

SOUNDNESS IN THE SAMOYED

by PAT HOWDEN

I have been asked to define soundness as there seem to be many conflicting opinions as to which characteristics of a dog come under the heading of soundness and which belong under the heading of faults, or to the variations of type.

Soundness is a quality of health, both mental and physical. A sound dog is one which conforms to *all* the requirements of the standard of his breed which are listed under Coat, Back, Chest and Ribs, Hindquarters, Forelegs, Feet and some features of the head such as Jaws and Teeth, and dark eyes. Each of a dog's characteristics must function in a normal and natural way. If a dog lacks just one characteristic, or one characteristic does not function normally, then he is an unsound dog.

Let's take a look at the meaning of the word 'type' in view of the fact that there is a belief that Samoyeds may be the Cobby Type, the Rangy Type, the Show Type and the Sleigh-dog Type. Accurately speaking there is only one type and that is found in the dog which conforms to the standard of his breed. There is only one Standard and that is the one which insists on the dog having the right characteristics to do the work and live the life for which he was intended. There is no poor type! A dog is either correct according to the Standard and therefore the right type, or he is incorrect, unsound and not of any type at all. Having one ideal before us, how can we possibly see dogs of varying conformation all agreeing with the single picture of the one and only type?

You have heard the 'Sleigh-dog Type' derided as being too coarse, too big or too unrefined for the show ring. I have seen such coarse, big, unrefined dogs, but with my background of driving dogs I could not see these dogs as being ideal for harness work either. They were too slow, unwieldy and clumsy to do the work for which they were intended. They did not conform to the specifications of the Standard and I too would reject them as sleigh dogs just as would reject them for the show ring. The Standard was drawn up on the *requirements of the working dog* and any departure from that standard is nothing short of a flagrant diversion from the known health and emotional needs of the dog. It is time we stopped calling any dog who does not conform to the Standard a sleigh-dog, for he is not one in any sense of the word.

You have also heard the 'Show-dog Type' derided by the sleigh dog driver as being too weak, too unsound, too emotionally unpredictable for harness work; and here we come to a point of serious contention. This dog that we are seeing winning in the ring to-day is not suitable for sled work. Then why, if he does not conform to the Standard of soundness is he winning? For one thing, there are no sleigh dogs in the ring to give him competition and there are too many judges who are insufficiently trained and are actually afraid to judge a dog on soundness alone when they find themselves lacking in specific knowledge of the Breed. What then is a *real* show-dog? He is a sleigh-dog of few or no significant faults. It does not matter to the performance of a sleigh dog if his ears are too large, his muzzle a bit too long (or too short) or his black points are not complete; it is only essential that he be physically sound and mentally alert and eager. The show dog must first of all be a sleigh dog

and only secondly free from faults. If the dogs being shown today were judged on soundness alone they would be forced from the ring in abject disgrace. Does this sound too harsh?

How is a fault defined? Well, it is anything in the general appearance of the dog – quite apart from the requirements for soundness – that mar his beauty. He may have a peculiar knob or bend to the tip of his tail, he may lack feathering on his legs or, as mentioned above, he may have large ears, etc. Faults are not and never have been as much of a threat to the future of a breed as has unsoundness, and they should be the last consideration in the selection of breeding stock. Unfortunately they are too often the first consideration to those breeders who have their hearts set on winning in the show ring by the promotion of the spectacular features of the breed, and the ignoring and obscuring of unsound features that are creeping in.

There are many people who, for some unfathomable reason, hate to hear the Samoyed referred to as a sleigh dog. Perhaps they are afraid that the Sam will be thought of as a “Husky” and perhaps in this way will be associated in the minds of the public with all the vicious and untrue things that have been said and written about Huskies and other Northern Breeds. I have seen these northern dogs in harness and in the homes of their owners and it has been quite apparent that the dogs are what their owners make them. An ignorant brutal driver will have dogs which are constantly on the defensive, suspicious and not to be trusted or treated in anything remotely resembling the way we treat our Sams. I have also seen dogs that were intelligently handled and were therefore as friendly and dependable, if not more so, than most of the lap dogs I have known. Few people have seen a team of Sams working and fewer still have found themselves in a position where their lives depended on the emotional stability and physical stamina of their team. Those who have will never lose that deep feeling of appreciation they had when their dogs finally brought them safely home after a long trip into nowhere. Once you have been a sleigh-dog driver you will find that there is no higher praise you can give a Sam than to be able to call him a sleigh dog. He has become something more than just a dog. He cannot take the place of another human, nor would he want to be treated as a human, but he has made a place for himself in the experience of his driver that can never be challenged by another dog.

The Samoyed is also, according to the record, a herding dog. But this does not make him any different, conformation-wise, to the sleigh-dog. The physical requirements of one are identical to the requirements of the other; they are both the same type because they must both conform to the same standard.

So, whether you think of the Samoyed as a herding dog or as a sleigh dog he is in actual fact the *same* dog. And when you think of him as a Show-Dog, you *should* be thinking of him as a very superior sleigh dog, one which has few or no faults and *absolutely no unsoundness*. But when you *speak* of the Samoyed as a sleigh-dog, to a driver, for heavens sake don't sneer! You will be insulting the best friends he ever knew and that isn't a safe or wise thing to do.

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