

Alaskan Malamutes – To Improve or Preserve

When planning a litter, breeders often make the statement that Alaskan Malamutes should be bred with the goal of “improving the breed”. But is it truly our duty to improve the breed, or should we instead be preserving it?

The Alaskan Malamute Club of America’s outstanding judges’ education program incorporates a variety of slides as visual teaching tools that go hand in hand with the lecture and printed materials. These slides show the desirable attributes that judges should hope to see in their rings. They also aid in pointing out some faults that should be avoided. The very first slide displayed in the program is a 70-plus-year-old photograph of an Alaskan Malamute puppy and a Siberian Husky with Eva Seeley, owner of some of the first registered Malamutes and founder of the AMCA. The Malamute puppy is so incredibly gorgeous that any breeder of today would (or should) take it home in a heartbeat! In breed seminars hosted by some other breed clubs, photos are often shown depicting dogs from the 1800s, 1920s, 1940s and upward to current examples, describing how the particular breed has changed in type, coat and style throughout the years. The fact of the matter is that the Malamute puppy in that old photo could walk into the show ring today and easily take home the points. And that is as it should be in the Malamute breed.

The breed’s history is important not only to breeders but to judges as well. Breeders need to know the origin of their dogs, how they were used, what their temperaments were like (including their well-known stubbornness) and why they should closely resemble the descriptions in the standard. Judges need to know the history so that they will better understand and appreciate the breed’s correct physical look, movement and temperament. Most importantly, both breeders and judges must clearly understand that should the Malamute lose the necessary survival characteristics of the breed, it is no longer a true Malamute!

As the heavy freighting dogs of the Arctic, Malamutes were used for hauling heavy sledges over long distances. Their strength and endurance were second to none. They were expected to work long hours in extreme weather and



maintain themselves on little food. In addition to freighting, they were used to hunt seals, course polar bears and assist with fishing. The Inuit people relied on these dogs for their very survival, so “mediocre” was not tolerated. Dogs that lacked the proper coat were quickly destroyed. Cruel as it may seem, it is a fact that a long or soft-coated Malamute would have died from exposure to the elements.

Dogs that were too large and clumsy or too small and fine did not have the ability to work successfully and tirelessly. Those lacking the proper big, thick feet or with unsound legs could not hold a place on a team and were culled. Those with round, protruding eyes faced the danger of becoming blinded in the blizzards. Large, thin

ears could freeze, and dogs would lose heat through them. Dogs that were unsound in any way were unsuitable for their intended job and therefore did not survive to reproduce.

As a result, the Inuit kept and bred dogs that were as “perfect” as possible for their extensive and vital needs. This process of selection produced the dogs that present-day breeders should strive to preserve. Certainly the Alaskan Malamutes in the conformation rings today are often prettier to the eye, have more glamorous coats, and are much more highly show-trained than some of their ancestors. Does that make them better show dogs? Yes. Better Malamutes built for survival? NO.

When breeders claim to be doing a breeding to “improve the breed”, what they are truly doing is attempting to improve their own breeding programs. If that feat is not accomplished with the goal of maintaining and preserving the breed’s natural appearance, characteristics and abilities, then breeders are certainly not doing the breed any favours!

Judges naturally seek out animals that are pleasing to look at and are well trained and groomed. But I ask that this question remain in their minds when making selections: “If I were stranded in the Arctic, which of these dogs would I choose as my companion to help me to safety?” Find the dog that answers that question, and you’ll be helping to preserve our breed as well.



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