

Norwich Terriers, 5-16

Title: Pursuit of Perfection

Few things evoke discord in a breed club like the interpretation of the attributes of its official breed standard. Disputes seem to flare with fads and fashion. Acceptable size and colors are common topics. In a recent discussion amongst breeders, I heard the standard referred to as a “mandate”, and wondered if this interpretation of the true purpose of the breed standard is the basis for some of the disagreement.

The breed standard is not a mandate. The AKC states clearly that, “The purpose of a standard is to be a guide for breeders and judges.” In fact, breed standards are not unique to the dog fancy. In all sorts of animal husbandry (cattle, goats, poultry, rabbits ...), the breed standard is used as a set of guidelines by breeders to produce animals that conform to the specifics of their standardized breed. Breed standards define the ideal as a pattern for an animal fit for the function it was bred, and typically include a section that covers place of origin and the original work done by the breed and its ancestors.

Although our modern Norwich Terriers may never hunt vermin or bolt fox, it is a tribute to their breeders that the standard has remained relatively unchanged since the first English standard in 1932. Our current official breed standard was approved in 1981, when the breed divided on ear carriage, and it has been updated only slightly over time. As with many breeds, size has been a perpetual topic. In 1961, when both prick and drop ears were called Norwich, the standard was changed to describe a smaller terrier: “ideal, 11 to 12 pounds.” The previous wording quantified a wider span in size: “ideal 11 pounds, not to exceed 14 pounds, not less than 10 pounds.” Today’s standard says, “Weight approximately 12 pounds. It should be in proportion to the individual’s structure and balance.” Thus, the pendulum has swung back to permit greater variation.

In the show ring, judges must ascertain correct type from the standard. Percy Roberts described the standard as the blueprint and the judge as the building inspector. If we believe that the standard is a guide for breeders and show judges alike, why would we show anything less than a dog that, in our best judgment, conforms to the qualities of the ideal? We know that the ideal is elusive and seldom met even amongst the most successful champions of the show ring, but our judges need to know from us (the breeders) the type desired. For example, in pursuit of the ideal, our standard reminds us that the Norwich is to have the appearance of a “hardy hunt terrier” with “good bone and substance and an almost weatherproof coat.” His sturdy size and wiry coat serve a purpose. From ringside, a spectator would be surprised to learn that the Norwich standard says, “The breed should be shown with as natural a coat as possible. A minimum of tidying is permissible but shaping should be heavily penalized.”

Although much has been written about the evolution of show presentation across the breeds, excessive trimming of terriers was admonished many years ago. In a delightful narrative published in 1922, Mrs. Bryon Rogers wrote not about Norwich Terriers (as the Norwich was not a recognized breed until a decade later, first in the England) but rather about Cairns. She said, “The idea that a working dog must be trimmed, plucked, powdered and so on is abhorrent to the minds of most sport-minded people and should be universally condemned.” And, she admonished the handler who lifts the dog’s weight off his feet with taut lead to hide the faulty front or props up the rear. “He should be able to stand naturally on his own merits, or else be put out of the show ring.” (B. Rogers. Cairn and Sealyham Terriers, 1922, New York: Robert M.

McBride & Company). Her words are a reminder to continue to shape our ideal Norwich towards the requirements of his original work, and uphold the qualities that so endeared him to our founding breeders. To do this suggests that we leave the official breed standard as it is, safeguard against so-called improvements, and put only our best dogs in the show ring. The words penned by Constance Larrabee in 1969 remain true: “The Norwich Terrier breed continues in its pursuit of that elusive Standard of Perfection.”

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