

# Perception is Reality

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In the early 1980's, an article appeared in US News & World Report, highlighting troubling trends among AKC dog breeders. The piece featured several breeds, including the German Shepherd Dog (GSD) and was accompanied by unflattering photographs of severely angulated dogs sold as pets. The focus of the article was to highlight the harm done to various breeds by American Show Line breeders. More specifically, those who prioritized breeding the GSD with extreme hindquarters & sloping toplines. When I first read the article, armed with my considerable breed knowledge and extensive experience (a whole five years! LOL), I wrote a scathing letter to the editor arguing that the piece was biased, unrealistic, and relied upon poor references of the breed. Forty years later, recognizing just how naïve I was defending the sidegait fad alone and not taking into account the entire dog and all of its defining traits. While the article's prophetic accuracy is impressive, the author was not a prophet nor a GSD expert, just someone with a realistic perception.

To the point, even the untrained eye can easily recognize a drastically malformed hindquarter when present. When the average person sees a weak kneed, overly angulated GSD walking/standing on its hocks, they are concerned and ask - is something wrong with your dog's rear legs? was your dog injured? etc. When you find yourself in this uncomfortable situation of trying to explain the reasoning behind the dog's appearance, you've already lost the argument. More directly, this is not due to *their* lack of breed knowledge, but because its glaringly apparent and no explanation will convince them this odd deformity is acceptable. As Dr Phil would say, "Perception is reality".

It should come as no surprise, the public's image of a GSD is not of a one-dimensional show dog that is solely justified by its sidegait. It's that of an intelligent, strong, athletic, noble, loyal service/companion dog – a breed with a trifecta of virtues: type, temperament and transmission. Unfortunately, many dogs fall short of the ideal and come dangerously close to a caricature rather than the breed standard and ultimately mar the breed's image.

At the core of the discussion lies an over-arching issue: a notable absence of uniformity within the breed. This widespread matter extends well beyond the show ring, affecting various aspects of the sport and utilitarian nature of the breed. In particular, the breed displays inconsistencies in proper type, suitability of temperament, and correct transmission of gait (*i.e., structure*). These characteristics are intended to be the cornerstone and defining features of the breed, significantly influencing both their appearance and performance. This lack of uniformity is so prevalent, the GSD is often characterized as having different lines/types within the same breed (*i.e., American Show Lines, West German Working Lines, East German Show Lines, Czech Lines, etc.*), a stark reflection of the division that persists. It is this lack of uniformity across the breed that creates a confusing image to the public.

Having judged the breed for the past 22 years, I've consistently observed these problem areas, and in my opinion, they have not significantly improved over time. In fact, I've observed an increasing preference for superficial style over sound structure throughout an even longer period. Unfortunately, due to decreased participation, the number of poor representatives of the breed, are now being seen in the ring at higher percentages and with greater regularity. This trend is yet another issue that negatively impacts the breed's public image.

The most popular American show dog that helped to further shape public perception of the GSD is Westminster's 1987 Best In Show winner "Champion Covy-Tucker Hill's Manhattan", as "Hatter" garnered adoration from GSD enthusiasts and the global public alike. Hatter's acclaim was not attributed to sidegait, but rather his remarkable performance, poise, and character, in and out of the ring. Manhattan possessed imperfections, but the general public embraced and adored him for his appearance of physical soundness, robust personality, strength of character and his "Hollywood Handsome" swagger. He epitomized the public image of the quintessential German Shepherd Dog.

Despite Manhattan's widespread public appeal, mainstream specialty breeders chose a much different path and focused upon breeding to extremes. By doing so, they neglected key areas of the standard and created an even wider disparity within the breed. This obsession with exaggerated form rather than symmetry and balance, gradually reshaped the breed's image, making it an easy target to criticism from working line advocates, AR groups and notably, the general public.

Four decades later, the pendulum has swung too far, leaving the breed lacking uniformity, consistency in type, temperament and correct transmission of gait. Increasingly common today, overly angulated hindquarters paired with insufficient front assemblies create an unnatural imbalance, thereby compromising gait, athleticism, and overall soundness. Although general popularity has remained reasonably high per AKC statistics, the show ring has sadly, now reached its lowest point of participation. It seems, only a small movement of purist breeders recognize the problem areas, and more importantly, the sidegait at all costs crusade has failed. When sidegait alone becomes the singular focus of breeders and judges, we lose vision, sacrifice uniformity and with that, the true essence of the breed.

This decline in the show ring closely parallels a decline in the GSD's utilitarian service roles. In recent years, other breeds have seen an increase in their use for police and military work, search and rescue efforts, drug detection, and as guide and herding dogs. Regrettably, these are roles for which the GSD was previously renown. The decline can be attributed to several factors, including health-related issues, suitability of temperament, size concerns, decreased athleticism, etc. These concerns and more, have led to the growing preference for other service breeds. Even as these traditional service roles diminish, the fancy seems more focused upon promoting past historical supremacy rather than address the ongoing decline. All of which underscores the urgency to reverse the loss of these essential traits.

We are steadily approaching the point where a shift in perception is needed to initiate a thorough rebuilding and rebranding of our breed's image. Picking around the edges will no longer work. Preserving, Protecting and Promoting the breed's legacy is the core mission of its guardians. To truly shift perceptions, we must start by consistently presenting dogs that embody and reflect the breed's original purpose, uphold its public image, and closely align with the breed standard.

A significant shift in philosophy and selection will be required to create a unified vision.

*"Nothing will change, until something changes"*

*Randy Darnell*