**"CREATING BY DESIGN, FOR PURPOSE"**

**Northwest Notes/LABRADOR QUARTERLY WINTER 2009-2010**

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Many times in the past couple of months, I have been 'blessed' with calls from people who have web sites and are breeding and selling Labrador puppies. (Anyone who 'breeds' IS A breeder.......) I say 'blessed' BECAUSE they felt comfortable asking questions about their dogs..... “What did I think of 'Lady'?” And, I say blessed BECAUSE I was able to not say “Those dogs aren't breeding quality” but instead, sent them an e-mail picture or two and began discussing the importance of correct 'structure' and WHY - “The Labrador Retriever is a strongly built, medium sized, short-coupled, dog possessing a sound, athletic, well balanced conformation that enables it to function as a retrieving gun dog ; the substance and soundness to hunt waterfowl or upland game for long hours, under difficult conditions; the character and quality to win in the show ring; and the temperament to be a family companion.” WOW. The beginning of 'the standard for the breed' says a LOT but what does it mean to someone who has been breeding their beloved pets but yet, wants to 'improve' ?

Since most of theses 'breeders' are selling companion-hunting dogs, we begin looking at coat. I tell them of the many times I have had 'locals ' here phone me and actually ask WHY their dog might have gone into the cold water once or twice but then sits shivering and refuses to continue hunting. “The coat is a distinctive feature of the Labrador Retriever. It should be short, very dense and feel hard to the hand (course). The Labrador should have a soft, weather resistant undercoat that provides protection from water, cold and all types of ground cover. A slight wave down the back is (fine).”

I ask about what their dog's coat is like when placing their fingertips in and peeling it backwards... I carefully yet firmly state that this is very import in the dogs we select to breed even if “they are just hunting dogs”.

When I judge sweepstakes (which I love to do and am thankful for the assignments), or when evaluating my own dogs for breeding as well as puppies in a litter, one of the first things I look for is length of neck - “The neck should be of proper length to allow the dog to retrieve game easily.” The standard calls for a proper length and associates this with retrieving. The neck has thick muscles that attach at each vertebrae and extend downward to the the chest – A short neck will have less muscle along it's fewer vertebrae for lifting and carrying; where the neck meets the back is how to easily 'see' the neck's length, and, where the neck ends and the back begins is where the shoulder blades are. When looking at a dog or puppy and finding the place where the neck ends, place your fingertips right there and feel that the two shoulder blades are right there. I want them to print a picture if helpful and make a drop-sized dot with a pen right where the neck meets the back....Do this for many pictures of different dogs and begin to 'see' where the shoulder is. Feel also if they are closer together or seem farther apart (examine many dogs and begin to feel the difference).

Next, 'we' make a dot just above the tuft of hair on the fore chest and, a dot at the elbow. To physically feel this part of front structure, hold the puppy or dog's head, run your finger slowly down the throat and you will bump into the bony end of the sternum (the bone in the middle of the chest where the ribs attach); the dot ABOVE the tuft of hair on the fore chest is approximately where this 'pro-sternum' is. (“before” the sternum) . Use a ruler, index card, etc., to draw a line from dot-to-dot. DO this on the photos here and on others in magazines and begin to SEE the structure that makes the front.

The standard has always said something similar to “long, sloping shoulders....The shoulders are well laid back”. Take a look at the DIFFERENCE between the 'angle back' with the longer length of neck compared to the same line and angle on a dog with a short neck. The short neck makes the back longer and as confusing as it is for most people who read 'ewe neck' in the standard, I know from raising sheep in 4-H and they are describing their very short necks with long backs.

Draw a line on a ruler from the dot on the fore chest at the 'prosternum' to the elbow. This is the UPPER ARM and ideally the length and angle of the upper arm should be of similar length and angle to the shoulder. The 'angle back' of these two important parts of the front allow the forearm to REACH FORWARD when moving and 'cover more ground' in any type of work the dog does. This upper arm length and angle also is responsible for the FORE CHEST. “The Labrador Retriever when viewed from the side shows a well developed but not exaggerated fore chest.”

The Labrador's hindquarters or rear end must be well developed and powerful. I ask that a dot be made approximately where the hip socket would be and then to draw a line straight down from that to the ground. It is easy to see IF the rear feet easily set behind this point on the ground. A short hock gives more length to the leg under or behind the knee (stifle) joint and allows for “bend of stifle”. We can all pretty easily see where the thigh is (the wide, 'meaty' part just under the hip socket), but there is also the SECOND THIGH below the knee. Many dogs have a thinner or narrower second thigh, again with less muscle coverage. Not only does the bend of stifle and the muscular thigh allow and assist the dog to 'push off' and 'drive' his rear feet behind him, but the 'turn or bend of stifle' causes the dog to cover more ground when moving. “ The hind legs are strongly boned, muscled with (moderate) turn of stifle ( a stifle that is too bent may be weak), and powerful thighs”. Too much angulation or bend of stifle causes also a sloping top line which is not correct for the breed. “The back is strong, and the top line is level when standing or moving”.

One of the “most distinguishing features of our breed is the 'otter tail' which should be very thick at the base, gradually tapering toward the tip, of medium length and not extending beyond the hock. The tail should be free from feathering; clothed thickly all around, giving a rounded appearance”. Breeders wanting to improve their breeding programs MUST select for good tails which is a huge part of 'type' (features that make the dog look completely different from and not to be ever confused with another breed). The wonderful otter-tail also work for the dog as a rudder in the water to help him swim forward and turn easily and a huge part of function for the water dog.

Substance is a tricky word for someone newer to breeding quality Labradors, and it doesn't mean “cloddy” or “overdone.” Substance and bone should look strong and thick and never light or “weedy” as these incredible dogs need to be able to work all day in the field, in the water, walking the streets guiding the blind or, pulling a wheelchair.

We each have ideas of our own about heads ..... But “The Labrador's head should be side at the skull, with a moderate stop so that the brow is slightly pronounced and with the skull not in a straight line with the nose.” Definitely this beautiful breed developed in England cannot have heads that are wedge shaped, long or narrow in the muzzle nor massive and cheeky. But as important, the pigment around the eye rims and the size and shape of the eyes must “give the appearance of kind expression, intelligence and alertness.”

When at a show, especially a specialty show, watch the dogs in the ring or even those standing nearby and look for the 'dots'... Begin to SEE WHERE the shoulder is; WHERE the prosternum is and look for the BEND of stifle and for short hocks. 'Balance' is so very important as it is wrong for a dog to have ' a lot of angle in the front or rear' and NOT have a matching and powerful opposite end. “The Labrador Retriever must be well balanced enabling it to move in the show ring or work in the field with little or no effort.”

Our beloved Labradors should be bred with strong consideration for correct structure, absolute soundness against hereditary problems and, the features that give us Labrador breed 'type'. Be selective in the dogs chosen for breeding and in evaluating puppies to keep as this is of critical importance to breeding better Labradors.