

Thoughts On The Borzoi

by

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Over a period of years, the author has been asked many times for advice about Borzoi. It seems the fancier -- especially the newcomer -- sometimes has difficulty in developing an understanding of the breed. It is the hope of the author that this article will present an elaboration of the basic features of the Borzoi, together with some illustrations which might prove helpful to those who are new to the breed. The information is based upon the experience of the author who has been a breeder, an exhibitor, and a judge of Borzoi beginning in 1917, and are his opinions alone. While some fanciers might disagree with the fine points, the basic characteristics which are necessary for a Borzoi are based upon the historical standards of the breed and are not a matter of personal fancy. **The image of a perfect Borzoi must not be bent to fit existing dogs that may be in the kennel.**

Borzoi is a difficult breed and there is no shortcut to hard work and study if the fancier wishes to do the best for the breed and for himself. The most difficult thing required in the sport is objectivity. Real success in the breed cannot be achieved without being objective *about all Borzoi*, whether they are yours or not. There is no other way to develop a real eye for the breed.

The first question in my mind when judging any breed is "Can this dog do the job it was originally bred to do?" In the case of the Borzoi, the dog must be *capable* of the wolf hunt. In Russia two dogs and a bitch generally worked as a team to overtake and hold the wolf until the huntsman arrived to secure it. This called for certain features which were developed in the breed and later formed the basis of the breed's conformation and standard. To ask the

question as to whether a Borzoi should be bred for the show ring or for hunt is not pertinent. Both the field dog and the show dog should have exactly the same conformation and condition. The outstanding coursing Borzoi, with training, could be show Borzoi, and the outstanding show Borzoi, properly trained, should be able to do well in the field. In Russia there was only one standard for the breed, and the same dog was both hunted and exhibited. In 1925 the author first judged Borzoi at Westminster where there was an entry of fifty or so dogs. When, strange as it seems, into the ring walked a cowboy with hat, spurs and so forth, with a Borzoi on a chain, who went BOB from the classes. The cowboy also brought two other Borzoi almost as good. These were O'Valley Farm dogs raised in Wyoming on a ranch by the cowboys, and used to hunt coyotes. The dog and his two brothers are shown in the 1929 yearbook of the Russian Wolfhound Club with the two dozen coyotes they captured in three days. Ch. Ivor of O'Valley Farm was a great dog and was among the best we have had. Proper conformation is basic to the survival of the breed and it is equally important to a pet, a show dog, or a hunter.

In past, the hunt was essential in the development of the breed. After witnessing dogs that were successful, the huntsman had only to select the most representative of true type. Today, in most cases, the fancier must make a special effort to learn the features that would make a successful hunter, or at least accept the necessity of these features. Ignorance does not alter facts, and the only thing proven by someone who defends features such as giant Borzoi, dogs with straight shoulders or a camel back is the fact that such a person does not understand what *is and has always been*

required of the breed.

Any study of the Borzoi standard makes it apparent that the majority of the description is devoted to elements of the Borzoi that when assembled in the proper proportion, balance and symmetry would constitute the soundest possible type of sighthound because it is an integral part of the Borzoi. Therefore, it is ridiculous to think of soundness as something extra to type; without it you cannot have outstanding type.

Naturally, conformation is not a quality which is either entirely present or entirely absent. There are many degrees of conformation. The problem that faces us is to define what degree of variation from the standard of perfection is acceptable, for ourselves and, therefore, for the breed. While it may be debatable whether a Borzoi with a shoulder of forty-five degrees or one with fifty-five degrees of layback is best, there can really be no argument that the five or ten degrees of layback that we see very often is absolutely unacceptable. The time has come when Borzoi suffering these detrimental features should be considered unsightly and not bred. Those we know who do breed these features are only speeding the ruin of the breed. It's time we called a spade a spade!

Features such as straight stifles are not just unsightly, there are a sure sign of weakness. Just as it is true that the slight arch of back with the highest point being over the loin is a beautiful feature of the Borzoi, so it is true that the wheel, camel or roach back is doubly condemned; that is, it is both unsightly and unfunctional. It should be apparent to all fanciers that, in addition to changing the dog's ability to move, these faults alter the Borzoi's overall appearance for the worse. All these defects upset the overall proportion and symmetry of the Borzoi. Yet, some breeders prefer to defend and perpetuate these features in their dogs. Some of these faults result from

promiscuous breeding; others because the Borzoi is improperly raised.

When writing and reading a written description of anything as complex as a living Borzoi there is always a possibility that the author or reader will place undue emphasis on one feature or characteristic at the cost of the others. It is always the whole dog that must be considered. Understanding a written description is difficult, and the fancier must approach the standard with some experience because when we speak of type, soundness, conformation, condition and so forth, it is just impossible to separate one of these characteristics from others. There will never be a nice, quick definition of a Borzoi because all of the above characteristics are so closely interrelated and it is the way they all fall together that makes the dog a Borzoi. We can't have good type without soundness. You cannot have soundness without conditioning and you cannot condition a Borzoi who lacks the basic raw material, and so on and on.

All of these terms and descriptions attempt to put into words what the eye and experience probably does better. In fact, the person who has "a good eye for Borzoi" probably is just weighing up a dog he has seen and comparing it with his mind's image of a perfect Borzoi which he has developed by careful study. After a period of learning the breed's history and the standard, together with some keen observations and objective help, most fanciers should be able to construct this image, to the same degree with which they apply themselves. However, it is very important that the information used to formulate this understanding of the breed is based on a sound foundation. Don't take one opinion, *learn to evaluate for yourself*, keep still; when someone promotes his own dog, decide for yourself.

It should also seem obvious that one imperfection may not be as detrimental to

the abilities and conformation of the Borzoi as another. Even in a single feature, there are many degrees of conformation. Sometimes it may be difficult for a newcomer to make a judgment of the quality of a Borzoi. A dog may have a stifle that is not perfect or another flaw and still be considered quite good. Conversations about Borzoi often result in some disagreement as to which type faults are best or worst. Since there aren't any Borzoi around that don't have some faults, the basic problem in assessing a Borzoi is deciding which faults would be the most detrimental to the dog. Common sense tells us that a Borzoi that occasionally pricks an ear, other things being equal, is better able to meet the requirements of the breed than another Borzoi with splayed feet. Some things affect a dog's ability, and other things are important conformation marks which should come second. It is really as simple as that. Unfortunately, many faults we see are functional. A head that is lacking in depth or strength of the jaw may appear pretty to some, but it should be faulted because it cannot hold the wolf. Any feature or lack of feature that would impair the Borzoi's basic duty in the hunt should be considered functional. The author does not believe that a spot of missing pigment or a missing premolar are as detrimental as a lack of condition, training or soundness. Training and condition are the things that indicate real *commitment* to the *breed* on the part of the owner because they take work. A beautiful head or a profuse coat cannot stand alone.

If the reader takes exception to some of the descriptions, remember these are the author's opinions. Different approaches can be progressive if they are based upon a reasoned opinion for the betterment of the breed. None of the Borzoi that the author has owned or ever judged would get a perfect 100% score based on the outline that follows; yet, very high standards insure that

Borzoi will continue as a great breed. The drawings that accompany the description are an attempt to depict a composite of the written outline that follows and should be studied together with the description.

A Borzoi should be a combination of the following: An elegant, graceful, aristocrat among dogs, possessing courage and combining muscular power with extreme speed.

Expression, intelligence and courage are difficult qualities to define in words. However, they should be simple to recognize by fanciers as they are essential to the breed. Nobility of expression is largely a result of conformation, intelligence and carriage. This is an elusive quality which is apparent in some Borzoi, and yet some otherwise quite good dogs fail in this respect. Intelligence and courage are very important in Borzoi, but they are sometimes difficult to evaluate in the ring; however, their owners know. Moreover, shy, spooky or neurotic acting dogs must never be bred regardless of how good they look.

It is important to remember that the Borzoi normally reaches maturity from 2½ to 5 years; perhaps somewhat less for a bitch. During their period of immaturity pups will grow through stages which cause concern. Many pups get awkward with their feet and legs; they tend to carry their tails a bit too high and sometimes their ears seem beyond control. In most cases these things pass with time.

Rearing a Borzoi properly is half the battle in owning a great one. Up to 60% of the mature Borzoi's character and ultimate conformation is a result of the way he is fed, exercised, trained, housed and understood during the period when he is growing and maturing. When we see a Borzoi down in the pasterns or with splayed feet, weedy and lacking in muscle development, we can very often find the reason in the way he was raised.

A Borzoi's temperament is developed by

his owner, while the different dogs differ in temperament just as people do. Owners can bring out the best or worse in the dog. Typically, a Borzoi should be calm, intelligent and easy to train. Bitches seem easier to handle. Any Borzoi, especially a dog, can be stubborn as a mule and fiesty around other dogs. But, with understanding and firmness, he will be won over for life. It is almost always a mistake to strike a Borzoi; they are slow to forgive and forget.

Conformation is the degree with which the various angles and parts of the Borzoi conform with one another and the general purpose or pattern *demanded* of the breed. The gait (trotting, running or galloping) should be proper with coordinated leg action in keeping with that of a true sighthound.

The overall outline, proportions, and the makeup and interrelationship of the various features of the Borzoi are the basic ingredients of conformation and constitute both soundness and type. Height at the withers and the length between the rump and brisket should be equal. The head should measure one-third the height and the withers plus up to about one inch. The depth of chest should be one-half the height at the withers. The highest point at the backline should be over the midpoint of the loin and the arch of the top line is slight. These measurements must be made "fair" when the dog is set and alert.

To be in proper *condition* a Borzoi must have very well defined and very firm muscular development. Proper condition can only be accomplished by diligent and constructive exercise.

In Russia, the huntsman conditioned the Borzoi by horseback. Today, there are a number of approaches to exercising Borzoi -- using him in the field is good. But, it can also be accomplished with a bicycle as well as with a station wagon or a van. However, great restraint must be used with autos when beginning conditioning programs so

as to drive very slowly, at a slow trot. A *trot* is the best gait for conditioning. During the first weeks of training, any definite signs of tiring, such as excessive crabbing, pounding or padding, or favoring a leg on the part of the dog should bring a halt to the trotting. The dog should be trotted at least five nights a week during his conditioning program, two to five miles per session. Just having your dog in a large run is not enough; *he must be constructively conditioned just as an athlete conditions himself.*

It should be a severe fault if a Borzoi has poor muscle development or coordination.

A Borzoi should have a well-balanced *head* with the skull very slightly domed, long and tapering, with scarcely any perceptible stop, rather inclined to be Roman-nosed; long jaw, powerful and deep, strong teeth, clean and either even or preferably scissor bite (the upper incisors should strike just along the front face of the lower ones for the correct scissor bite) with a large black nose. In all, a well-balanced head which measures in length about one-third of the dog's height at the withers, plus up to about one inch. A head with perfect conformation should measure one-half its length from the center of the eye forward to the tip of the nose and one-half backward to the occiput. The head must remain functional. One must not breed for an exaggerated head either in length or fineness. A head that no longer retains power and ability to hold a wolf is without the slightest value and is completely atypical. Heads that are too long, lacking in depth of jaw, or heads that have excessively crowded front incisors are no longer functional.

It is important that fanciers learn to distinguish between a *Roman Nose* and a *Roman Head*. In the 1920's, the author fought very hard to educate fanciers about this difference but, today, we see Roman-headed Borzoi appearing again. Roman-headed Borzoi were considered freaks by

most all of the original breeders and are just as much a freak today. In a Borzoi with a proper *Roman Nose* only the cartilage at the end of the nose drops slightly; this is a proper and beautiful feature. In the freakish Roman head, the whole skull drops away in a downward curve from the eyes to the tip of the nose. Roman-headed Borzoi must never be bred.

A Borzoi should be faulted if it is fox or dish-faced, has a wide skull (viewed from the top), liver-nosed, pink nose, butterfly nose, or for missing premolars or other teeth.

A Borzoi's *eyes* should be brown or dark brown, oval set somewhat obliquely, intelligent but rather soft with a rather oriental expression, never full or bulging and the eyelid and eye rim with full dark pigment.

A Borzoi should be faulted for light-colored eyes, lack of pigment on rims, eyes too large or too small, round set eyes or eyes with incorrect expression.

The *ears* of a Borzoi should be small and fine in quality, lying back on the neck when in repose with the tips thrown back almost touching behind the occiput, raised when at attention to a semi-pricked rose-ear.

Poorly set ears, gay, very large, floppy or pricked ears should be faulted.

The *neck* of the Borzoi should be clean and free from throatiness, slight arched, very powerful and well set on; the length of the neck should measure one-third of the dog's height at the withers. The neck should be measured from the occiput to the withers with the dog in a standing, alert position.

A Borzoi should be faulted for too short or too long a neck, a weak neck, a poorly set neck, or throatiness.

The *shoulders* should be placed obliquely (about 45 degrees) layback is the ideal), muscular but not loaded, fine at the withers and free from coarseness or lumber. The shoulder is one of the most common weaknesses of the breed. Its importance to

the dog's endurance and running ability cannot be overstressed. Dogs with poorly set shoulders and upper arms can never move with the smooth grace of a Borzoi with the proper shoulder placement and development. A Borzoi with straight shoulders will always move in a stilted way.

It should be a severe fault if a Borzoi has straight shoulders or shoulder blades that are too wide at the withers.

The *chest* should be powerful with slightly sprung ribs and great depth of brisket, to reach nearly to the elbow. One-half the Borzoi's height at the withers is made up by the chest.

It should be considered a fault if the chest is too narrow, too wide, too shallow or too deep *in proportion to the rest of the dog*.

The *ribs* should be slightly sprung, very deep, giving room for heart and lung play.

A Borzoi should be faulted with flat or barrel-chested ribs.

The *back line* should rise *slightly* at the loins in a graceful, *continuous* curve; this curve is more noticeable in dogs than in bitches. The back line (or top line) on the Borzoi begins on the withers and extends to the base of the tail, including the croup, loins and back.

It should be a serious fault if the back is roached or wheel-backed, short, flat, soft or swayback, downhill, or has excessive fallaway.

The *loins* are extremely muscular, but rather tucked up, owing to the great depth of chest and comparative shortness of the back.

A lack of strength in the loin or lack of tuck should be faulted.

The *forelegs* should be flat and straight, then beginning at the lower end of the shoulder blade is the upper arm, set similarly in *length* and *angle* to the shoulder blade. This brings the elbow under the back edge of the top of the shoulder blade. This open angle (ideally of about 90 degrees) drops the elbow just below the lower part of

the brisket. Pasterns should not be straight but at a slight angle of eight to twelve degrees and should bring the heel pad under the center of the shoulder blade to give the front a level balance: Forelegs should be perfectly straight and set well into the shoulder; the pasterns should be slightly angled and strong. The bone should be strong yet bladed in proportion to size.

A Borzoi should be severely faulted for a straight upper arm or if he elbows out, or has bowed legs, fallen pasterns, or has knuckled-over pasterns, or coarse-boned legs.

The *feet* should be hareshaped, with well-arched knuckles, toes close and well padded.

A Borzoi's feet should be faulted if they are like a cat's feet, lacking in pad, splayed, flat, or feet turning in or out.

The *bindquarters* of the Borzoi should be long and very muscular and powerful with *well bent stilfes* and strong second thighs, hocks broad, clean and well let down. (Hocks well let down means a short set of bones from the hock joint to the foot or ground.) Femur and tibia must be equal in length. However, the Borzoi must remain upstanding.

It should be a fault if the Borzoi has a ring tail, squirrel tail, short tail, gay tail, weak or poorly set tail.

The *coat* must be long, strong in texture, inclined to be silky, either flat, wavy, or slightly curly with soft undercoat, never wirey. On the head and ears and in front of the legs it should be short and smooth; on the neck and frill it should be long and profuse, less so on the chest and forelegs. Consideration should be given bitches and for warm weather when coats are lighter.

Wooly, wire or excessive coat, or lack of coat are faults.

The coat may be any color. Any solid color and *white points*. Solid black or black marked with tan should be discouraged. The author believes as did Mr. Thomas and

many prominent Russian breeders that solid black or black marked with tan, without white points, should be discouraged.

Size and weight. Dog's average height to be measured at the top of the withers from 28 to 32 inches. Average weight according to height from 78 to 110 pounds; bitches are invariably smaller than dogs, height from 26 to 29½ inches and weight from 65 to 85 pounds.

It should be a severe fault if a dog is over or undersized and a disqualifying fault if the Borzoi is over 34 inches in a dog, or 31 inches in a bitch.

Today we often see excessively large Borzoi. In the author's fifty-five years as a judge he has not seen a Borzoi that exceeded 32 inches that had outstanding conformation. The craze to breed larger and still larger dogs is not in keeping with the job the Borzoi was originally intended to perform. There appears to be an optimal size and weight range for the Borzoi and when we breed to exceed this size and weight range we suffer the consequences.

It is no more difficult or expensive to breed toward the ideal with our Borzoi, but one must learn to assess his Borzoi and always *plan* the breeding to correct the shortcomings and fix the fine qualities of his dogs. *The sole aim of breeding Borzoi should be to improve the breed.* And it is always the whole that must be considered in assessing any dog for breeding. Remember to look at the sire and dam and grandparents when buying a pup. You stand little chance of getting any more in a pup than you see in his close ancestors.

In the author's eyes, the Borzoi remain the most purposeful and beautiful of the breeds. Borzoi will always be a very difficult breed because of the time and work they require, but the reward of having a true Borzoi more than makes up for the work he requires.

In conclusion, *learn to critically assess your own dogs.* Don't let your familiarity

blind you to the shortcomings of your dogs. Everyone likes to win, but don't let winning become your goal. Let your goal be breeding and maintaining the best Borzoi and improving him. Finally, remember that it is

the condition of the dog on the day of the show and his behavior that counts, not what it was six months ago or what it may be in six months hence.

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