

It's As Simple as Black and White - Oh, Really?

By Bill Stebbins

A subject near and dear to my heart but one where, as a non-breeder of AOAC's, I have often relied on the input from others to form my opinions on factors specific to color and markings. The world of Harlequins/Mantles is one unto itself. Those of us that come from Fawn/Brindle backgrounds think we have done extensive homework with our breeding programs. We are minor league in comparison with the factors involved with the breeding of AOAC's. Let us take our concern for color. We know if we breed two Fawns we get a Fawn litter. We also know what we will get if we breed a Fawn to a Brindle (at least statistically). We may be concerned about how rich the coat color may be or the number of chevron markings but, in general, there are few true surprises. The AOAC people endure more heartbreak than elation in the results of their work. The puppies with better conformation are often Merles and the beautifully marked dogs have too many structural deficiencies. To these ends is the point of this article. The passion of the AOAC breeders is now (and has been) a thing of wonder. Love for the breed does not begin to do justice to how these people wear their emotions on their sleeve. To a point that is great but without some form of temperance it can become devisive. There are schools of thought within this world about what are and are not acceptable color/marketing patterns for the show ring. The very nature of the Harlequin gene is one of instability. Therefore, the possibility for a broad range of looks is a given. There are the more fundamentalist thinkers that believe that anything other than the description in the standard (or very close to it) should probably not receive consideration in the show ring. Then there are those that feel that as long as some basic requirements are met the color/markings should be a minor consideration in comparison to the emphasis which should be placed on structure and soundness. Am I opening a can of worms or what?

The ability to find a middle ground amongst these divergent views has been an on-going issue in the breed. I remember going to a discussion group at the National the second time we were considering the approval the Mantle. OMG!!! Not very pretty. Although I have always teased my AOAC friends about their "funny colored dogs", the truth of the matter is that I love these colors and am amazed at the quality we see today versus 30-40 years ago. I know that sometimes feathers can get ruffled but the bottom line is that the quality of these colors has (and continues) to go in the right direction.

Here is the \$64 dollar question... If, within the breed, we cannot have a universality of thought on this sometimes convoluted and unique color/marketing issue, just how do we try to educate not only future judges but our own new owners? Part 2 of that conundrum is just how much emphasis do we feel we need to place on a cosmetic factor and do we ever want to throw out the baby with the bath water? Granted the Harlequin marking is unique to the Dane but it is still not a structural consideration. I know from talking to MANY people that a well structured but more poorly marked specimen would be their preference over a more poorly structured but beautifully marked one.

The Great Dane Standard is the most comprehensive, thorough and detailed of any breed. Many breeds could take a lesson from what we have done. Yet, with all of the information it contains, there is no way that the multitude of color/marketing variations can ever be articulated to people trying to learn our breed. A case in point would be the piebald. I would refer any readers to the writings of JP Yousha from 2000 wherein she explains about the piebald. To Daneites that do not have AOAC's many have never heard this term and, I would dare say, that some AOAC people may also not be aware. JP's article reads like a graduate paper from Gregor Mendel University but it gives all of us pause to ponder the types of considerations the AOAC people must face. In recent history a situation arose where a judge gave a class ribbon to a dog that apparently was a piebald. Should this happen - no. But the term and even a layman's description do not appear in our Standard. A judge can easily overlook rounded edges from torn patches. (Want to get crazy about spots and patches, take a look at the Dalmation standard.) Every time a Harlequin is shown (and, God forbid, wins) that has extremes in

its markings, the drums are beaten. There is nobody that appreciates a beautifully marked AOAC any more than I. But, if only the nearly perfectly marked dogs were shown, how many truly great structured dogs would never see the show ring? Furthermore, a truly great dog with less than wonderful cosmetics could be the next great producer. Remember a complete reversal in the quality of the markings is only as far away as the next litter.

I appreciate the desire for near perfection with color but I would be a lot more comfortable if that same desire were aimed at structure and soundness. The hue and cry about how this judge or that doesn't look at color may, in some instances, have merit. But, if we are sometimes keeping our best quality dogs out of the ring due to a cosmetic issue that would seem to be a self-fulfilling prophecy for judges not to put up color.

Our current modus operandi for Judge's Education is to tell future judges to "paint them green and then judge them". There can be (and probably are) arguments against this methodology. But, although I understand the contrarian point of view, I have yet to hear an argument that convinces me to place cosmetics as high on the pecking order as structure. If you come into my ring with a well structured and beautifully marked Harlequin, I will say thank you. If you come into my ring with a well structured but not so beautifully marked Harlequin, my response will be the same. The successful hunters of wild boar were not determined by their color but by the anatomical ability they possessed to perform this most demanding of tasks. Poor shoulders, light bones, whippety bodies, poor conditioning, etc. did not represent the nature and demands of the breed. The essentials of correct breed type are the factors of physical structure and mental soundness that create the Apollo of dogs... "This physical and mental combination is the characteristic which gives the Great Dane the majesty possessed by no other breed."

My comments will have little impact on those that do not agree but I would ask them if, as previously noted, a lovely dog is kept out of the ring because it has less than great markings and away from the eyes of others that love this breed so much, then who is it that has lost the most?