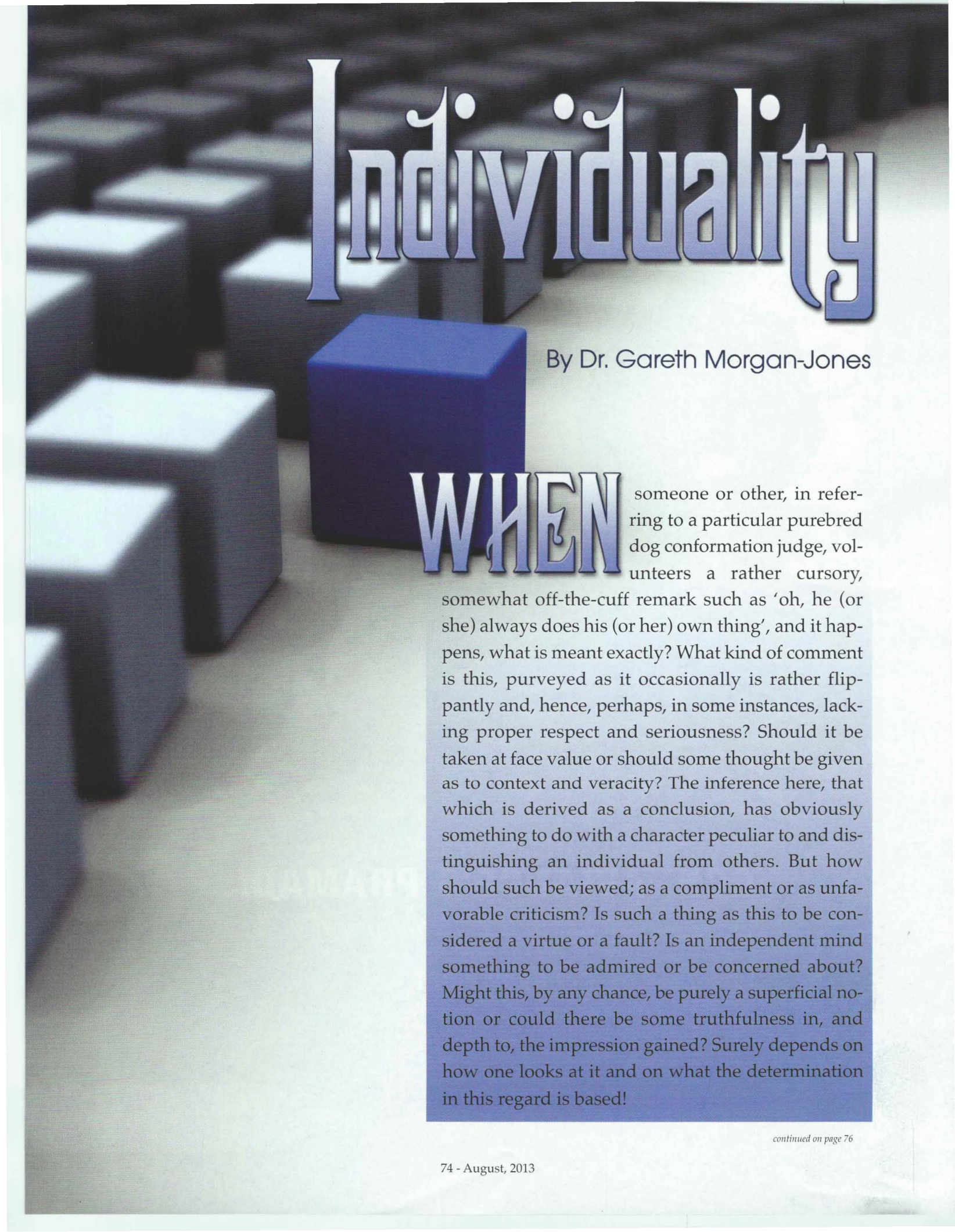




Individuality

By Dr. Gareth Morgan-Jones

WHEN

someone or other, in referring to a particular purebred dog conformation judge, volunteers a rather cursory, somewhat off-the-cuff remark such as 'oh, he (or she) always does his (or her) own thing', and it happens, what is meant exactly? What kind of comment is this, purveyed as it occasionally is rather flipantly and, hence, perhaps, in some instances, lacking proper respect and seriousness? Should it be taken at face value or should some thought be given as to context and veracity? The inference here, that which is derived as a conclusion, has obviously something to do with a character peculiar to and distinguishing an individual from others. But how should such be viewed; as a compliment or as unfavorable criticism? Is such a thing as this to be considered a virtue or a fault? Is an independent mind something to be admired or be concerned about? Might this, by any chance, be purely a superficial notion or could there be some truthfulness in, and depth to, the impression gained? Surely depends on how one looks at it and on what the determination in this regard is based!

continued on page 76

INDIVIDUALITY

continued from page 74

This can presumably mean that the person being characterized is viewed as having a mind of his or her own, is uninfluenced by the opinions of others or by advertising, is unencumbered by the mental baggage that oftentimes comes from friendships or acquaintances, and is, maybe, in the business of practicing personal preferences within the ring. Could be that one or all of these factors are involved. On the other hand, the person offering the opinion might believe that the judge in question is highly unusual and even off-the-wall in his or her decision making. Such are the vagaries that confront us as we try to understand how people view judges and the role which individuality plays.

During the course of judging the pedigreed dog in conformation competition there seemingly always occur in the thought processes of judges some interaction between that which is objective, that which is soundly grounded in accurate knowledge gained through observation and examination, and what we oftentimes refer to as the subjective dimension, where sometimes different emphasis is placed on preferences and interpretations. The latter may not always be necessarily fully justified, which is where problems can arise. In order to reach valid evaluations of a dog's merit, a judge obviously has to resist the temptation of letting a personally held opinion as to what is right and ideal, in terms of prioritizing, unduly distort a conclusion reached. There are certainly situations where a judge has to consciously

"Is an independent mind something to be admired or be concerned about?"

compromise and not allow individuality to dominate reason. One must be careful not to let narrow preferences come in the way of making rational decisions, those which appeal strongly to the mind. By allowing that which is cognitive to predominate, the tendency for that which is idiosyncratic, that characterizing and individualizing peculiarity with which judges are sometimes encumbered, is neutralized. It almost goes without saying that in order to reach good decisions a judge has

to resist the temptation to let opinions which are generated and conditioned by personal background and experience unduly impact and even distort his or her ability to be objective.

So how have we reached a situation where some judges like one thing and others like something at least to a degree different, each one maintaining their position

"Above all, judge to the standards."

to be the most appropriate. Is this a grey area which can be argued about? Well, of course, one of the main reasons for this is the change that has occurred within breeds over the years as a result of selective breeding and the degree of variability which still exists within them despite attempts to specify requirements in ever-increasing detail. Although standards have been repeatedly revised with a view to enhancing precision, we remain in a situation where there is apparent room for disagreement. In some cases we have surely reached a state of diminishing returns. So how come the present state of things in this regard? You would surely expect the opposite. In the case of non-specialist judges (as opposed to breeder-judges) does their background and extent of familiarity with other breeds affect their preferences? How much effect does mental baggage have in terms of carry over? Do they indeed have a role to play in keeping breeds so-called honest? Take, for instance, the evaluation of side gait. How does an individual reach a particular preference? There may be spill-over influences, with a particular style of dog gaining prominence at any one time. Breeder-judges are obviously sometimes very prone to indulge in their own peculiarly narrow choices. Witness the focus on a specific 'type' which is oftentimes the practice within parent club fraternities. I'm not being critical here, merely pointing out how things oftentimes appear to be.

There can be little doubt that subjectivity oftentimes creeps into the decision-making process. This is one of those factors with which we all have to contend. It

continued on page 78

INDIVIDUALITY

continued from page 76

comes with the territory, so to speak. The doctrine that individual taste and preferences are the ultimate determinants of that which is valid only goes so far, however. Judging which is solely governed by interpretations and predilections and, yes, sometimes even prejudices, is always, or should be, suspect and certainly open to criticism. Here is a

"This should surely not be purely about personal, individually-held preferences."

way of looking at things. By all means anchor one's thoughts in the rational while permitting emotion and intuition some latitude. There are, however, some boundaries. Hold one attribute constant as a solid foundation while allowing a certain flexibility but not at the expense of taking unreasonable liberties. Above all, judge to the standards. Start with the objective evaluation of make and shape, of structure and balance, of movement and temperament, and then follow with the aesthetic, more subjective, dimension. But do not stretch the limits for some personally-held notions, especially if they are open to question. This principle of continuity balanced by freedom of style and taste dovetails well with the notion of refining one's sophistication but it has to come within a certain context. It is as if a balance of positive and negative forces, the yin and the yang, are ever-present and in play. The skillful blending of these elements is obviously crucial when reaching decisions. Never allow the other types of possible baggage, including human relationships and exposure to promotional elements, including advertising, to have any influence and contaminate the equation. Keep it clean!

The main differences in levels of judging competency are surely a reflection of the depth and validity of an individual's concept of what a dog of a given breed should look like, how it should be constructed and proportioned, how it ought to move, and how it should behave, temperament-wise. Without a sound understanding of the essential elements of breed type, and of the desired form in terms of make and shape, judging cannot be appropriately conducted. Practicing some personal preference or other on a whim, without due regard to what a standard calls for, does not amount to appropriate eval-

uation of breeding stock, which, after all is said and done, is what dog shows are supposed to be all about. Visual perception, interpretive skills, sensitivity to the aesthetics of balance, are certainly all ingredients but,

above all, the central responsibility is to get it right according to the standard. As has been said many times, no two indi-

viduals will necessarily see given exhibits in precisely the same way, or interpret what they see in exactly the same manner, or weigh virtues and faults identically, but there surely has to be a common yardstick, an objective point of reference, otherwise any evaluation or comparison is rendered meaningless. This should surely not be purely about personal, individually-held preferences. This is what firmly anchors decisions while allowing for the inevitability of the subjective element. Whatever trade-offs that have to be made, or challenging choices which have to be confronted, they must be dealt with in light of detailed breed knowledge and not on the basis of what one may like or dislike. A balance has to be set, rigor is exercised side-by-side with a measure of flexibility. An accurate awareness of the important characteristics of a breed serves to validate decisions. The practice of making choices on the basis of what one prefers or does not care for can often lead to some less-than-acceptable merit determinations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gareth Morgan-Jones holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Nottingham, England, and a Doctor of Science degree from his alma mater, the University of Wales. Now retired, he carries the title of Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at Auburn University, where he was a member of the faculty for thirty-eight years. He is approved by the AKC to judge Best in Show, the Hound and Toy Groups, sixteen Sporting breeds, and Pembroke Welsh Corgis. He can be reached at morgangj@charter.net.