

As I See It, by Tom Roebuck Jr.

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How many of us have entered birds in a show, had them judged, and disagreed with the outcome? Most of us I would think. On any given day, any given judge will place the same birds differently. We have to accept this. Each person, be they judge, breeder, or both sees different things in each bird. Many judges and breeders alike have their own pet peeve that they look for first in specific breeds. Additionally, each judge is required to interpret the requirements set forth in the Standard of Perfection and apply that interpretation to the classes as they judge them.

As I see it, it is our duty as a Breed Club, with members who in many cases breed only Cochins, to ensure that our breed is judged, and bred, as near to the Standard as possible. Who better than Cochin Breeders, who should be the resident experts, to uphold the guidelines and breed characteristic as delineated by the Standard.

I love to talk chicken, especially, when the topic is Cochins. I have spoken with several people who are concerned that some of our breed characteristics are being overlooked by breeders and judges alike. Some of the concerns include improper eye color, improper color of the feet and beaks in Whites, improper undercolor in Blacks, and improper color in Mottled Cochins. These are only some examples. Let me address each individually.

Eye color: Across the board, the required eye color is reddish bay. My interpretation of this color description is a deep orangeish/red. The correct eye color will stand out in the show hall. Likewise, so will the incorrect eye color. If you go by the standard, improper eye color is a defect and a 2-point deduction when cutting for points. Not a lot in the grand scheme of things, but a required breed characteristic nonetheless.

I whole heartedly agree that type makes the breed and type comes first when selecting your breeders, but somewhere in that equation you have to start looking at the little things and improving upon them.

Improper color feet and beaks in Whites: The ABA Standard calls for Yellow feet and Yellow Beaks in the White Cochin. Plain and simple. No interpretation necessary. It is either yellow or it isn't. I do recognize that females in production will lose some of that yellow pigment and that is something that a judge must take into consideration. One can easily tell if a bird is laying or not. From the breeder standpoint, we have to make sure that we are not breeding toward washed out beaks and feet. Maintaining that bright yellow is just a matter of selective breeding.

Improper undercolor in Blacks: The plumage description in the ABA Standard calls for "dull slate" in yellow shanked varieties, and lists "any appearance of any other color excepting varying shades of gray in the undercolor in any section of the plumage" as a Disqualification. White undercolor in a Black bird is a disqualification. Here is where it gets tricky for the breeder. The Standard also calls for yellow or swarthy yellow beaks and feet in the Black Cochin. Using a male with "light undercolor" will enable the breeder to meet this requirement, but oftentimes the results are cockerels with white undercolor. I will be the first one to say that a Black Cochin with a swarthy yellow beak along with proper type set next to a bird of equal type but a black beak immediately catches your eye, but herein lies the dilemma. Do we use a male with a disqualification in our breeding program? If you use the Magic 8 Ball, the likely answer should be "definitely not", but with the possibility of achieving the elusive yellow to swarthy yellow beak and feet it is tempting. I will leave this one for you to ponder and welcome any feedback. I will say however, that a Black with white undercolor, as stated in the Standard, should be disqualified in the show hall.

Improper color in Mottled Cochins: Another tricky topic. Easy enough to define using the Standard of Perfection, with variances in the required white tipped feathers by sex and body part. For example, the back in the male is described as "brilliant greenish black, one feather in four ending in a V-shaped white tip" whereas the female is described as "black, one feather in two ending in a Y-shaped white tip". Easy to define, but incredibly difficult to breed to this standard. Why? Several factors. Apparently soft feathered breeds are difficult to get the correct Mottled pattern on, not to mention that in Cochins, the Mottled pattern originates back to the crossing of Blacks and Whites. All you have to do is take a look at a Mottled Cochin and an Ancona or a Mottled Houdan (if you can find one) to see what I mean. A properly patterned Ancona is a thing of beauty. Another factor to consider in the breeding program is that as the Mottled birds get older the amount of white in them increases. Something like graying as you get older. This makes choosing your breeders a challenging practice, suggesting that in Mottled Cochins you should probably choose your breeders from two-year old birds. The Mottled pattern is gorgeous when correct and

I have had several discussions with Matt McCammon on the variety. He and Jamie Matts, to name a couple, have made great improvements in this color. From my discussions with Matt and Jamie, you have to be very patient with your young birds because they take a very long time to develop, from a color standpoint. What we as breeders need to stay away from is the Mottled birds with way too much white in them. The Standard calls for black feathers with Y-shaped white tips, not entire white feathers. What is good for this variety, is that we have breeders like Matt, Jamie, Karl Rau, Norman Rau, Joe Mazur, Hans Maas in the bantams, and Elton and Josh Minnich and John Thyssen in the Large Fowl working to improve them. It is also quite a popular color for newcomers to the breed.

How can we make sure that our Cochins are being judged correctly and in accordance with the Standards of Perfection? By reading the Standards ourselves for one thing. And also, by talking to the judges. If you have a question on a class, ask it. Don't stand off to the side and gripe and complain about the outcome of a class. This accomplishes nothing. Maybe the judge has a great reason for the way he placed a class. Something that you can't see from outside the cage. If you disagree with the results, ask to speak to the judge when he or she is done, and have them explain why they placed the birds as they did. If, however, there are obvious grounds for a protest it is your right to do so. That is what that system is in place for. It may not make you the most popular person at the time, but by the same token, if our judges are not judging according to the Standard, then why do we have it in the first place?

Above all, remember that this is a hobby, and that we are talking about chickens here. As I see it, this is a way for people who share the same interests to get together and have some fun on any given weekend during the show season. The key word here is FUN!

One last thing, as we promote our breed and sell stock to potential future breeders, let's make sure that we sell/give the buyers stock that we would not be afraid to use in our breeding program. Certainly, you are not going to sell your best birds, but birds that are of poor quality should not be offered as show quality or "breeding stock". If they are of no use in a breeding program, take them to your local stock auction. There are plenty of people out there that just like to have them running around their yard, and you can still help offset your feed bill! That is "as I see it".

