

# Soundness First!

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I had the opportunity to attend the AKC/Eukanuba Invitational this year in Long Beach, Calif. I drove Kate's Belgian Tervuren bitch out from upstate New York while Kate flew out for the weekend to minimize missed school time. The show is a great adventure - with more room to spread out than Westminster so you get all the extra activities such as heading demos, freestyle demos and the obedience and agility competitions, to say nothing of the fabulous breed booths, plus, of course, many of the top dogs in the nation and from all over the world.

What really bothered me, though, was seeing lame, yes lame, dogs at a competition of this level. I can somewhat understand the two lame dogs I saw in Junior Showmanship. If a junior has worked all year with a certain dog and this was their last chance to compete in juniors, they might hope their slightly "off" dog would pass inspection. The lame junior dogs did not make the finals, but their handlers did get to compete and neither dog appeared to be in severe pain.

I only saw small sections of breed judging and all the dogs I noticed were fine. When we stayed to watch the Groups, I was horrified to spot a couple of lame dogs in the Groups! I don't think there were any breeds represented by just one dog, so I am assuming all the judges had choices.

The premise of conformation showing is that we are looking for the breeding stock of the future. OK, I know, you are choking over your drinks, but actually going for top rankings was not the original purpose of dog shows and I don't think the AKC's purpose statement has changed. To me, one of the most basic requirements of any dog - pet, performance, breeding stock, top show dog - is that it must be sound. No matter how stunning the type, how spectacular the silhouette, if the dog can't move soundly it should not be put up.

So, for you judges, breeders and exhibitors who are having trouble picking up lameness, let me offer some information and advice. Go to a horse show and watch horses walk and trot. With the bigger size and longer stride it is often easier to spot an "off" step. Then watch lots and lots of dogs moving - walking and trotting are usually best for picking up subtle movement defects. Watch dogs coming and going as well as side gait. Faster and flashier isn't always more sound or even correct.

You are looking for any disturbance in the balance or smoothness and ease of movement. Efficient movement is usually sound movement. You have the advantage in that you don't need to determine which leg is wrong or why the gait isn't smooth - all you need to do is see that it is not correct and then avoid rewarding that dog. The veterinarian's job is to figure out which leg has the problem and why. If you can do that as well, more kudos to you! As a tip, with front leg lameness many dogs will "bob" their heads. With rear lameness, there is often a "hitch" in the hop area.

This also means you need to know the breed in question thoroughly. The amble of the Old English Sheepdog may look "off" to a sighthound fancier. If you are used to breeds that single track coming at you, you might be horrified by a dog whose breed is expected to parallel track. Most breeds now have nice breed videos so you can see correct movement for that breed.

Good ways to evaluate movement (obviously not available in the show ring) are to have a dog walk through a puddle, then trot over dry pavement so you can see the actual pattern of the footsteps. You can also do this with a thin coating of sand or snow.

Continue to educate yourself. I had the wonderful experience of attending a seminar by Rachel Page Elliott. Her books and [DVDs](#) of the [canine cineradiography](#) are excellent. Think of it as seeing live, moving e-rays showing how dogs actually move. There are many excellent books - [Dog Locomotion and Gait Analysis](#) by Curtis Brown, [The Dog In Action](#) by McDowell Lyon, and [K-9 Structure and Terminology](#) by Edward Gilbert Jr. and Thelma Brown are just a few. There are others out there and don't neglect your own breed's standard and educational materials. For a fabulous free web site education click [here](#). This site shows both normal dogs and dogs with some common causes of lameness. You can slow the motion down to carefully study it as well as watch the dog move at normal speed.

Lameness may be due to poor structure, so train your eye to look for structural defects that may contribute to poor

movement. But be aware that lameness could be temporary and from an injury, a pulled muscle, a bee sting on the pad, a nasty burdock or thorn in the paw, etc., and not related to structure at all. Still, as a judge, your job is to weed out the dogs who are unsound at that moment in your ring. When Kate's bitch was stung on the pad this summer as she entered the breed ring, the judge rightly excused her, as she was not sound at that moment. Twenty minutes later, after removing the stinger and icing the pad, she was fine, but at the time she entered the ring she was not sound.

If you know your dog is "off" for whatever reason on a given day, do not shoe it! Why would you let the world, or at least the ringside spectators, see your dog at less than its best? If you are a judge, have the courage of your convictions to excuse, or at least not put up, a dog that is lame. And, breeders, exhibitors and judges, please educate yourselves and your "eye" so you can identify lameness!