

What Do We Owe The Past?

ESAA has just concluded another highly successful National Specialty, this time hosted by the Puget Sound English Setter Club in Seattle. Congratulations go out to GCHG Stagedoor Mercury Comet Cyclone (“Comet”) and his connections (Breeder Joan Savage, Owners Tannley Goldberg/Marshall Goldberg, Agent Lindsey Cook) on winning Best In Specialty, along with all of the other gorgeous dogs that participated at the National Specialty, the Puget Sound English Setter Club Specialty, and the Willamette Valley English Setter Fanciers Specialty. We are blessed to have wonderful dogs representing the breed from puppies to veterans which surely shows that we have some outstanding breeders and owners in English Setters today.

Watching the judging online and looking at many pictures of the dogs at the shows, I couldn’t help making mental notes about English Setters today and some of the great dogs of the past. Fittingly enough, a photo of Ch. Rock Falls Colonel winning the Sporting Group on his way to going Best In Show at Morris & Essex in 1951 showed up in my news feed on Facebook and I kept thinking of his image during the National. I couldn’t say whether he was the greatest English Setter of all time but he was certainly a good one. He’s also a dog that is almost certainly in the pedigree of every American bench English Setter today.

Thinking of the Colonel and other dogs of the past made me start thinking about what we owe to the past. What do we need to ensure we save from dogs of the past and dogs of today to pass along to the future?

In the picture I was looking at, the Colonel had wonderful breed type in body and head. 1951 was early in the Colonel’s career but he was magnificent. The picture appeared to be un-retouched and you could see that at this point the Colonel had a sparser coat that he may have had later.

When you look at pictures of the Colonel I think you can see many of the things he (and his brother the great sire Ch. Rock Falls Racket) passed on to later generations. We all probably have thoughts about some of his characteristics we would like to see more of today: the front which is so hard to get and keep from one generation to the next; balance without over-angulation; and the beautiful head.

We have wonderful dogs today and there have been many outstanding dogs since the time of Ch. Rock Falls Colonel. No one should think that I am criticizing our current dogs. But I have seen in other breeds and animals how quickly things can change.

Consider, for example, Thoroughbred racehorses. The breed came into existence in the late 17th-early 18th century with three founding sires: the Byerley Turk, the Godolphin Arabian, and the Darley Arabian. (There were originally a few other sires but they fell by the wayside.) Today the Byerley Turk male line is hanging on by a thread and the Godolphin Arabian (the line that produced Man O’War), is dwindling. Ninety-five percent of Thoroughbreds in the world today trace in the male line to the Darley

Arabian. Horses from the Byerley and Godolphin lines are found farther and farther back in pedigrees. Make of that what you want but it's a great loss for the breed on many levels.

What does this have to do with dogs, especially when dog breeding has never placed the same importance on male lines as some other kinds of animal husbandry do? The point is that when genes are lost, they are lost forever. It only took a few decades for the Darley Arabian, through Northern Dancer, to vanquish the other male lines, eliminating much of their influence. Though it was largely unintentional, there has been a change in the appearance of the breed in the last 40-50 years as horses favor Northern Dancer, a sire who has been a matador in Thoroughbreds, along with many of his sons. Matadors are sires that breed far more than their share of the available female population which can lead to genetic bottlenecks.

The same thing can easily happen in dog breeds. It has occurred in many breeds and it's something that all breeders must guard against. It only takes a short time to change a breed if multiple breeders are using the same sire or sire lines. In some cases breeders may not even be aware that they are using the same lines but the result is the same.

If we don't breed for fronts and balance and beautiful heads in our English Setters, we will lose them. Fronts, balance, toplines, good movement, heads and expression – all of the characteristics we love in our English Setters can be lost in a short time if we aren't careful. That means making smart breeding decisions for each individual dog and bitch instead of breeding to the most popular sire of the moment or the current dog with the most show ring wins, no matter how handsome he might be. Choosing the best match for your particular bitch is paramount.

Breeding two nice dogs with questionable fronts is unlikely to produce puppies with good fronts. Breeding a dog that is lacking in angulation to one that is over-angulated won't produce offspring with balanced angles. The old saying is correct: Two wrongs don't make a right.

Most of you already know these things but it never hurts to say them again as we lose older breeders and new breeders take their place. Many thanks to all of the breeders who are breeding such wonderful dogs today.

When we think about what we owe to the past and all of the breeders who devoted their lives to our breed, we need to make sure that we pass along dogs that retain the same good qualities that we see in photos of their dogs. In the present, we need to produce English Setters that rival the great dogs of the past.

As for the future, we can also contribute dogs with good health. We have opportunities now that our predecessors never had. We have access to x-rays for hips, elbows, BAER testing, and thyroid testing that they would have envied in the 1950s.

Of course, my favorite thing about English Setters is probably their gentle, fun temperament. That's something I hope we never lose.

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