



By Gretchen Bernardi

In the insular world of dogs, it is easy to forget that the principle of form following function is universal. No less an authority than Frank Lloyd Wright said that the concept of form following function had been misunderstood, that "Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union." Who could argue with the great architect who also said of Marilyn Monroe: "I think Ms. Monroe's architecture is extremely good architecture."

The idea of form following function and of the "spiritual union" in Wright's buildings (though probably not Ms. Monroe's architecture) can be quantified and tested by science, having to do with load-bearing, stress, vapor movement, etc. We cherish the form and function dogma as the basis for the standards, because the testing of our dogs was done primarily by those who preceded us and the principles were based on performance, a sort of working science, in its way. When exhibiting or judging in the conformation ring, we cling to this belief that the standards we are interpreting will guide us in finding those dogs that could best fulfill their original purpose.

All of this makes sense. Why, then, is there such a wide and widening gap between our working dogs and our shows dogs, a gap that is becoming more evident as we are able to more readily observe the differences in breeds around the world? Why, in a culture that celebrates the idea of form following function, do we have such combative elements within parent clubs, with two almost different breeds emerging from the same gene pool?

This is an old argument; nothing new here. The field versus bench debate, which seems to come and go in cycles and in varying degrees of intensity, should begin with congratulations to those breeders who religiously test their dogs in the field and compete in the conformation ring as well. These people are the true believers in the form following function debate, because they can see what parts of their standards are meaningful and which are not. Congratulations are also in order for those parent clubs that encourage the dual-purpose dogs and reward those that excel in the ring and in the field. A warning: we cannot confuse true field work that is breed specific with those performance events that reward attributes that are inherent in all canines, even though it may be those very attributes that endear them to humans.

And another warning: some breeds can no longer be tested, however hard we try. Chasing a lure in a man-made pattern is not a test of a Borzoi or an Irish Wolfhound as it relates to these breeds' original demands. Lure-coursing for these breeds may be a test of many things—instinct for the chase, physical conditioning—but not for the ability to run down and kill a wolf. This is true for some other breeds as well, as laws and our own ethics prohibit some activities involving dogs.

This is not a new dilemma, of course. One of my favorite writers on all things canine, A.N. Hartley, worried about this in her book, *The Deerhound*, first published in 1955:

So now, with opportunities to exercise its legitimate calling vanishing, the breed was launched on the dangerous waters of the exhibition world; dangerous because breeds that can no longer be tried at the work for which they were originally intended are at the mercy of whims of fashion which may easily alter them out of all resemblance to their working prototype.

Surely we cannot sit ringside at our dog shows without seeing the wisdom, and the sorrow, of those words.

Those of us who committed ourselves to breeds with clear-cut roles depend on our standards to define the link—this specific structure

results in this particular result. We devoured all of the books that explained it and arrogantly saw the flaws in the dogs that, in our opinion, couldn't measure up. That Brittany couldn't be agile in the field, because it's legs are too short. That Basset Hound couldn't follow a trail all day because it has weak pasterns. That Shepherd couldn't sustain a working trot because it has a weak back. All of this conjecture is possible because we are committed to the idea that the characteristics laid out in the standards describe for us the requirements for doing the job. That is certainly a long and winding road to travel: from the men and women working their dogs and putting in writing what they thought was necessary, to our breeding dogs that met those physical requirements that were necessary to do the job, to finding the dogs in the show ring that have the characteristics that the original people thought were necessary. There is a lot of room for error in the traveling of that road. Just how committed are we to the concept that the requirements of our standards actually result in the dogs the breed originators were striving to produce?

In the 1970's, I was fortunate to have known the late Louis Pegram, the great proponent of and participant in Whippet racing. I loved the whole idea of form and function and those early days of organized sighthound lure-coursing gave all of us opportunity to talk the subject almost to death. I frequently asked Lou, who was also president of my all-breed kennel club and a respected author, just what structure, what specific conformation was required in a great racing Whippet. "Adequate," was always his reply. Adequate! That was certainly not what I wanted to hear. I wanted to hear about shoulder layback as it applies to reach, about low hocks as it applied to drive, about loins and pasterns and length of backs. Adequate was not a term I or any of my fellow enthusiasts could get worked up about.

We are all a little arrogant when we talk about the required structure in our dogs, considering how few of us really know what we're talking about. I have never heard a breeder or a judge state that the original purpose of a breed was irrelevant. I have never read a specialty critique in which the judge stated that a dog was incapable of fulfilling its original role, but she put it up anyway. In fact, most discussions of specific breeds usually begin with comments alluding to the dog's original purpose. No argument there. I just can't help wondering how well the standards themselves and our interpretations result in the dog we want to reward or breed from, if that is what we are truly interested in. Perhaps we believe in form and function in the abstract only. After that, things get a little hazy.

I was reminded of this recently as two pieces of writing came across my desk on this very subject. The first is the fascinating *Livestock Protection Dogs*, by Orysia Dawydiak and David Sims. The authors, a husband and wife team, are well-educated in their fields. Ms. Dawydiak, who has a degree in zoology and an advanced degree in animal science, works in the biomedical field. Mr. Sims has degrees in engineering and a Ph.D. in Veterinary Anatomy and is a professor at the Atlantic Veterinary College. But they are both breeders of Akbash and of sheep. In terms of knowledge applied to practice, it can't get much better than this.

The photos alone are worth the price of the book and the captions give an idea of their appeal: "A Kangal Dog sharing shade with a few sheep and shepherds," "India, a Great Pyrenees, and her alpaca friend," "An Adolescent Meremmma shows submissive behavior when challenged by a ram," "Eight-week-old Slovakian Cuvac pup already started with sheep."

Although some of the breeds are either fully recognized by the AKC or in the Foundation Stock Service, most of these beautiful rare breeds are shown being picked, trained and worked at the very specific jobs for which they are bred and I wondered as I read the book and admired the photos just how much our standards equate with the performance abilities of the dogs. Although the authors carefully state that "All breeding stock must have a good working temperament, be sound and have a conformation which meets the official breed standard," they wisely state "...there is no compelling reason why you should be producing pups for livestock protection if your breeding stock have never seen sheep." To repeat: these experienced people believe that adherence to the breed standard is not sufficient to picking working type and abilities.

The authors give excellent pointers in picking puppies and have put together their own job-specific temperament test, in an effort to identify the best working type pups at an early age. But the emphasis throughout this book is on working dogs.

Even more to the point that I am trying to make—exactly how closely do our standards describe the working prototype—is an intriguing article written by an even more intriguing man, the late Dr. Dan Belkin. Titled "The Functional Saluki—Lessons from the Coursing Field," it is another example of the opinion of someone who has just the right credentials to make himself believable.

Dr. Belkin, who died of an inoperable brain tumor in 1988, was an evolutionary biologist who specialized in physiological and ethological ecology under a Research Fellowship at the University of Florida Medical School, where he also taught respiration and nutrition. A falconer and a Saluki fancier, he and his wife coursed and bred Salukis under the Bayt Shahin prefix.

Dr. Belkin's incredible intelligence and insight are evident on every page and that makes the following words frightening to me as a

breeder and as a judge, made even more so because they are believable.

About judging: “Things you cannot see are more important than things you can.”

About breeding: “Breeding to a standard will not preserve function. All it can preserve is appearance.”

About eyes: “The standard says ‘eyes, dark to hazel and bright, large and oval, but not prominent.’ It doesn’t say anything about whether or not the Saluki can see.”

About form and function: “People who have coursed dogs for any length of time learn that all their preconceived correlations between form and function have a lot of exceptions.”

About structure: “...visible, palatable aspects of conformation don’t mean as much as most people think they do. You can have apparently malformed, unsound looking dogs that you would swear couldn’t run perform brilliantly.”

And my favorite, about the foreleg: “The important thing about the forelegs is that they don’t break.”

And then he makes a terribly good argument for what may have gone wrong in the process of writing standards by good people with the best intentions:

“Most breed them to do some particular thing. They looked at them and said ‘This is what they should look like if they perform this function,’ and drew up a standard accordingly; sometimes very precise, sometimes not. Then they bred dogs to look like those which did that thing, instead of breeding them to do it. That’s fine if all they wanted was dogs with that look. But, if they expect those dogs to do what resulted in that look, they are going to be disappointed.”

Personally, I found those lines disturbing, because they upset my way of thinking and caused more than a few ripples of doubt about all my previous notions. My thinking life as a breeder and as a judge was simpler and far more comfortable before. Although my attitude towards our standards and our duty to adhere to them will not change, I will be forced to think about those words every time I say with presumed authority and conviction that line we so frequently use: “This dog could really do its job.” Or could it?

We live in an imperfect world and we do our best to apply the meaning of dead words to living things. As breeders and as judges, we use the only tool available to us—the standards of excellence. If we sometimes come up short of even our own expectations, it is helpful to remember that learned scholars devote their lives to interpreting the United States Constitution and still come up with as many conclusions as there are scholars. But it doesn’t hurt to think about it.

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*I recommend the writings mentioned above for anyone in the dog world. *Livestock Protection Dogs*, second edition is available from Alpine Publications, Loveland, Colorado. “*The Functional Saluki*” was based on a seminar given at the 1993 Saluki Club of America’s National Specialty and can be found at <http://saluqi.home.netcom.com/belkin.htm>. *The Deerhound* by A.N. Hartley is out of print, but can be found occasionally through rare and used book sources.*