

SOMETIMES LESS IS MORE

The breed's AKC standard says the following: "Temperament: Alert and intelligent, calm and observant. Instinctively protective, he is courageous and highly adaptable. He is very loyal and responsive. Highly territorial, he is a natural guard. Reserve around strangers and off its territory is acceptable. Responsiveness with animation is not characteristic of the breed. Overhandling would be discouraged."

The Anatolian Shepherd is a livestock guardian dog (LGD) breed originating from Turkish landrace dogs that have been utilized for millennia for the singular purpose of keeping livestock (a broad term) safe from predators (both four-legged and two-legged). This is important to note, because this singular purpose of the breed determines just about everything about the dog. Size, coat, structure, temperament, and demeanor around stock are all the result of thousands of years of selection for a large, rugged, powerful dog with an inherent suspicion of novelty; the intelligence to work alongside humans, yet able to make independent decisions when it comes to the safety of its charges; and the courage to stand his ground in the face of a threat and meet force with equal force.

What does this mean for the judges who may be reading this column? That's a very good question, and that's why we are here. Judges, when you have an Anatolian in your ring, remember that less on your part during the exam is often more.

Watch the dog as he or she moves around the ring, and use that time to look for fluid, efficient movement, because movement is often the truest test of structural soundness. Be aware that fluid, efficient movement does not translate to racing around the ring at high speed, with wide open "TRAD" side gait. This is a breed that moves at the speed of the herd that it is guarding, and herds don't move fast unless they are running away from a threat or running toward a feed trough.

Once the dog has been stacked, make the exam brief and targeted to the areas that your eye picked up as potential problems while the dog was moving. Unless you have a heavily coated rough dog, there isn't much to hide on an Anatolian, and there is no need to linger or give a free massage with every entry.

The last point is one I want to stress, as in recent trips around the ring judges have spent way too much time lingering over the minutiae of the dog. A brief, impersonal exam is all that is required.

Some judges seem to want to cradle the dog's head in their hands and gaze deeply into the dog's eyes with the intensity of a lover. That may be all fine and good with a breed whose default setting is not based on being suspicious of every person they meet, but with an Anatolian the best-case scenario is a dog who gives you the canine equivalent of a look that says, "Bro, don't make this weird," and worst case is a dog who tells you to back off, which doesn't end well for anyone.

Bite is front only—no need to examine sides for any reason, just a quick look for a scissors or level bite. Missing incisors or broken canines are not an issue, and there is no requirement for complete dentition, so no need to show the sides or open the mouth as I have seen both judges and handlers recently doing.

A judge at a show this spring shared with me an assignment where he excused two dogs for growling at him when he approached them for the exam. Now, you absolutely should be able to make it through a class without being growled at, but as he recounted his story, he was towering over me and talking into my face to the point that I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. When I glanced at my dog, he was starting to give me physical signs that he was not comfortable with the judge's incursion into our bubble of personal space. I took a deep breath, backed up to give us all some room, yawned a bit, and hoped my dog was reading my body language. The last thing I wanted was for his behavior to give him another chance to excuse a dog.

Despite an increasing (and unfortunate) split between working and show lines in this breed, where some breeders are softening the temperaments of the dogs and breeding away from pronounced suspicion, you should always assume that you are being presented dogs who can still do the job they were bred for. Make your exams brief and businesslike. Don't linger or stare.

Most Anatolians are fine with people they know, and once you've made it into the "friend zone" the reception you get is very different, but the two minutes you are allotted to judge is not sufficient time for the average Anatolian to decide it wants to be friends with you. Puppies may be the exception to this rule, because most puppies have not yet developed the level of suspicion that will mark their adult years, but adults are serious dogs and should be approached and treated in that manner. Approach an Anatolian never with fear, but always with respect.

Just like a meal that ends with crème brûlée rather than a fancy chocolate cake with raspberry layers and a heavy frosting, sometimes less really is more.

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