

The Judgement of the Youngsters

by Dr Frédéric Maison

Judging the youngsters is a difficult task which one can assume is loaded with a certain amount of subjectivity. Is there any judge who, once at home after a show week-end, is not full of doubts and regrets ? We have only a few minutes to rank the dogs, of the same breed obviously, but all a bit different with their own qualities and faults. But judging the puppies is a much more hazardous task, and even more when a giant breed is concerned. The future colossus is only an outline of what he will be at the end of a dazzling growth (one of the fastest in the animal Kingdom) where everything or nearly in his body, his movement or his character is likely to change as we shall see. So why are we judging them ? The question is worth asking. Besides the show training, there are other valuable reasons for the young breeders in particular, eager to get the opinion of their peers about their breeding options. Anyway, these competitions exist and the owners love to show dogs that are younger and younger. It seems to be the current trend and it's up to the judge to deal with this delicate task.

With the giant breeds the growth period is long compared to the other breeds but relatively short in comparison to other species. We can presume that the growth of the long bones is achieved at 13 months. However the peak growth occurs between 4 and 7 months and at 10 months, even if the dog will still grow, we have already a fairly precise idea of what he will look like as an adult. So, quite logical, the first precept is that the « older » the puppy, the less chance to be wrong. When he must draft a report on a three months baby, the judge finds himself in a mist which will dissipate as time passes and at 10 months the doubts begin to fade away. This reflects in his written comments which are likely to remain often quite elusive of being too definitive. He manages to find a honorable way out if the nice puppy presented to him doesn't fulfil his promise in the future.

Let's have a look at the characteristics most likely to change during this period, the first one being the proportions. I'm part of the judges who consider that the most widespread fault in the Irish Wolfhound is a lack of proportions. It is the one that jumps out at first sight. No need for a long and meticulous examination to see that an animal is either too short either too long or that he is lacking in leg length. These faults impair to type, symmetry and sometimes (but not always) functionality. According to me the major fault that keeps me from going further with this dog. The only exception to this rigour is the judgement of the puppies. It is illusory to appreciate their proportions as long as the growth isn't achieved. Some give the impression of having started well but suddenly stop growing at 8 months being left with a long and impressive body too close to the ground. In contrast others who looked short in the legs at the same age, continue to grow considerably after 8 months and finally have correct proportions when grown up. On this topic the genetic differences between lines are important but not sufficient to explain everything, since two pups in the same litter kept by the breeder, within the same environment may grow entirely different. One must admit that it remains often completely unpredictable.

The faults in the legs with puppies cause much cold sweat to the breeders even if they know that during the growth period crooked fore-limbs or bad hocks may occasionally adjust as if by magic. These growth disorders of the long bones may in certain cases bring about an important discomfort on the locomotion which sometimes is just temporary. The head also

for a long time is going to change during growth to achieve the correct proportions quite late. Its shape but also its features (ears, eyes, jaws and bite) constitute essential elements when evaluating a dog. The faults are numerous (lack of length, ear carriage) which may improve spontaneously up to adult age or on the contrary appear during growth (narrow muzzle, lack of underjaw). The bite is an important part in the judgement. We know that the lack of temporary teeth is absolutely not correlated with abnormalities of the adult bite. So the missing of one or several milk teeth therefore need not be mentioned. Only an important prognathism must be penalised even if we all have observed afterwards spectacular turns in the matter. The lack of underjaw and the misalignment of converging lower fangs, increasingly widespread in the species, partly due to a modification of the environment of our carnivores, must also be penalised beyond 8 months.

The angulations sometimes exaggerated sometimes absent in a puppy may normalize and finally be near to perfection in the long run provided the youngster benefits from adequate physical exercise. But the opposite may also be observed. The dog may lose its beautiful angulations at the end of growth to become permanently straight. Difficult to be too conclusive when examining a youngster.

Many are looking for dogs with strong bones, sometimes exaggerated to my taste. The study of the old representatives of the breed often show much lighter build and more tucked up dogs compared to what we see nowadays. Anyway, this wolf hunter needs solid bone. The development of the skeleton during growth may vary tremendously from one line to another. According to my observation, and this has been corroborated by numerous breeders, certain lines produce puppies with strong bone which progressively gain in refinement as things progress and the bone lengthens, whereas others produce puppies relatively refined whose bones grow in all directions, in length and width at the same time. In that case the knowledge of the line is of great assistance in evaluating the puppy.

The movement is of utmost importance in a hound. You must feel his energy, his ease, his speed which reflect a good conformation, a balanced muscular development and a sufficient nerve impulse. All this is developing with a puppy and the muscling is seldom proportioned to the already very heavy skeleton. The result of course is a quite awkward gait in which even at an early stage however, one should perceive a certain facility (sometimes qualified as elegance) and promise of an athletic future that is the characteristic of the breed but which unfortunately lacks in many of its representatives.

The harmony is difficult to explain. It is more at the level of the feeling and is the prerogative of all great champions. It makes them beautiful and pleasant to look at. One can already find it as a bud in very promising puppies. This is where the experienced breeder and the competent judge acquire the knack in order to recognize these gems from their early age.

The well-balanced character is a priority with all the dogs but it is an obligation with the big breeds. The selection must be turned towards puppies which are not excessively anxious and never aggressive. A certain shyness is allowed with all the hounds and with the puppy in particular, but must never be confused with phobias or severe pathologies of the behaviour. The environment plays of course an essential part in this regard, equally with genetics, but

the judge must penalize any failure in the matter whatever the cause and if he considers the line crossed, he must be strict.

In fact there are only a few characteristics that do not change during growth, and to think about it I only see three : The colour of the eyes, the nose and the lips is the first one. With homozygous puppies with the allele of Maltesed dilution , responsible for the blue colour, we may note from the first weeks on that the nose and the lips are grey (they will remain so their full life) whereas the eyes are blue. The latter will become yellow when adult. This very widespread mutation with hounds is not desirable in our breed. The second is the woolly coat. It is also a defect visible very early. Finally some puppies are born with the tail bent due to a congenital malformation of one or several coccygeal vertebrae. This deformation persists and remains more or less visible with the adult.

Excepting these three faults, all the others present since birth (congenital anomalies) or appearing during the first months, are likely to improve or even disappear with time. However this does in no way presage their genetic origin or not. In fact the environment interferes greatly during this particularly sensitive period of life. This is the case with the growth disorders that are grouped together under the terms of osteochondrosis and dysplasia which are so frequent with the big dogs. If our breed seems not much touched by hip dysplasia, it's not the same as dysplasia of the elbow, osteochondritis dissecans and radius valgus are concerned, which seem to affect from 10 to 20 % of the population according to the studies. The symptoms vary greatly from one animal to the other and range from a slight lameless which disappears spontaneously after a certain time, passing sometimes totally unnoticed by the owners, to the severe pathology that needs surgical management. The so called « growth lameness » forwarded by a good number of breeders and considered an almost physiological state of a vague origin inherent to growth, doesn't exist ! Any lameness with a youngster is pathological, admittedly of variable severity, but if one takes pains to research, one always finds the origin of the trouble. Whatever it may be, a lame dog, even young, has not his place in a showring and if it happens, he should be penalized.

Experience shows that there exist big differences between the lines. The breeder who knows his own is relatively at ease when evaluating his own puppies. But it may be more complicated when he gets out of his kennel. As one who is rather quick when selecting my puppies, I remember having been once completely disoriented when I had to choose two puppies from abroad. On arrival the youngsters in no way looked like what I was used to seeing. I had admired the adults very much, the reason that led me to this import, but the puppies were so very different from mine as if they belonged to another breed. After one hour I still couldn't make up my mind and the breeder had to guide my choice for fear of my missing the plane back. It was the first time this happened to me. The judge in the middle of the ring finds himself often in a similar situation in the presence of puppies radically different but sometimes all of quality. Without knowing the way in which they may progress he must judge what he has under his eyes at this very moment, at that stage of growth. We must therefore accept that a puppy, who will become a great champion, may have difficulties to start his career because he is a bit « clumsy » in his youth. On the contrary a nice and very promising puppy may deceive later on because he doesn't progress as one could have imagined. The judgement of the youngsters is not a pronostic on the future, it's a judgement which is dated. It is not a mistake for a judge to have « missed » a youngster who subsequently becomes gorgeous. He must take account of the faults he sees even if he

knows that they are likely to loom up or even disappear, and he must reward the qualities even if he feels that they are only transitories. In the end it's the owner's responsibility to know whether or not he must show a youngster. Some lines have the reputation to produce beautiful puppies qualified as precocious, others are much more late and do not benefit from being shown before adult age.

The adventure that represents the growth of the giant breeds with his lot of pathologies and troubles is certainly a major difficulty for the judge, but at the same time a source of unequalled excitement for the breeder. More than with any other breed, it is the school of patience in front of this wonder of nature which transforms from day to day before our astonished eyes, passing us through all the emotions from deception to admiration.