



The 5 Virtues



"...Why just take a look at all the Judges critiques you have and all his purple and gold ribbons."

Many years ago an interesting exchange happened between my mom and me in regards to two dogs. It was so eye opening that I would like to share it.

First some back ground, my mom is no stranger to dogs. She knows "her" breeds well but is not exactly up on the Official Standard for my breed at the time and most of her experience comes from one classy little dog who had done quite well in the show ring. This dog has some outstanding features and we were very proud of him. From now on I will refer to this beautiful boy as 1st Child. I acquired a bitch of the same breed that I will from now on refer to as 2nd Child. I chose

this bitch in my head months before the breeding ever took place. After 2nd Child arrived in my home I began to watch her with keen interest as she grew and matured. I was worried about ears, and bite, and tail, you know, the usual stuff.

At about 7 months old it all started to come together and I mentioned to my mom "wow, 2nd child has a better head than 1st child. Her ear carriage is not so good but it doesn't matter, one of the key elements for this breed is outstanding on 2nd Child".

She said: "uummmm I just don't see it. She looks too different for me.

1st Child is better. Why just take a look at all the Judges critiques you have and all his purple and gold ribbons.

I replied: "without a doubt 1st Child has a beautiful head, but 2nd child's head is a little better."

There was no doubt about 1st Child's head being exceptional. It was confirmed time again by breeder judges and even all round judges.

Over time my mom would make mention that she did not get it and then the light bulb went on in my head!! I had the answer!! I explained to her this was because she had



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imprinted on 1st Child. To her he was the ultimate example of this breed. This was a classic example of Kennel Blindness. Oh the horror!! Kennel blindness cannot be right under our nose!! but yet we were looking it square in the head.

The reason I am telling this story is because by seeing the virtue in other dogs we are better equipped to see where we need to improve in our own. This was such a super example of harmless kennel blindness it was funny, eye opening, and disturbing all at the same time! I can think of a hundred reasons why this is a good story to tell. We simply cannot move a breeding program forward if we do not see our own dog's faults as they relate to the Standard. Seeing the virtue in 2nd child allowed me to see where 1st child could use improvement. Conversely knowing where 1st Child could use improvement opened the door to see that improvement in 2nd Child. Very Exciting Stuff.

Seeing virtue in others is a difficult task because I think we have been programmed to criticize. I am not sure why, maybe it is our own insecurities leaking out. I learned a lesson from a respected Judge and breeder many years ago and it has changed the way I see other dogs and in doing so it has improved my ability to pick a winner and move forward with confidence. The lesson is simple, when standing ringside say five nice things about a dog before you say one bad thing. I have found that by the time I get to number three the perceived fault is diffused and doesn't matter anymore. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard (and even said) unkind remarks about dogs in the ring or outside the ring at dog shows. I look back now and I cannot think of a single good reason to ever discuss another dog's faults right at the ring. Experienced enthusiasts should be setting examples for good behavior; new people should be able to learn from observing good sportsmanship. It is extremely hurtful to hear your dog being discussed by strangers or worse, people you look up to. If you are asked for an opinion find the five virtues first. We always look much more wise and intelligent if we discuss other dog's virtues at ringside. This is not to say I discount the value of sitting ringside with a respected breed specialist waxing philosophical

about the Standard and dogs being judged for the day. Everything has its time and place and some opportunities cannot be passed up. Just be super careful you are not criticizing someone's pet within ear shot of anyone. When in doubt shut up. People really love their dogs.

My Rules:

- Stop discussing your dog's faults with anyone who will listen, it sounds like you are making excuses.
- Say five nice things about a dog before you say one bad thing.
- If it is necessary to discuss what you would like to improve on your dog, say to a stud dog owner, sell it like an enhancement. For instance 1st Child's head is gorgeous but I could see where he could be improved. Then be careful what you wish for, exaggeration of any kind should be avoided.
- Do not ask judges or others for their opinion of your dog. A lot of people will disagree with me on this one, but I hold firm. I have seen enough judges, AKC and KC alike with such differing opinions that at times it is a matter of preference rather than fault or virtue. I do have an exception to this rule and that is if you are discussing with your breeder or someone close and truly knowledgeable and trustworthy.
- Do not ever fault judge another person's dog in person, in the vicinity, or honestly even at home. Look at your own dogs first.
- If you must have a discussion with a judge, talk about the Standard and the breed in general rather than your dog.
- As a breeder, virtue judge others and fault judge your own, always based on the Standard.



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- Know your dog's virtues based on the Standard not your opinion or what you prefer. It is honestly ok if you prefer a sweet feminine head that is a little snikey, or the tick tock movement of straight shoulders but that does not make it correct to the Standard.
- One of the best ways to see where you need to improve is to be open to the individual virtues in others.

Develop your own opinion by learning the Standard and being super observant. If you need help understanding the Standard you should ask the questions as they relate to the Standard and not your dog. Memorize the paragraph and ask your mentors to explain and show examples of correct. If you are still confused, ask for clarification. Don't move on until you get it. I do not mean you should look for your dog's faults by asking everyone you know and then discuss them ad-nauseum. In fact you should NEVER discuss your dog's faults. Discuss their virtues but keep the faults in the back of your head for what you would like to improve on. I really do not think you learn anything by having another person fault your dog for you. You will just walk away feeling bad. You would be better off asking what is good about your dog. At least then when you start repeating what you were told, and we know you will, it will be virtues! There is no quick path to knowledge. You must work hard for your answers.

In the old days there was not an experienced breeder who would answer a novice's question without first asking, "What does the standard say?" If someone says to you, "Well, it says this in the Standard but I prefer this other thing", RUN! Everyone should be directed to and respect the standard. It is the one thing we have in common. I can look at our Stafford Standard right now and then in the ring today, and tell that we have plenty of people (Judges included) who need to be pointed back to the Standard in regard to the most basic fixable issue, weight! Weight is important because it relates to Balance and Balance is a key element to Stafford "Type".

My observations from the dog show world:

- People repeat what they have heard regardless of the source, it only has to sound half way reasonable and then just like the child's game of telephone it can evolve and eventually it may even become a new truth.
- Most people do not know your dog's faults until you tell them and then they cannot wait to repeat them as if they are so clever for discovering your dog's fault and if you told them it must be true.
- People are too willing to discuss what they were told without truly understanding it.
- Many people don't thoroughly know and understand the official standard for their breed. (One time I asked a question about a passage in an official Standard at a seminar and I was told that the passage was not in the Standard by a breed judge! I was right and he was wrong.)
- Having a few litters and a following of puppy owners does not exempt one from novice status

Memorize, Memorize, Memorize the Standard and understand each part of it. Understand what your breed "type" is. Get to know your own dogs and how they fit or don't fit the Standard. Understand why your beautifully structured dog may always lose the blue ribbon to a dog whose virtues you do not see. Stop making excuses about judges and start looking at your own dogs with the critical eye you have used on others.

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