a bit different than those of my dog. Their virtues and their imperfections seem to somehow balance on the scale of truth.

What do you say of Mildred's dog that possesses a marvelous head and a weak rear? Is it better or less desirable than the dog with wonderful hind end and an average head? I do not think many bad judges make it through the AKC's testing and approval process. So, let us allow the judges to weigh and measure the strengths and weakness as well as the type and soundness of our best. Then let us weigh and measure the results against the breed standard and establish our priorities. I can guarantee that your priorities will not be the same as mine, though I trust we are working toward the same goal.

What Are the Risk Factors for Acquiring Kennel-blindness?

Kennel-blindness is much more frequently seen in breeders that fall into the following risk categories:

- **Novice breeders who are strongly influenced by their dog's personality and temperament.** These owners usually choose to breed their bitch not to improve the breed but rather because they love her and want puppies who will be just like her.
- **Breeders whose every moment revolves around their dogs.** The general lack of meaningfulness in their lives make their dogs their reason for being. This can seriously cloud one's

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judgement and objectivity.

- **Breeders who simply do not have a “eye” for a dog.** Most highly successful breeders have an eye for a good dog. Some, like my wife, who was raised on a farm, have a natural eye for a good animal. Others, like me, have read and studied hard for years to develop an eye for a good dog. Those breeders who are unable to develop an eye for a dog will never be able to correctly evaluate structure and movement.
- **Breeders who have enjoyed great success in the past, but are struggling now to produce dogs of real quality.** Some breeders who experienced success early in their breeding career are at a significant risk. This is because their early success may have contributed to the development of some measure of tunnel-vision in their quest to breed their next big winner, and they may be more inclined to take unreasonable risks
- **Breeders working with a small number of dogs.** The thought is that because small breeders have less to work with and choose from, they may be less inclined to see problems in their breeding program. Although this may be a risk factor, I am not sold on the idea that this is a significant causation. I actually think because there are fewer dog in the home or in the kennel, they are being seen more, handled more frequently, and breeding considerations are much more thorough.

Is There a Cure for Kennel-blindness?

If caught in time, like most diseases, it can be effectively treated by a combination of therapies.

- **Avoid the over-emphasis of a specific characteristic in your breeding program to the detriment of overall balance, type and soundness.** Most highly successful breeders attempt to achieve the ideal dog overall. However, there are some breeders who cannot help but emphasize a certain trait that they feel is most important to breed type. For one breeder, it may be the head, for another, the topline, and for still another, correct coat. The danger here is by focusing on just one trait, a breeder can easily fail to notice other faults appearing in their line.
- **To assess your clarity of vision,**

ask a respected and trusted colleague to go over your dogs and give you an honest critique of their strengths and weaknesses. Have this colleague look at the pedigree of your bitch and evaluate your short-term and long-term breeding goals. Get a second opinion. Honestly compare these assessments to yours, identify your shortcomings, and make a plan to remedy the situation.

- **Ensure you possess a sound understanding of the breed standard.** Ensure you have a very clear picture of what the ideal dog looks like and breed for that look. Sincere honesty is a critical element of a successful breeding program. And we could all use a dose of honesty every now and then, for the good of the breed, and for the future of our sport.

Kennel-blindness is as equally tragic and debilitating for the one dog owner as it is for a large breeder. It makes one incapable of seeing the faults in his or her dogs, and unable to recognize and appreciate the positive traits in a competitor’s dogs. Kennel-blindness also provides the motivation for an individual to contort the breed standard to fit the type of dogs they exhibit in the show ring. Those breeders so afflicted see their dog as possessing that magnificent head or rock solid topline. The judge cannot help but notice the short neck, lack of forechest, cowhocks and restricted movement.

