



A Standard of Excellence

By Thomas Shaw

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It is absolutely impossible to attain marked success in breeding domestic animals without breeding them to a certain standard. The man who makes the attempt to do so is like the mariner who sails the seas without a compass. He, himself, cannot tell whither he is drifting. He is playing at what may be termed a game of chance.

Definition of the Term. - A standard of excellence is an ideal for the guidance of the breeder, and one which he should constantly aim to reach. This standard may be written or unwritten. Written standards are commonly prepared by the individual associations which protect the interest of the respective breeds. Unwritten standards are ideals in breeding which exist only in the minds of individuals engaged in the work. These ideals may be original and exist independently, or they may be based on what may be termed popular opinion; of the former class were the ideals held by the originators and improvers of breeds. These of necessity had to make their own standards. Of the latter class are those held by judges and breeders of stock in the absence of a written standard. The necessity for a written standard is based on the desirability of reaching uniformity and high excellence in the breeding of live stock. In the absence of a standard in one or the other of its forms, such uniformity and high excellence are impossible. Even with the aid of a standard, absolute uniformity can never be attained in breeding, because of the existence of the law of variation.

But it can certainly be more nearly approximated with than without a standard, and with the aid of a written standard rather than with that of one not written. Standards are also necessary to enable the teachers of the science of animal husbandry to do their work intelligently and with sufficient precision and exactness. The standard points of the living animal must be presented from a standard either written or unwritten. The advantage of the first method over the second will be at once apparent to all fair-minded men. Again, good judges of live stock have gone into the show ring with the boast upon their lips that they did not believe in standards. They claimed they were going to judge the animal on its merits, and not by paper made standards, oblivious of the fact that every award made by them was based on a standard existing in their own minds.

Standards for Purebreds. - In nearly all instances the standards for purebreds are written, but there are some exceptions. Notable among these are the Shorthorn and Hereford breeds of cattle. [As of 1903.] That these breeds are yet without a written standard is not to be set down to the credit of the associations which guard the interests of the respective breeds. True, they have attained much celebrity without written standards, but that was before the era of standards and in spite of their absence rather than because of the same. The existence of written standards would have made impossible the Jew and Samaritan-like attitude that prevailed so long between the breeders of the Bates and Booth Shorthorns, and it would altogether have prevented the unfortunate controversy between the advocates of the white and mottled faced Herefords toward the close of the last century. It does seem unfortunate there should be any necessity to make a plea for the existence of written standards in this progressive age.

When not written, the standard for judging purebreds is regulated to a considerable extent by the awards made in the show rings by men who are generally recognized as good judges. The type of animal which more commonly gets the prize is recognized for the time being as the standard type. To some extent it is also influenced for a time by popular taste and the demands of the market. Some years ago the popular taste in this country proscribed white animals among Shorthorns and showed a decided preference for those that were red. To so great an extent was this unfortunate prejudice carried, that white Shorthorns became almost unsalable for breeding uses, notwithstanding their individual excellence, and roan Shorthorns were much discriminated against. Again, when the Cruikshank type of Shorthorns first came before the public, many of the breeders of the Bates and Booth types refused to introduce Cruikshank sires into their herds. But the dealers in meat gave the preference to animals low and blocky in type and thickly fleshed, hence, the demands of the market compelled the breeders of the Bates and Booth types to introduce Scotch blood into their herds.

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The originators of breeds must make their own standards, as previously intimated. They are seeking what may be termed a creation that is something different in the line of live stock from anything that has previously existed. In the absence of a standard they must create one, whether written or unwritten.

Standard of Grades. – The standard for grades is unwritten, except in so far as it may have been or may be committed to paper from time to time by certain individual breeders. From the very nature of things it must be so in the absence of organization to protect the interest of grades of any class. Because of this, uniformity in the breeding of grades can never be attained as in the breeding of purebreds with a written standard. But whether the standard is written or unwritten, the ideal type must be clearly fixed in the mind of the breeder. His work will not be that success which it ought to be unless his ideal is as clearly present to his mental vision as though it were on canvas or better still, a living presence standing before him.

Such a standard will or should rest upon utility. Fancy points may be tolerated in breeding purebreds since they may so far evidence pure and even high breeding. But there would seem to be no place for them in grades. It will take into account the performance of the animals, as, for instance, in relation to speed, milk, or meat production, and prolificacy, since in all these respects the relation is close between animal form and performance resulting there from. It will also take into account the demands of the market. If the market should demand lean pork with much side meat, or fat pork with but little side meat the grower must give heed to such demands and shape his ideal accordingly. This one influence has tended to modify the ideal in certain breeds, as for instance, in the bacon of swine in Britain. The same is also true of certain of the types of the American Merino in the United States. Happily those changes in the popular taste are not of frequent occurrence and they are made but slowly. Were it otherwise, the possibility of breeding to a fixed ideal would scarcely be practicable.

The Makers of Standards. – From what has been stated above it will be apparent, that in nearly all instances the makers of standards are the members of the associations formed to protect and promote the interests of various pure breeds. The work is usually done by a committee appointed by the members of the association. Sometimes it is admirably done, but in instances not a few, standards are quite defective. The defects include, chiefly, a lack of clearness, definiteness and precision in statement, and a want of comprehensiveness in the points covered. Such phrases, for instance, as, “A head well set on,” and “A good back,” are well-nigh meaningless to the uninitiated in live stock lore. They arise, not from a want of knowledge on the part of those who frame them with reference to the requisite furnishings of the animal, but rather from a lack of felicity of expression in the use of language. The statement, though clear to the framers of the standards, may be far from clear to the average reader.

Some breeds are represented by several associations. The Poland China breed has a number of these. Usually this multiplication of associations is unfortunate, since it oftentimes results from strife that has sprung up in one of the associations previously formed. Happily these associations generally adopt the same standard. When they do not the interests of the breed suffer.

Two Classes of Standards. – Two distinct classes of standards have been drawn up for some of these pure breeds. The first relates to the requisite furnishings of the animal, more especially as to external form, but it includes such evidence of disposition, stamina, and performance as may be gleaned from external form and also color. It is frequently spoken of as a scale of points, although, strictly speaking, a scale of points has reference to the numbers affixed to the various points in the standards. The terms scale of points and standard of excellence have frequently been regarded as synonymous, and interchangeable. But, from what has been said, it will be apparent that the second is the more comprehensive term, since it includes all kinds of standards as applied to live stock, not excepting the scale of points. The second class of standards is based upon performance. They are in a sense supplemental to the first, and are usually referred to as

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advanced registration. They seek to encourage higher achievement in the breeding and management of live stock.

A Scale of Points. – A more extended description of a scale of points will make it to include: 1, size, symmetry, style, and weight; 2, evidences of disposition, digestion, constitution, and capacity; 3, what is termed quality and the amount and kind of bone; 4, the general outline of form as a whole and the development of each part as far as discernible to the eye, and 5, color and fancy points, as for instance, color markings. Symmetry relates to the harmony, as to form, that exists between the different members of the body. Style or carriage as it may be termed relates to the movement of the different members of the body and to the position of the same when in motion. Weight should always be included in a scale of points though frequently it is not.

Advanced Registration. – Advanced registration usually records performance in animal production, absolutely or at different ages, and speed in trotting horses. It may be made to record performance in breeding and possibly in some other lines, as in wool production. Heretofore it has been confined more commonly to dairy cattle and to standard bred horses. When applied to dairy cows it takes into account performance in production of milk or butter, or both, for a term of days, weeks months, or years. Only purebreds have been admitted to advanced registration, among dairy animals, but it would also be possible to establish such registration with unrecorded animals, whatever might be thought of the expediency of such a course of action. When applied to trotting horses it records the time made in speeding on the track. Animals whose performance is recorded in the advanced Registry are also recorded in the ordinary pedigree standards kept for the breed.

Points in Standards. – In drawing up standards, certain numbers are used to designate perfection in the particular part of characteristic considered. These numbers vary with the importance relatively of the part under consideration. For instance, in beef cattle, while but 1 point may be assigned to the ear, 10 or 12 points will be assigned to the back, because of its greater relative importance. In some records they also vary with certain features of development peculiar to the sexes. For instance, in dairy cows, many points may be allowed for udder development. In the male this could not be, but with him more stress is put upon other indications, as, for instance, those that relate to the evidences of constitution and other features of a well developed masculinity. In other instances the numbers are affixed not to a single feature of development, but to a group of these considered collectively. For instance, so many marks will be assigned to the head as a whole briefly described, rather than to each part of the head particularized in detail. To affix marks in detail rather than to certain parts grouped furnishes a more complete scale of points. And in yet other standards, objectionable features are stated even with some minuteness in detail, as it were, the valuable points. The numbers used in a scale of points are also sometimes called counts, and 100 of these are fixed upon as the standard of perfection.

Fancy Points. – Fancy points are those which have little or no intrinsic value in themselves when viewed from the standpoint of utility. They are such as relate to color and color markings, the size and shape of the ear, wool on the head and legs, and dish in the face of pigs. It would not be correct to say that fancy points are of no value at all, but that they are only or chiefly valuable as indications of purity of breeding. While thus far they are valuable, the fact should not be overlooked that other indications could be made to substitute them in time without necessarily impairing the usefulness of the breed. They should never be sought at the sacrifice of important features of form unless when they are regarded as an essential evidence of purity of breeding. The red color, for instance, would not be admissible in an Aberdeen Angus, since black is the standard color. To select a Shorthorn bull, red in color, but inferior in form and pedigree, in preference to a roan would be carrying a fancy point to an extreme, as would also the choice of a Shropshire ram of but ordinary development because the covering of the head in the first was superior.

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Advantages of Standards. – It has already been intimated that standards are necessary to secure uniformity in breeding and to make it practicable to teach correctly the facts relating to form. In the absence of authorized standards, individual breeders set up standards for themselves which may and which do differ materially. The difference in type thus produced tends to confuse. An illustration is found in the Bakewell and Border types of Leicesters and the Bates, Booth and Cruikshank types of Shorthorns. Where such differences in type exist, controversy regarding them arises, and the difficulty in placing awards in the show rings is increased, hence, the reputation of the breed suffers proportionately. It does not follow, however, that breed type should never be modified, but when so modified the standard should be made to accompany such modification.

Standards May Change. – Standards may and do change, but when they do the changes are usually slight. They may change with the changing of fashion, with the changed demands of the market or to increase the usefulness of the breed. The favorite standard color in Poland China swine calls for much less white than formerly. The port market calls to a longer and leaner side to meet the changes in the popular taste and to maintain sufficient stamina in some of the breeds, stronger bone is needed. Modifications in some of the standards for swine have already been made in these directions and possibly further modifications may yet be made. However, after breeds are established, the aim should be to conform type to standard rather than standard to type, hence, the necessity for keeping standards abreast of the needs of the time.

Receiving Benefit from Standards. –The merest tyro in breeding will receive benefit from standards, since they will furnish him with a guide in selection as far as he may be capable of using them. But the highest benefit from standards will come to those who understand best the laws of breeding. In the absence of knowledge regarding these, the information which standards bring cannot be turned to the best account. In the hope of simplifying the study of these laws, the attempt will be made in the chapters which immediately follow to so define and explain them that the essential features thereof may be so grasped by the ordinary intellect that they may be turned to good account by anyone engaged in the breeding of live stock.