

# Functional and Fabulous

## Demystifying The Pekingese

By Tony Rosato

We always say that “Form Follows Function” in show dogs, yet we know that nearly all toy breeds were developed for companionship and their own unique look and appeal. And so it helps to understand the origins and traditions of the individual breeds to provide ourselves with a clear picture of each breed’s unique character and capabilities.

We can easily appreciate the Cavalier as a sporting Toy spaniel, or the Toy Manchester Terrier (English Toy Terrier) as a good ratter with its lithe athleticism. The same with the enchanting monkey-like “mustached little devil”, the rattling terrier Affenpinscher of German origin. But what about the Pekingese? It’s true that Pekingese, being a very old Asian breed, was the favored breed of the Empress Dowager of China as well as many aristocrats in Britain, Europe and the US in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There’s a lot of history on the breed to fall back on and some of it can be very enlightening. Bearing that in mind, what clues do the breed’s traditions offer us today that say something about Pekingese that might dispel the perception that Pekingese is a glorified, royal couch potato?

Some believe that toy breeds and Pekingese in particular do not have to be sound to the same degree as other breeds that work, using as their justification the breed’s unique construction and privileged past. Others believe the breed should be absolutely sound in every way, as any other breed, and some are making it a very big issue these days in Europe.

One of the best things we can do as dogpeople, breeders, exhibitors, handlers and judges is to learn from the past -- from history. Sometimes if we search for information, we can come across some enlightening facts that will help us to be better at what we do. So let’s take a look at some historical highlights from Pekingese lore that may help us better understand the breed’s form and function, and see if it offers direction for the future.

The Pekingese community is extremely fortunate to have a good deal of background data on breed history, particularly a translation of an ancient document that served as the first breed standard. Several versions of the ancient document were passed down through Emperors of China with the final version being attributed to the “The Old Buddha”, the Empress Dowager Tzu H’si (Cixi) herself, whose passion for extravagance and excess is well documented. Even when she was buried, her body was covered in precious gems. Interestingly, one of the Pekingese that the Empress bred and exported became the first champion bitch of the breed and won Best of Opposite Sex at the first Peke National in New York in 1911, the year the Empress died at age 74.

The character and form of Pekingese, in fact, reflect the values of lavishness in Imperial Chinese culture, as we see in the ancient breed standard. The key points in that ancient

standard indicate the breed's original form, which the breed founders and those in control of breed clubs amended over the past century.

The ancient Chinese document begins with, "**Let the Lion Dog be small**". In fact, the smaller Pekes were in China, the more valuable they were. Because rewards were given for the best dogs produced, the court eunuchs used to practice cruel methods of artificially restricting growth. Not forgetting that this was a society that bound the feet of women for esthetic purposes, they would encase puppies in a tight mesh or wire ball, which was a practice of which the Empress disapproved. Talk about going to extremes to win...

The ancient standard called for a black face, a "straight and low" forehead (shallow head), a nose like "the monkey god of the Hindus" (broad, flat nose; large, wide open nostrils), large, luminous eyes (which went into the Western standards) bent forelegs and the "body shaped like a hunting lion". A profuse tail over the back was called "the standard of grandeur", again suggesting high social rank, at least in canine terms and in the eyes of the Chinese Empress. The word "dignity" in reference to breed character was used twice, once in reference to a cape (or ruff) around the neck and once regarding attitude. The Peke was supposed to "conduct itself with dignity", and today, many of them still have that haughty attitude and an unwavering pride or ego. We call it stubbornness. But it's really a giant ego.

As to the temperament, the Chinese wanted Pekes to be wary of strangers and avoid danger, so they wrote that into the standard and selected for that trait. One reference in the ancient document calls for Pekes to "**bite the foreign devils**", meaning of course, invading foreigners from the West. Some of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Pekes were loyal and extremely affectionate, but at the same time could be downright cantankerous with strangers or other dogs. They backed down to no one and could routinely intimidate much larger dogs.

Pekes today still have that fiery, self-important streak in them, and even some of the littlest ones from certain strains can be ferocious. The Chinese reportedly bred some of the "tinies" as hidden weapons and literally "kept them up their sleeves", especially for the women. The ferocious sleeve Pekes were concealed to surprise and bite anyone who might try to accost their owner in a dark hall or passage way, in or out of the Forbidden City compound.

It seems that, more than any other breed, the various points of Pekingese breed type defy understanding for many outside of the breed, even some of the most seasoned dogpeople, which is perhaps part of the breed's captivating mystique.

Let's just say that Pekingese are far out on the end of un-dog-like characteristics as it gets in the dog world. If that's true, it has been as much of a blessing as it has been a curse, when it comes to the information and misinformation that has been touted about the breed throughout its distinguished history in the sport.

We can say on the one hand it's a blessing, because the breed's exotic beauty, character and nature has attracted some of the most wonderful dogpeople to the breed, ever since Pekingese were first exhibited in Philadelphia in 1901. John Pierpont Morgan was one of the original American Peke fanciers, and a parent club trophy bearing his name is still presented at the New York Winter National. Mr. Morgan had many breeds, but loved and

owned Pekingese. Some of you have heard the famous story about Mr. Morgan's blank check being refused for one of the famed Alderbourne Pekes in England of Mrs. Clarice Ashton-Cross. The story made national news at the time, saying that even J. P. Morgan didn't have enough money to buy Mrs. Ashton-Cross' Pekingese.

As an early patron of the breed in the US, J.P. Morgan helped stage the first Pekingese National in America in 1911 which was considered an important social function held at the Plaza Hotel on Central Park South in New York City. The entry was 95 dogs. One account of the inaugural show reported, "*The ballroom was crowded; and New York began to realize for the first time that this sturdy, sporty, affectionate, and beautiful little dog had come to conquer all hearts.*" By the next show a year later, the parent club had 188 members and it was reported, "*The annual winter Pekingese show has become one of the great events of the sporting and social world.*"

Years later, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Downing, parents of American all-breed judge, Melbourne Downing, bred and exhibited Pekingese and had the first one to win a Best in Show in the US in 1934, named **Ch. Wundah of Holly Lodge**. Then there was Mrs. James M. Austin, who imported Caversham dogs from England and owned the Catawba Farms in Old Westbury, on Long Island beginning in the 1930's. She and her husband James had about 18 breeds and over 120 dogs during the glory days of the big kennels. In fact, both husband and wife had their own kennels, each with top winning dogs.

Mrs. Austin's Peke kennel was noted for having the first Peke to amass a record of Best in Shows – a Peke called "The Duck" (un-dog-like characteristics?), also known as **Ch. Che Le Matson's Catawba** who ended his career in 1942 with 26 Best in Shows and 98 Group Firsts. He was handled by Ruth Burnette (later Sayers), Mrs. Austin's full time kennel manager, who went on to become one of the most formidable Poodle handlers in the country. One of her big Poodle winners was the white Miniature, **Ch. Fircot L'Ballerine of Maryland** whom she handled to Best in Show for Mrs. Saunders Meade at the last of the original Morris and Essex shows held in 1957 on the Giralda Estate of Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge.

Then of course there was Dorothy Quigley who established her kennel in the Northeast in 1928 and had so many big winners. Some will remember Vera F. Crofton who came into the breed and was one of Frank Sabella's Peke clients. Christine and Charles Venable - owners of Chik T'Sun, set an all-breed record that held for 22 years, which still stands within the breed. Within the last 40 years plus, Pekingese lovers such as Hope H. Burghardt, Augusta Maynard, Ed Jenner, Kay Jeffords, Wynne S. Ballinger, and now Kit Woodruff – are only a few of the distinguished fanciers through the years who have had or currently have top winners, top handlers and/or major breeding programs. What they have brought to the breed is a source of pride, excitement and inspiration to the Pekingese community as well as to the entire sport.

On the other hand, if there is a curse with the breed being unusual, exotic, captivating and beyond the grasp of understanding for many, it's that it has afforded ambitious people extraordinary leeway to exploit faults of the breed and perpetuate myths for marketing purposes – in a way that wouldn't be possible in any other breed. The "cloud of mystique" surrounding Pekingese has provided ample opportunity for people to take advantage of other's lack of detailed information or close familiarity with so complex a breed. As with

any breed, it's hard to find someone knowledgeable who is completely objective, which is why you have to be careful where you get your information.

The perpetuation of myths and misinformation applies a kind of pressure on selection of breeding stock that may, over time, have a detrimental affect on the breed. Changes are subtle, of course, and cumulative, because we're too busy to notice and are all caught up in the momentum of activity and aspiration. We can easily be desensitized and may miss the signs of a breed on a descending slope – only to wake up one day and realize the breed is in a corner.

Now, as many of us are aware -- and as some in Britain and Europe are beginning to take very seriously -- The European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals is cracking down on Pekingese form and function while applying a lot of pressure in Britain and the European continent to radically change the breed. This is no small deal. The commission is lobbying kennel clubs to eliminate breeds with a foreshortened muzzle, short legs, long ears and folded skin. This strong lobby intends to change the form of Pekingese in Europe to more of a generic dog that can breathe easily and move without restriction.

For the moment we Americans are insulated from those pressures. But we can't bury our heads in the sand either, pretending this strong movement won't affect the breed – or for that matter, and more importantly, that there isn't some merit to the commission's demands.

For example, where did the misconception come from, which we have here in the US, that Pekingese can't move? We hear all the time that people in other breeds wonder why a Peke takes a few steps and has to be picked up. And why, over the years, have we allowed the faces of Pekingese to become more and more tight, compressed or crumpled in the nose and wrinkle area? The Pekingese is considered a head breed, so the nose/wrinkle area is one of the most critical, because its configuration affects a crucial function -- breathing. The wrinkle should not be tight on the nose. The stop should be deep, the nose fairly large, but in proportion -- and open. When looking at the nose and wrinkle, you should not have a sense that there is any pressure on the nose or nasal passages.

If you look at photos of the majority of show Pekingese some 40 years ago, the faces were generally much more open. There seems to have been a higher incidence back then of well distributed features, open nostrils and large wideset eyes.

Breeders and judges should pay closer attention to the subtle signs of evolution in a breed that may take it in a direction from which it may not easily recover...if at all. That's a worrisome thought, as some breeds today are facing the possible obsolescence of valued traits.

Soundness in Pekingese must become more of a top priority today, not only because the Europeans are raising awareness, but because the breed has evolved and there are uncommon signs of decline. What's more, there are factors in place that may, perhaps inadvertently, undermine breeder's efforts to achieve soundness, especially in movement.

We want short legs on Pekingese, but with a proper front assembly, good shoulder layback and a free stride with a slight roll over the shoulders and through the ribcage. Yet in a

breed that many find mind-boggling to begin with, it stands to reason that misconceptions in movement have been particularly easy to promote. This misconception may have its roots in the marketing of dogs with steep shoulders and short upper arm.

Just how serious and widespread is the misconception regarding Pekingese movement? About 15 years ago, a judge was observing a Peke in the group ring, and mistakenly thought a Pekingese rolled from the rear, which unfortunately for Pekingese, is how the glossary in the AKC Complete Dog Book characterizes a rolling gait. On seeing the dog move away, swaggering from behind, the judge said, "*There's the roll*". Another top handler thought so too.

Then, not long ago a top senior judge suggested that a restricted Pekingese gait was correct movement for the breed. The judge was not entirely at fault, because the breed standards in both England and the US state that the gait is "slow" as well as "dignified" (England) or "unhurried" (American - following the UK insertion of "slow") ....which, if you stretch the imagination, a restricted gait could be interpreted as "unhurried" for any number of reasons.

It's important for Pekingese watchers to know that an "unhurried gait" is something that was inserted in the American standard in 1995 and was never a part of American breed tradition prior to that. However, perhaps appealing to the idea of a dignified character of the Pekingese, the British introduced the concept of a "slow" gait in their standard revision in the mid 1970s. The "slow gait" concept had no precedent, and should be re-evaluated in light of the European lobby to improve soundness, in addition to the trouble some Pekes have with movement today. It is clear from history that Pekingese have always had ease of movement, should move at their own natural pace, and some of them are decidedly athletic.

Let's look at what the writers of previous standards had to say about Pekingese movement going all the way back to the beginning. In the 1907 yearbook of The Pekingese Club of England, three years after the club was founded, and in the show catalog from the 1912 The Pekingese Club of America show in New York (the parent club was founded in 1909), both the British and American standards were printed. Both standards were identical and said this about movement: "**Action: Free, strong and high, crossing feet or throwing them out in running should not take off marks. Weakness of joints should be penalised** (British spelling)".

The British standard later amended that last phrase to "**absolute soundness essential**". But the breed's founders, who wrote the breed standard in Britain when the breed first came from China, eliminate any *possibility* of a suggestion of restricted movement by use of the word "free".

The idea of high action is completely foreign, and crossing of the feet doesn't sound too attractive either. Those references became obsolete by 1935 when another American standard was approved, although today you still see some Pekes with feet pointing inward, and even remnants of the tendency to cross or swing the front.

But you have to wonder how we went all the way from "running," to the introduction of the term "unhurried" in reference to movement in less than a hundred years. Most breeds

today have evolved considerably, and Pekingese are no exception. But how many breeds can account for such a radical range of evolution in the concept of ideal movement?

For one thing, the Pekingese of the early 1900s looked more like a Tibetan Spaniel and were in fact initially called Pekingese Spaniels when they were first classified in England along with Japanese Spaniels (Chin). The two breeds were originally considered one.

As the breed evolved to look more like what it does today, the American standard amended the section on movement. In the 1935 Pekingese standard, movement was described as follows: “**Action: Free, strong, with rolling gait.**” In the 1956 approved standard revision, the word “fearless” was added to express the character of the movement, which implied bold carriage, which is typical for the breed. The 1956 section on movement read: “**Fearless, free and strong, with a slight roll**” and that remained consistent and unchanged until 1995...39 years.

There is nothing conveyed in this description of typical movement that suggests “unhurried”, and for 60 years *at least*, that ideal of Pekingese movement in American breed standards was established and clear. It was true, simple enough to visualize and understand, and it guided breeders and judges for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only 9 years ago was the concept of “unhurried gait” introduced in the American standard.

So the big question is, if form follows function, and the form of the Pekingese has been well established for at least 80 years or more, what is the basis for “unhurried” movement”? Is it justified? And what kind of effect will it have on the breed over the long term if we can now justify restricted gait as “unhurried”?

Even if you go back to the ancient standard you’ll find a reference that suggest Pekingese were lively, which they most definitely are. The ancient standard read: “**Let it (the Pekingese) be lively that it may afford entertainment by its gambols (romping, frolic).** And, “**Let its feet be tufted with plentiful hair that its footfall may be soundless.**”

The only possible reference someone could come up with to justify slow movement, and again it’s a stretch of the imagination, is from the ancient standard which reads: “**Let its forelegs be bent, so that it shall not desire to wander far, or leave the Imperial compound.**” But we know that in fact bowed forelegs do not cause Pekingese to move slowly, which is obviously why the breed founders, and the breeders who came after them did not prescribe unhurried movement. What should be taken from that reference in the ancient standard is what has been known about Pekingese for centuries, that they are not endurance dogs designed to go long distances. But when they do move, they’re lively and unrestricted, or “**fearless, free and strong**” and can move at a quick, natural pace – with a slight roll.

So, as we can see, there is in fact no historical precedent for the notion of unhurried gait, in any of the breed standards in America or China prior to 1995. There are, however, one or two strains of the breed that developed in the last 30 years that were affected by steep shoulders, restricted fronts and straight rears. If one were to connect the dots, appropriate conclusions could be made.

At the same time other prominent breeders in England maintained soundness, proper well laid back shoulders with an excellent front assembly and well angulated rears in their

breeding programs. Consequently, there were strains that moved with freedom and a proper roll. One of those strains had a decisive impact on the gene pool in North America and England, therefore those traits remain accessible in the gene pool.

What is objectionable is to see handlers artificially holding a dog back, or rushing it, not revealing its true natural gait. Or to see a handler pick up a dog after a few steps, when it's clear the dog doesn't have free, typical, correct movement, because the dog is not well made, usually in the front. This does the breed no good.

That's not the same thing as a handler picking up a Peke that is shown on rare occasion and not in top physical condition to go around the ring several times without tiring, particularly the group ring. Or with a puppy. It's understandable that a handler may want to conserve the dog's energy for the weekend or cluster. It only takes very few steps for a judge to observe whether a dog has the right construction and carriage. But it is a show, and the Pekingese must be able to show itself off and should have no problem gaiting with complete ease.

It may be worthwhile for the world Pekingese breed community to rethink the use of the terms "unhurried" or "slow" in reference to movement in their standards. In light of the pressures from the European Commission alone calling for freedom of movement, this is something that should be re-evaluated. The possible detrimental affect that the insertion of the term "unhurried" may have on selection of free-moving Pekingese in the decades to come may be a higher price to pay than any of us originally thought.

And now as a final thought on characteristic Pekingese movement, just consider this point by itself. Just about everyone saw the Pekingese who won Best in Show at Crufts last year, either in person or on TV. No one could call that dog's gait unhurried, as he swept around the huge ring at a very quick, natural pace. I have judged this dog in England, so can vouch for his superb construction. His quick paced, free-flowing movement with an easy roll is enough to make the case for fast moving, typical Pekingese for the rest of time. That alone and should close the book on the myth of a slow or "unhurried" gait being the ideal once and for all.

Recently there has been much discussion about the body shape of the Pekingese. Length of back has always been a problem in the breed, and the US breed standards for over 60 years addressed this. However, from 1935 until 1995, the Peke standard said that longer bodies were allowable in bitches. This hampered breeding efforts for breeders to eliminate genes for length of back. Yet, many breed specialists in both England and America continually upheld the notion of a pear-shaped body that was "not too long".

In fact the *original* turn of the (20<sup>th</sup>) century American and British breed standards say this about body shape: **"Heavy in front, broad chest falling away lighter behind, lion-like, not too long in body."** The 1935 standard kept nearly the same wording, reaffirming that the Pekingese body is "*not too long*", which of course means different things to different people. But today, the current British Standard, which is the same as Australia's and the FCI standard, leaves no ambiguity, stating: **Body: "short, broad chest and good spring of ribs, well slung between forelegs with distinct waist, level back"**. That is about the best description of the Pekingese body as I've ever read.

As many people understand, there is a very strong rapport between AKC and The Kennel Club (UK) as there has always been between American and British Pekingese breeders for as long as the parent clubs have been in existence. So this is where the notion of the “short, cobby Peke” comes from, because British imports have always dominated the American psyche, kennels and show ring, and many leading American breeders have traditionally deferred to the British concept of what constitutes correct type.

The term “cobby”, while not used universally in the US, is derived from the cob horse which is **small, hardy, compact, stocky and strongly built**, which clearly applies to Pekingese. At the same time, it is important to remember that Pekingese are pear-shaped and should have a distinct waist.

Ironically, the Americans have recently changed the standard to provide for a 3 x 5 body ratio, which is decidedly longer than what many of the top winners and top kennels since at least the 1940s have exemplified and upheld. At the same time, the British have maintained the requirement in their standard for a short body (without declaring a ratio), preserving the established tradition of a compact, one-pieced, pear-shaped dog while omitting “tapering behind”. How to reconcile this discrepancy is in the hands of the Pekingese community in the US to decide, and indeed in the hands of breeders world-wide.

Lastly, we come to the Pekingese head, which is another area where form is complex and often misunderstood, and where essential function is sometimes taken for granted. The term “massive” is used to describe the top skull rather than the head itself, which is to be wider than deep. The British used to call the head itself massive, but changed the term to “large” to offset concerns of whelping difficulty. In the US where elective c-sections in the breed are more routine than in Britain, a huge head is less of a concern and considered desirable, though no one may be able to convince the European commission of that. However, the incidence of smaller head size is noticeable in both countries, which is an issue of balance and proportion that breeders must address.

Today the most critical issue that all breeders and judges must concern themselves with in the Pekingese head, and where form really *should* follow function, is in what we call “the open face” vs. the crowded features, narrowing muzzle, and worst of all, crimped nose and wrinkle area. This latter fault is trouble for a smooth coated brachycephalic breed, but it is becoming a serious issue for Pekingese.

It is only within the last 30 years that the crimping of the foreface has begun to slowly increase in incidence. One would almost never see a top winning Peke years ago with noticeable tightness in the nose and wrinkle area. On the contrary, exposed stops and “nosiness” were more of a problem, in terms of the esthetics of the face. But the dog could *breathe*.

Back then the problems were with too much diversity of type and overstrong chins, with distorted lips and a tooth showing in show photos being a very common occurrence. Nowadays, you rarely see a Peke revealing a tooth in a show photo or distorting its upper lip. The finish of mouth is something that has markedly improved.

Where we fall down as a breed community is in crowding the nose and wrinkle area. Getting the balance just right is a hard thing to accomplish, with a wide, symmetrical

wrinkle stretching across the face, but not too thick or out of proportion, not too thin, and not coming down over the nose. There should be lots of width between the eyes. The idea is width...openness...with a broad nose and large open nostrils. If you take your index finger and, keeping it straight, place it on the upper lip, nose leather, wrinkle and forehead, all these parts should be on the same plane, with no concavity apparent.

The tilting of the muzzle is common. In some Pekes the tilting or upturn is too much, sometimes with the nose receding into the face or up under the wrinkle, so that the breathing area is compressed and compromised. There is no other place on the entire dog where form following function is more important. For a long, long time, we have all been tolerant of this crowding tendency in the Pekingese face. Yet now that the breed has evolved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and a number of breeders have perfected the flat plane with wide open nostrils, we all should look ahead to selecting for this correct, necessary, futuristic head trait which is as fabulous looking as it is functional.

The Pekingese has had a remarkable history and it remains a breed that captivates interest while ranking high in the ratings. The breed has been fortunate to have had great breeders through the years to develop it and fill the gene pool with all the traits breeders need to continue producing great dogs. But as the Europeans warn us, we need to focus on ease of movement and to improve the form and function of the area of nose and wrinkle. The time has finally come to take these issues more seriously than ever before.

**~ Tony Rosato, September 2004**