

AKITA, WHERE IS THE BREED GOING?

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(*Akita Journal*, 1980 Special Annual Yearbook Issue, pages 22-23)

Though this high degree of exposure to Akitas from New York to Tokyo does not make me privy to any special body of knowledge or wisdom, it has certainly given me a perspective on the development of the Akita in America from the broadest possible vantage point.

In that context, I would like to share with you some observations and comments on the direction the Akita breed is taking in the United States and Canada.

At the moment of its recognition by A.K.C. in 1973, the Akita in America was represented by two rather distinct types: (a) the "old style" Akita descendant of the "Dewa" line, which traced its ancestry back to the famous Japan Grand Champion Kongo-Go. Foundation stock behind most of these early dogs were imported to America during the 1950's and early 1960's. They were generally characterized by large size (often 27" to 29" height in the male), heavy bone, black or dark mask, kurogoma coloring, sometimes loose facial skin and dewlap, larger ears than called for in Japanese standards, and generally heavy coats (there are three accepted standards for the Akita in Japan - (1) Nippo, (2) Akiho, (3) Akikyo); (b) the "Import" type was in general a more stylized Akita, smaller in bone structure, with refined head and face, good tail set and curl, a more proper shape and color of eye, tight facial skin, and often of Brindle, White, or Akagoma color. Many of this type of Akita could be traced back to the Ichinoseki or derivative lines in Japan.

GOOD NEWS - BAD NEWS

As I travel the width and breadth of America today and compare the current crop of Akitas in the show ring with those of several years ago, I see, as the old saying goes, "A little good news - and a little bad news." First, the good news: (1) in general, rears are better than they were several years ago, with less hockiness in evidence, better angulation, and greater overall strength; (2) temperament in the ring appears to be good, with little indication of unnatural aggression; (3) the skills of Akita owner-handlers have improved 1,000% with most amateur exhibitors presenting their dogs with style and grace. Grooming has also shown a marked improvement over the years.

The bad news is: (1) we are rapidly losing "type" altogether. Rarely do I see an Akita these days which is a clear representation of either basic type which existed just a few years ago; (2) we are losing the sharp, rich colors so important to the Akita ("colors are brilliant and clear and markings are well balanced with or without a mask or blaze" - from the Akita standard approved by A.K.C. April 4, 1973.) More and more the Akita is taking on a bland, washed-out, nondescript coloring, which does not do the breed justice; (3) we are gradually losing those ornamental refinements of the head, face, tail, and feet which are the most unique characteristics of the breed. Again, from our standard:

FEET - Cat feet, WELL KNUCKLED UP with thick pads, feet straight ahead.

TAIL - Large and full, set high and carried over back in a three-quarter, full or double curl, ALWAYS dipped to or below level of back.

EYES - Dark brown, small, deep set and TRIANGULAR in shape. Eye rims black and tight.

EARS - They are strongly erect and SMALL IN RELATION TO REST OF HEAD. (Bold type by author for emphasis.)

In my view, it is increasingly rare to see "proper" eyes, ears, feet, tail set, color. The hard, cold fact is that the classical Akita look is undergoing a gradual, but unmistakable mutation.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE?

One must attempt to evaluate what has brought about this rather grotesque change which is causing metamorphosis of the Akita into a breed which may be unrecognizable in another twenty years. I would submit the following as significant contributors to the current dilemma.

1. The Akita is developing into a series of distinctly "regional" types, attributable to the extensive breeding of a handful of dominant stud dogs in various parts of the country. Unfortunately, "geographical convenience" is too often the overriding consideration in selecting the stud.
2. Fewer and fewer Akita breeders have a clear concept of their own objectives, let alone a long-term, systematic breeding program to accomplish those objectives based on a sound understanding of the science of genetics.
3. The closing of the registry to Akitas from Japan in 1974, the land from which the breed evolved, has cut western breeders off from an important source of new breeding stock in which many of the important features of the classical Akita look are well set. Though the Akita in Japan today still needs much improvement in body structure to suit my tastes, it has much to offer which, if lost, may never be captured again.

A SOLUTION

As a breed, we are going through the same problems which every breed goes through during the early years following recognition: a great acceleration of popularity and public interest, an influx of new breeders, some of whose interest in the breed is both short-term and exploitive.

The best advice I have for the Akita breeders in America is to get back to the fundamentals:

- (1) study the history and evolution of your breed so that you can better appreciate and understand the form it should take.
- (2) know what you are trying to produce, and have the patience to work toward long-term goals. Never lose the visualization in our mind's eye of what your "perfect Akita" would look like.
- (3) learn and practice sound, scientific, genetic principles. You and the breed will benefit in the long-term.

As a matter of personal opinion, I believe that the Akita breed in America would benefit immeasurably by a re-opening of the A.K.C. registry to Akitas from Japan. That is where the breed originated and flourished. To leave the door closed forever to that fact of history would be short sighted indeed.

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