

Spinone Club of America Specialty Show on Friday, 27 April 2007 in Hustle, Virginia.

It was a great privilege to be invited to judge the National Specialty of SCoA on its 20th anniversary, particularly as the invitation came from a ballot of the membership. The hospitality of the Club's committee and all the Spinone enthusiasts that attended the week-long rally were unbelievable and the temperament of the hundred or so dogs was also exceptional. We were blessed by sunshine throughout the week, except the morning of the 27th when the heavens opened. Just as we were hunting for our wet-weather coats in the bottom of the case, the sun peeped out and shone brightly all afternoon.

There is no doubt that the Spinoni in America have a ball (yes, I even picked up some of the lingo)! Without exception, they were treated as intelligent, working companions first and foremost; enjoying swimming in the vast lakes and hunting the acreage of woods and scrubland. Very few were primarily 'show dogs', with even those committed to campaigning the trail, taking time out to train to a standard that achieved a Junior Hunter title. The members' commitment to maintaining 'natural ability' within their breeding plans is highly commendable and even the members that choose not to hunt, participate in agility or obedience. The juvenile assessments are generally carried out before environmental and habitual effects interfere with the dogs' inherent abilities and prior to any formal training that may, for a time, inhibit the natural inclinations.

The aptitude assessment is certainly very valuable for planning ahead. I have always been interested in testing puppies for their natural behaviour, in order to place the right puppy with its new owner, and a number of charities, such as Canine Partners, have followed a regime of testing at six to seven weeks of age prior to selection. The SCoA principle of contracting their new owners to a 'natural aptitude' assessment of their puppy before full registration/transfer of ownership is finalised, ensures that the breeder has a broader knowledge of the outcome of a mating and prevents an unsuccessful coupling (as far as hunting/pointing/retrieving skills are concerned) from being repeated.

SCoA has played a large part in the formation of the AKC breed standard and there are one or two differences between this and the FCI/ENCI/KC standards used in Europe. Exhibitors are prevented from 'sculpting' their dogs coat into shape, the only trimming acceptable being on the skull, cheeks and tops of ears. In fact, the presence of undercoat, a long, soft or silky coat or signs of excessive grooming (scissoring, clipping or setting of pattern) 'should be sufficiently penalised to eliminate the dog from further competition'.

I understand that the early Spinoni had terrible coats/skins and so it was decided that, in order to educate the majority of non-specialist judges, the standard should draw their attention to the incorrect coat texture on the rather 'flashy' subjects. This, in turn, should produce a gradual move towards the wiry-coated dogs. Ten years later, the downside of the strong line is that a large number of dogs still carry their puppy and/or previous season's dead coat with them into the next year!

In fact, I found just a few dogs with soft, profuse coats/thin skins like a Griffon, but the majority of those with an over-abundance, had a correct texture – if rather wayward and

difficult to get hands through when trying to establish breed type. As in Europe, there were Spinoni with wiry-textured but short coats, lacking in facial furnishing and leg brushes – more in keeping with a Bracco.

What I did find on the majority of Spinoni judged was good, broad loins and croup, with correct low tail set and the correct profile hind assembly for the breed. There were very few ‘overly short hocks’ with long sweeping/over-angulated stifles and few that moved without a positive stride from the rear. Fronts were disappointing on the whole, with a general lack of ‘upper arm’, pronounced sternum and/or the correct layback. This dissymmetry sadly produced very few Spinoni that moved with the desired pounding gait. A number of dogs lacked bone and few had well-arched, well-padded round front feet.

American exhibitors have obviously worked hard to maintain the divergence of head planes and ear shape/length was pleasing throughout. Some of the less refined heads, with flatter skulls naturally showed higher earset. Once again, in keeping with a Griffon style headpiece. Overall, heads were generally broader, but to my mind, as long as the correct dolicocephalic shape is adhered to, narrowness is a less important factor than the correct eye shape/placement/expression and head planes in this unique breed.

My Best of Breed was bred in the US (Ch Epithelium Elia Imp x Ch Couchfields Made You Look) by Michelle Brustein and Dave Brooks (and handled by Dave). Not quite two years old, Ch. Couchfields Poderi JH stood away in the BOB ring as having the true Spinone gait and profile outline for this breed.

Best Opposite Sex to BOB, who was also Best Winners Bitch, went to Suzanne & Ed Applegate & Junior McDaniel’s homebred Capo di Paura Camilla Barker. Just eighteen months old, she is also by Ch Epithelium Elia Imp but from another import from this famous Italian kennel, Ch Epithelium Athena.

Best Winners Dog and Best of Winners was awarded to Allison Schultz’ brown-roan boy, Ercole del Caos JH. He was homebred by Ch Ludstar Alfonso Imp x Ch Zetta del Caos and is also just eighteen months old. Ch Epithelium Elia Imp received a Merit Award.

Other class winners were Rhodes’ Osage Duxun Limited (MPD), Sweetwood and Friedman’s Drago Castellano of Trollbo (PD and Reserve Winners Dog), Baks’ Luciano di Belle Isola (JD), Brookman’s Gisa K-Y Marko of Isis (Bred by).

In the bitches Schultz’ Fara del Caos (MPB), Bodell & Raho’s Capo di Paura Dash 4 Cash (PB), Applegate & McDaniel’s Capo di Paura Cassidy (Bred by), Andrews’ Busy B’s Cajsa-Lena (American bred and Reserve Winners Bitch).