

No Good Dog is a Bad Color

By Tony Rosato

You've heard it said, "No good dog is a bad color...but it certainly helps if they're a *beautiful* color". While this may not apply to a number of breeds, it certainly applies to many and definitely to the Pekingese. But we in the Pekingese world have always known that. We have more or less always taken pride in the fact that in our breed a dog's coat color doesn't matter at all.

The breed standards through the years both in the US and England have clearly dictated that all coat colors and markings are allowable and of equal merit in Pekingese. There are historical reasons for this, but more importantly it also places focus where it should, on the distinctive, often misunderstood and unique characteristics of the breed.

Going back now two breed standards ago, and that means a decade, the standard used to have a definition of particolor. That cleared up any confusion with people thinking that a dog with white markings is a parti. It's not uncommon for someone with a few years' experience in the breed to think that a dog with a parti blaze on its head or a white chest and forelegs might be a particolor. Consequently, some breeders regret the omission, feeling that a clarification preserves the future integrity of the true parti markings.

The British standard retains this point, saying "Parti-colours evenly broken", while it disallows albino and liver colored dogs. The American standard does not mention liver-colored dogs. But then, purely from a judging standpoint in our breed, color and markings are inconsequential.

Many of us remember when the old breed standards both in the US and Britain used to state "spectacles around the eyes with lines to the ears are desirable". That in fact remained in the American standard for decades and it kept the trait in the gene pool for a very long time. If you're not sure what spectacles look like, just look up an old photo of Ch. Caversham Ku Ku of Yam, perhaps in a book from the late 1950's. He was a famous winner and sire, and is still used as the model for the ideal Pekingese in the UK yearbook today. He had spectacles around the eyes. So did Chik T'Sun of Caversham to a lesser degree. In fact we still see traces of that trait today, but it is relatively rare.

This is just a little bit of trivia, but you might like to know where the idea for the spectacles came from. It was derived from Chinese tradition. Even though the trait is not seen in photos of early dogs imported to the West from China, the trait has its roots in ancient China because of the Chinese elite's love for learning and education.

The Chinese prized certain markings on the dogs, such as a white ball or blaze on the forehead, which was called the "superior mark of Buddha" and had mystical significance. You still see that trait manifested in other breeds,

like the Japanese Chin, which you may not realize was once nearly one and the same breed with the Pekingese.

So the idea that a dog had spectacles around the eyes, for the Chinese at least, was a symbol of superior intelligence. You only have to live with a Pekingese for a little while to understand how super smart some of them are -- so much so that when you're saying something you don't want the dog to hear, you sometimes have to spell in front of them....and even then they usually know exactly what you're talking about.

If you've ever wondered why Pekingese can be any color, you only have to look back to the ancient Chinese Standard for your answer. All the breed standards since have been based on the original Imperial Chinese dictates which were passed down from Emperor to Emperor.

Here's are excerpts from the ancient Chinese documents, **“Let the Lion Dog be small.....Let its face be black....And for its color - let it be that of a lion, a golden sable, to be carried in the sleeve of a yellow robe - or the color of a red bear, or a black and white bear - or striped like a dragon - so that there may be dogs appropriate to every costume in the Imperial wardrobe.”**

So yes, Pekingese even had stripes back then, tiger stripes that is, like a tabby cat. If you ever get the opportunity, there's a British museum in England that displays a preserved, ancient Chinese smooth coated Pekingese, which was actually bred in the Forbidden City. I saw this dog in that museum, and it had the faded markings like a striped tiger all over his body. It would be interesting to know where striped coats in dogs originated, since there is evidence that the DNA of dogs and cats branched off from the same genus in prehistory.

Does that mean, then, that the ancient Chinese folklore about Pekes actually coming from a cross between a lion and the tiniest of all monkeys (a marmoset)...might actually be....true? We know, of course, there were no lions in China, only tigers. So...now, we have to think about this.

Setting the historical considerations aside, however fanciful, today's breeders are concerned with how to breed for certain coat colors and markings. Even though all colors and marking are allowable and have equal merit, and a black mask is not required, everybody has preferences. Yet a lot of breeders want to know more about coat color inheritance. For example, how do you get a bright shimmering clear fawn, or a bright orange-red with no brindle and jet black mask and ear fringes? How do you get a black and tan? Some breeders would like to know how.

A question that still persists in breeders minds is, if there are blacks in the pedigree, but neither parent is black, can you still get black? The answer is no, but sometimes breeders get one in a litter that they *think* is black, but it isn't really. It's a “dusty black” or a derivative of black and tan which is a recessive factor and a completely different gene from the black gene.

Remember, recessive genes have to be carried by both parents for the trait to be expressed in the litter. Whereas with a dominant gene, only one parent has to carry the gene for the trait to be expressed in the litter.

True black is a dominant trait, and so only one parent has to carry the black gene to get blacks in the litter. If the parent or a puppy carries that gene for black, their coat color will be true black, with or without white markings.

When breeders get what they think is a black puppy from non-black parents, these seemingly black puppies grow up to be a “dusty black”, not a true black. This causes some confusion about how black color is inherited.

Because it is known that black and tan is recessive factor, some breeders have learned that blacks born from non-black parents are often a kind of mismarked black and tan (with silver where the tan should be) and always have white markings somewhere. To be more accurate these have tri-color characteristics and generally develop as “dusty blacks”.

Muddy colors are fairly common in Pekingese and of course they're easy to get. Continuous outcrossing can often produce muddled color, or if you linebreed on wolf colored dogs. If you'd like to lighten your colors, you need to occasionally incorporate breeding known for producing clears, or include crosses with cream or white close up in the pedigree, preferably with very dense black pigment. Laparata breeding was famous for producing clear colors, as was Jamestown breeding. At no other time in the breed's history were clears so prevalent than when the breeding from these two famous English kennels dominated pedigrees.

But if you're looking to breed clear colors, you must never forget about pigment. That's why it's not a good idea to breed fawn to fawn continuously. Breeding fawn to fawn can give you clears, and sometimes breeding fawn to black can too. Breeding red to fawn is a safer bet if you want to maintain pigment. But remember pigment genes are inherited separately from coat color. That's why even reds and blacks can have light pigment. So, always remember to breed for dense black lips, nose and eye rims as a completely separate trait.

There is one color I haven't mentioned that is as rare as it is famous in our breed. It is called “Chun red” and has always been referred to with a sense of respect all through the years by longtime breeders. Chun red can be described as a clear, deep dark Irish Setter red throughout. The name comes from a famous dog born in 1901 named Eng. Ch. Goodwood Chun. He won 5 C.C.'s and was owned by a Mrs. Torrens in Kent who was on the committee for The Pekingese Club (UK). The closest I ever came to seeing the color was with one of the famous Belknap dogs in England, Ch. Belknap Bollinger. He was lighter than the traditional Chun color, but he was the real McCoy.

It is an interesting piece of breed lore that indeed the term “Chun red” has survived a century in the breed in tact. Somehow, even without people seeing

the color very often through the decades, the idea managed to capture the imagination of generations of breed fanciers.