

In consideraton of a breed split

By Bea Strongfront

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There are few situations that compel me to take pen in hand and respond to something I've read, but having just finished Ms. Wiest's column "Consider This" (LQ Winter 2001-02) addressing a formal split in the Labrador breed, I felt I must offer a few points to ponder that fall on the opposite side of the track.

The "horrible situation" Ms. Wiest speaks of is not the fact that there are different "types" of Labradors in this country, as there are in other countries, including England and Scotland where the breed developed into the Labrador we have inherited from the war era. Rather the "horrible situation" clearly is that small fractions of conformation people in this country alone do not like the AKC trying to format all breed standards the same and the subsequent changes made to the Labrador standard. It appears from what I have heard and read that some people would like the AKC to adopt the FCI standard. Since the U.S. is not a member country of the FCI I do not see that happening. However, it is possible to change the AKC standard if that is desired, and there is a process in place for doing such. To date, I have not seen much effort in using that process to make any changes, perhaps because the majority of the Labradors owners do not see it necessary. In any regard it would seem more logical to change what is not liked about the standard rather than create a new breed of dog, destroying the efforts of all the early breeders in the process.

I have shown and bred dogs in countries run under FCI rules and standards and have conducted many lectures on Labradors in many of these countries as well. I have also shown and bred dogs that have won titles under the AKC rules and standards and have gone on to win titles under the FCI rules in other countries so I am well familiar with both sides of the competition and the breed around the world. In the World Dog Show competition where many top kennels from England, the U.S., and other countries will be found in the same ring, I have won with my AKC standard compliant dogs. My point here is that quality dogs win and are recognized regardless of the standard and that is not something new. The standard is a guide and is interpreted by different people in their own personal way. Obviously the AKC judges thought the dog presented them was conforming to the AKC standard, as did the FCI judges who awarded the same dog top honors in the show.

But obscure amongst all this talk of standards is supposedly the issue of the day - splitting the breed. We, the breeders and fanciers of Labradors, are the custodians of the Labrador breed, a bridge between the present and future preservation of our breed. We must think carefully about the ramification of such a drastic move before acting too hastily causing irreversible damage. The main problem with splitting the breed would be in limiting the gene pool. Do we really want to go the way of the Dutch, who are now struggling to maintain their freedom to breed their stud dogs as they see fit and not limit breedings? Some of us who have been in the breed long enough have lived through the trials of discovering well-known lines diagnosed with PRA, retinal dysplasia, tricuspid valve dysplasia and epilepsy to name a few. If we limit the gene pool by splitting the breed to a few show lines we could easily box ourselves into a genetic nightmare. I think back to the topic of conversation at the last Midland Counties Lab Club function I attended where all the prominent English breeders were anxious about how small the gene pool had gotten on the island. In fact, I noticed when looking over pedigrees of breedings that had been done by those breeders, that many were crossing their show lines back into the better looking field lines to keep the genetic viability up. If we split the breed this option vanishes. And if we are the only country to do this split, how do we register our imported dogs? Or the litters from imported semen in countries where the breed is not split? I am also thinking of the "horrible situation" that would have occurred if a breed split was in place when I imported a stud that was three-fourths field trial breeding and one-fourth show breeding. He made up his American championship with three majors including a five-pointer, as he was a very good-looking dog. If I had been forced to register him as a show Lab instead of a field Lab in order to earn that title however, he may well never have reached his full potential as a stud. He added hunting ability to the few show dogs he was bred to without compromising looks but his real contribution to the breed was in his contribution to the pheasant hunting stock in this country. He greatly improved the looks and temperaments of the field dogs he was bred to while enhancing their game finding ability.

The founding breeders of the Labrador knew well, that genetic diversity was critical for the survival of a healthy breed. Many breeds, such as the English Springer Spaniel, are faced with the same difficulties as the Labrador, but the breeders chose to stick together to work out the "horrible situation." Historically it has been our united front that has made America strong and continues to keep it strong in the face of many adversities. Americans are not known to back down from a challenge or skirt any issues with an easy way out, we are made of tougher stuff than that. I do not see this "horrible situation" as an insurmountable problem. We cannot put aside the wisdom of our forebearers, we must I feel, remain united as a breed, for divided we will surely fail to do our noble Labrador its due justice.