

Form =’s Function

Or “Why is Conformation Important in a Hunting Dog?”

VHDF has taken the leap above and beyond almost every other sporting dog venue by adding conformation evaluation to our testing program.

Grasping the concept of how conformation fits into field performance is not an easy thing. But those of us who have been breeding dogs for many years know for a fact that “form does equal function.” Or as someone told me many years ago “If the dog is not put together correctly – it will not hold up in the field.” If you’ve ever watched a dog with bad shoulder angulation labor through the field – it is a sad sight to see. Especially when 10-15 minutes into the hunt the dog is laying in a puddle of water, literally exhausted because his body cannot carry him through the field even though his heart wants to.

Now we’re not talking “beauty shows” here, but please understand that even that venue has a purpose; especially if you look back at the original intent of conformation shows. Granted – some “show” venues have not done some breeds any favors by developing two different “types” of dogs within the same breed; i.e. the “field” type and “show” type. Often the two don’t bear even the remotest resemblance to each other. But this is exactly one reason VHDF decided that evaluating conformation, along with evaluating the dogs’ performance, is important – to try to avoid doing JUST THAT.

Any good breeder of performance dogs will tell you that adhering to the original breed standard is critical to producing excellent dogs. What we truly want to produce is a “TOTAL DOG.” If a dog hunts breed appropriate – it should also LOOK breed appropriate. So the first thing we have to do is start with the breed standard. VHDF has decided to use the FCI (Fédération Cynologique Internationale) standards for Group 7 Pointing dogs which include all Continental Breeds and British and Irish Pointers and Setters as our guide. The FCI is known as the World Canine Organization and is comprised of 83 member countries. The FCI is located in Belgium where they maintain the breed standards for 339 breeds of dogs. Since the FCI breed standards originate from the country of origin for each breed, and are recognized worldwide, we decided that that was the most uniform standard to follow.

So what does all this mean? Just that VHDF is using the FCI standards to evaluate how each dog fits into their own breed standard. Knowledgeable breeders and licensed conformation judges are serving as “confirmators” for this process. As I said, this is not a beauty show. No dog is being compared to another and certainly there are no “prizes” awarded. Although, as each dog is evaluated on its own merit, it is also rated Excellent, Very Good, Good, or Insufficient according to the breed standard.

This evaluation is a detailed examination of the dog “from nose to tail.” Every measurement including height, length, width of skull, length of muzzle, length of ear; to every angle from head planes, to shoulder angle, to rear angulation, to tail carriage is noted and compared to the “ideal.” [The breed standard.] When all is said and done, then the dog is viewed as a whole – what is the total picture/impression you get of the dog. Does it *LOOK* like a German Shorthair? Does it *LOOK* like a

Brittany or a Breton? Significant emphasis is also placed on movement – as that has a direct impact on the dog's ability to perform in the field.

The first few brave souls who subjected themselves to this process at the Montana Bird Dog Federation tests held at Vaughn, MT in August were there to get an objective opinion of their dog(s). They wanted to know, if this dog performs exceptionally well in the field, is it also a good representative of the breed. Is it a good breeding prospect in all aspects?

As breeders we have a responsibility to produce not only dogs that hunt, but also dogs that maintain the breed standard, and are healthy. This is just one more service VHDF is offering not only to breeders, but to potential buyers as well. If the dog you are considering getting a puppy out of not only has high scores in all the VHDF tests; but was also rated "Excellent" according to the breed standard; AND has good hips, elbows and eyes, that's just one more good reason to go ahead and get that puppy.

Obviously you were drawn to a particular breed because you like the way it looks and like the way it hunts. Therefore we need to preserve ALL aspects of each breed for what they were intended to be used for, and intended to BE both in appearance and temperament. If we don't – we'll all end up with the same dog – unrecognizable as any particular breed and not possessing any of the characteristics that we were originally attracted to.

So, watch for conformation evaluations to be offered at some of the upcoming VHDF testing events. Until we get a complete cadre of experts on board who are qualified to perform this function, not every test will offer conformation evaluations, but our goal is to get enough people trained who are located in various parts of the country so we can offer this service on a more regular basis.