

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE by Paul Battigan



The adherence & protection of the standard is paramount but in presenting the facts of the standard or even a little of its history, is that the full story? Is that always enough? The dogs do not bear the responsibility themselves to further their kind, if we fail to support each other & ensure that the base numbers of exhibitor/breeder remain stable then there is no breed. There is a bigger picture to always consider. We can easily fall into the trap of endlessly discussing at seminars, breed appreciation events and even ringside the merits of “classic collie” versus “modern Collie”, of British versus American etc. If it were consistently productive to do so then at some point over the past 40 years, the evidence of that would lead us to champion the merits of that kind of engagement. The reality is, it is often divisive, it rarely leads us forward. Moreover, it provides an unhelpful distraction from issues which do require our attention. Let us return to that word again – Fashion. For those of us who began our journey in dogs 40 years ago or more, how familiar might we have been with just for one example -the now commonly seen Dogue de Bordeaux ?, so some breeds once rare have become popular, whilst the popularity of others will wax and wane at the passing of time. In the case of the Rough Collie, we can see that a steady growth in popularity of this breed took place until such time as the period of 1980-2000. Some high points in Ireland for example would have been the AICSS Spring Show of 1988 with 106 entries or the IKC St Patrick’s Day show of 1984 with 130 entries. In the UK at club shows, the British Collie Club of 1984 drew an amazing 433 Rough Collies with entries at Crufts 1991 reaching 488. Following that numerical highpoint in terms of registrations and show entries we experienced then a slow but steady decline followed in recent years by a new levelling off. The year 2019 in Ireland saw an average Championship Show entry of 11 and the UK showing an average of 87 with of course both countries having much greater peaks at Club show events, Crufts etc. We are certainly not within a growth phase right now, we are not currently in a high risk zone either but we appear to be in a “maintenance phase”, in other words the need for discussion on how best to keep our numbers stable now and how we carry our breed clubs safely forward surely exists. 40 years ago, the ringside was without doubt inhabited by people of every age bracket, background, status, persuasion, belief and circumstance, The relevance? None of that mattered, it was as it should be – immaterial, we had more in common that we ever had apart. Nowadays it is easy to forget, easy to take for

granted but the same could not have been said in 1980's Ireland of every sport or pastime.

The dog world was then in many ways ahead of its time. This was the best possible side to the game, the very fabric of it – inclusivity! We should never assume that only someone of “financial means” would be capable of producing the next animal pivotal to the breed and its future. Maintaining inclusivity is therefore essential to the breed. From legislation to travel passport requirements, to sometimes exorbitant Veterinary costs there is a great deal of outside pressure placed upon the dog enthusiast, much of which we have little or no control over. We cannot ignore either the change in age profile of the average exhibitor today, it is in quite stark contrast to that which we would have seen 40 years ago.

The breeder of today has available to them such a range of Genetic tests, all to be lauded, but all come at a significant cost also. In the face of all that pressure we must ensure the avoidance of the scoring of the “own goal”. In other words, the things we can exert control over, these must continue to be a point of discussion. Everything we do in terms of the administration of the dog world, from the details of our costs/entry fees, judge's expenses etc and how they impact upon accessibility must be considered. Accessibility does not suggest that we constantly add more and more events to the calendar. The UK, serving a population of some 67.8 million has approximately 39 sets of Challenge Certificates at championships shows per annum. Ireland, serving a population of some 4.9 million has approximately 36 Championship shows per annum, a mere 3 less but with an eight of the average entry and with the KC in London operating its own 1 single show – Crufts, whilst the IKC has grown from its 1 traditional St. Patrick Day's Show to now 5 Championship shows per annum. It is furthermore debatable if the addition of ever more “titles” is a contributing factor in maintaining numbers and stabilising entries. The adage “sometimes less is more” – does that apply? (Yes – I am still purposefully pushing buttons!) Competition by definition, should remain competitive and in fairness it does so as the quality we can see is being maintained, but it would take little more than a handful of exhibitors to hang up their show leads to produce a serious effect on core entries, to have a serious effect upon the stability of our vitally important breed clubs. The “Irish Collie Club” was founded as long ago as 1892, originally an “All Ireland” organisation, with its secretary based in Dublin in those formative years. The political landscape saw that club elect to remain under Kennel Club (UK) jurisdiction in the 1920's and thus we saw in 1926 the formation of the Southern Irish Club - the All Ireland Collie & Sheepdog Society. By 1981 we also had the addition of the “Rough Collie Club of Ireland” Breed Championship show, so three now long- established clubs catering superbly for the breed enthusiasts of this island over the years. With luck they will all continue to thrive in the years ahead, but luck alone will not guarantee that. The hard work and time put in by those who serve on committees is worthy of our recognition and of our continued support. Furthermore, the institution of the Kennel Club, it is not some remote detached body whose interests are at odds

with its members. To comment, as a member, on that which one might wish to change or improve, to comment on resources, how finances are managed, to encourage a vision of what the future might look like, none of that need be negative or seem as such, nor disrespectful of the individuals who freely give of their time to serve on various KC committees. On the contrary one should engage surely in the encouragement of all to get behind and stay behind those we elect. In whatever country you reside, you ARE the Kennel Club, therefore BE the Kennel Club but always in a constructive way.

Everything we do in terms of our own behaviours, standards of sportsmanship and mutual respect, we keep check upon for they will, our experience tells us, impact upon the stability of our numbers and in turn that will impact upon the breed and our guardianship of its standard.

Whether or not we are competitors, seldom if ever before did the need exist to consider the future collectively, to “look out” for one and other. If the events of the past year have reminded us of nothing else – it is surely that. The losses, the heavy losses in recent years which have depleted our ranks are also such a reminder. With collective effort in time some normality will return and on we go.

The AICSS hopes that this small series of recent articles has provided just a little temporary distraction for its membership, something of interest or something to think about. A huge thank you to those who contributed so generously, it was greatly appreciated.

Until we see each other again - Stay well, stay safe.

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