

ANGULATION IN THE CHOW CHOW

I have often heard veterinarians state that Chow breeders should select for greater rear leg angulation to increase soundness in the hindquarters. My standard reply is "Consider the elephant" and I then enlarge on my point. The elephant is the other mammal with an utterly straight hind leg. This has been characteristic of the elephant for thousands of years. Elephants travel many miles each day in search of the large amounts of food they consume. Natural selection has assured that the straight leg of the elephant is a sound leg; undoubtedly, an elephant with a faulty leg would be unable to find enough food to survive. Thus natural selection would eliminate the unsound leg from the genetic pool. The ability of the straight-legged elephant to survive for thousands of years indicates that a straight leg can be a sound leg and a practical leg.

Chinese tomb statuary and written records indicate that the Chow has been known for its straight hind leg for over 2000 years. The Chow was not the pampered pet of the Chinese, rather, it was valuable primarily for the work performed. The storied large hunting kennels of Chows kept by some emperors were no doubt bred for their usefulness, which would have depended on sound legs. I once talked with a Chinese who lived in the countryside prior to World War II. He told me that when famine struck and the family was forced to leave their farm, the Chow was left behind to guard the property. So long as there was water, the Chow was able to hunt for his food and survive. Surely these dogs were sound and agile, either by natural selection or discriminate breeding, or both.

The straight hind leg and stilted gait is a hallmark of the Chow and the long history of the breed indicates the straight hind leg is practical. Who are we to presume that this ancient breed needs an angulated

rear? What we must do is breed for sound hindquarters within the frame that characterizes the Chow. Breeders too often do not know or care what constitutes a

sound rear and tolerate near cripples that have other desired attributes. Judges are also often not knowledgeable about soundness in the stifle and hock and overlook a slipping knee cap or a breaking hock and give points to dogs with these serious faults. Judges also err by not valuing the straight rear leg and even faulting the correct structure and gait. To hear a judge laud a Chow for its reach and drive is inexcusable and leads one to the conclusion that the judge is unfamiliar with the standard. Drive, yes the hindquarters are powerful and should propel the dog with noticeable strength. Reach, however, is alien to the required stilted gait. The standard describes a shoulder-upper arm angle of 110 degrees, "resulting in less reach of the forelegs." To see a Chow speeding around the Group Ring in a race with the Standard Poodle is wrong and the judges who reward this sight need to study the Chow standard.

The recently revised and adopted standard sought to emphasize the straight hind leg as an essential characteristic of the breed. It is described in "general appearance" and how straight the leg should be is defined, i.e. "viewed from the side, the hind legs have little apparent angulation and the hock joint and metatarsals are directly beneath the hip joint." In the section on hindquarters the hindleg is again described, including the desired stifle and hock structures. In addition, unsound stifles and hock are listed as serious faults. We must educate judges and breeders to understand and select for sound and correct hindquarters. Those who do not understand this structure should not be judging or breeding Chows, if their intention is to serve the breed. Anatomically, the nearly straight rear is

predisposed to certain problems and in a future article I will elaborate on this subject. Breeding correct Chows is NOT easy but we must not consider relinquishing the straight hind leg because we hope that might improve soundness. Will we next decide to eliminate the scowl in the belief that this will reduce the incidence of entropion? Those who wish to go this route might consider changing their breed - perhaps they might be more comfortable with the Finnish Spitz?

One of the advantages of having more than 50 years experience breeding and showing Chows is that when I, or another fancier, conceive a theory as to Chow structure I can mentally visualize good Chows I have seen in those years and compare the "new" idea to many actual Chows. In addition, as a practicing veterinarian for more than thirty-five years I have had almost daily experience in evaluating structure and its effect on function in many dogs. I have not observed that length of leg, when in proper balance to total height, is associated with increased angulation or that the moderate sized Chow does not usually have too much angulation. To reach back into history, The Clairedale strain came in all sizes but was noted for its straight hind legs, whereas the Choonam Brilliantine line was known to have more angulation. More recently, Ch.

Pandee's Jubilee was a large Chow standing 22 inches at the withers who had correct proportions accompanied by heavy bone and excellent straight and sound hind legs. Ch. Ah Sid's The Dilettante was a moderate dog, standing about 18 1/2 inches, but had moderate angulation, more characteristic of a terrier than a Chow.

I believe the degree of angulation is not related to length of leg other than coincidentally. Whether the dog is tall, average or short, noticeable angulation in the Chow is incorrect. The correct stilted gait must also be a sound gait and it will only be produced and maintained by careful breeding and elimination of faulty specimens from the breeding stock. The Chow has been shown in this country for just 85 years. If we find many unsound specimens we should blame ourselves and the judges who tolerate this in the kennel and in the ring, and not the original design of this ancient breed we are supposed to be preserving. Let us concentrate on understanding and breeding for the correct stilted gait and straight and sound hind legs. Let us try to educate the judges to understand this essential of Chow type so they will aid conscientious breeders who are trying to preserve this unique characteristic of the Chow.

- Jo Anne O'Brien, D.V.M