

The Whole Picture

Facebook has been a boon to dog owners and breeders in many ways. We can have instant results from dog shows, win photos, and even watch some shows live. (Not to mention all of the wonderful puppy pictures and other fun photos of our English Setters that are shared.) But it also has its drawbacks. For instance, it's done nothing to halt the spread of that old-time dog lovers' curse – kennel blindness.

Kennel blindness, for those of you new to the sport of showing dogs, makes someone incapable of seeing the faults in their own dogs – though it can heighten the ability to see faults in everyone else's dogs. It occurs in every breed and just about every dog owner and breeder falls victim to it sooner or later. Most people recover but some never do. They go through life happily believing that their dogs are perfect. They believe that the breed standard describes them exactly. And any time they lose in the ring, it must be due to politics or the nearsightedness of the judge. Kennel blindness is one of the reasons why dog shows are important so we can get relatively objective feedback about our dogs.

You can usually tell when someone has a case of kennel blindness. These are the folks who always speak up and say, "Oh, my special has a perfect layback. Here's a picture." Or, "My puppy has a gorgeous front. Here's a picture." And the ever-popular, "Here's a picture of my dog moving," though it's hard to tell much about a moving dog from a still photo.

None of this is said to discourage anyone from posting pictures of their dogs or pointing out their good points. I had my own proud moment in the sun years ago when a judge gave my English Setter bitch BOB and told every other exhibitor to come feel her layback because it was "perfect" and they should be breeding for it. I'm sure they were all thrilled. I still have the win photo up on my wall. But my dog wasn't perfect, as much as I loved her. Her head really needed improvement, for example.

Kennel blindness does disappear for most people, especially after you have a few litters. After you identify some things you want to improve in your dogs and start hoping to find it in your new puppies, it's amazing how critical you start to become about what you're seeing in your dogs.

On the other hand, the folks who are forever saying, "We don't have good ___ (fill in the blank)" in English Setters anymore really drive me crazy. Whether they single out fronts, layback, rears, or whatever, it's such a negative view. Have they actually seen every dog being shown or all of the dogs people are breeding?

Some people also forget that not all of the dogs in the good old days exemplified the breed standard. When we see pictures of dogs from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s (many of them thanks to ESAA historian Carl Sillman), we are usually seeing the most outstanding dogs of the times. It's easy to forget that there were plenty of dogs that didn't make it to the show ring or the field. There were ES even back then which didn't measure up.

I think the truth about English Setters today probably lies somewhere between the people who have kennel blindness and the folks who think the breed is lacking compared to dogs of the past. Every

breed is always a bit like a work of art, still in the process of creation. English Setters were not a finished breed in the 1870s when they were accepted into the AKC or in the 1930s when our parent club was formed. They weren't completed in the 1960s when Guys n' Dolls with their great bodies and the beautiful typey dogs of Clairiho were around. They're not completed today. They will still be changing and evolving, even within the breed standard, for years to come. It's up to us to make sure they stay true to what they should be. We always say that there are no perfect dogs, so the perfect English Setter has yet to be born.

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