Temperament - The Major Show Point of All

By Alistair Home

In November I judged a show for 'Unbroken Caps' in the north of Tasmania. I think you should always regard these shows as social occasions and pay less attention to the results than you might give to the major open shows. After all, it is a bit of a lottery to see which birds are in condition for the show, and most of us would not spend time preparing babies in the way we would prepare older birds. It did occur to me though that some birds seemed to handle the situation better than others.

Generally babies are at their best between forty and fifty days. Their feathers are still in good condition and they haven't learnt the wildness that can come from flying in the aviary. Probably they are still very familiar with their owner's hand and often they are quite tame. They then go into a really scruffy phase, although I will admit that I've seen some babies that seemed to improve just before going into their first moult. People who do not fly their babies early seem to be able to keep the birds in a reasonably quiet frame of mind in the stock cage.

Another factor that seems to help the very young is that they naturally puff their feathers out as a way of attracting attention when they want to be fed. This makes their heads seem better than the heads of birds not displaying. I think we often under-estimate the young cock birds because they don't start to show the adult male display patterns until after they moult, and often it takes a second moult to bring them to full display. Young hens show the width of face that is so desirable quite early and often we hear breeders saying that their young hens are better than their young cocks. You will usually find that the story changes as the birds get older.

Maybe there is another important feature - temperament. I believe this can be inherited just like other show features, and we should select for that feature just as carefully as we select for show points. The calm bird that is even a little bit bold and ready to come to the front of the cage will give itself every chance of beating other birds with stronger show points. The bird stands straight and shows every feature to advantage. How can a judge award success to a bird running all over the floor, or somersaulting around the perches? Naturally the judge will try to persuade every bird to give of its best, but some birds are determined to conceal their best features.

Many exhibitors will tell you about their training methods, and it is certainly true that a couple of our best exhibitors can get the best from every bird. How much easier that is if the bird is a 'natural shower' with an in- built steadiness.

I had the best demonstration of how behaviour can be inherited years ago when I owned two springer spaniels. They had never been outside a suburban backyard, but when I took them for their first walk in the bush you would have sworn that I had trained them as gun dogs. They ran fifty metres in front, moving in sweeps from side to side, returning to me every few minutes, exactly as though they knew that their job was to startle prey out of hiding. Some months later I bought three pheasants and installed them in a run. My dogs, who were familiar with ordinary domestic fowls, went into fits of excitement at the smell, again as though they knew that these strong smelling birds were game to be hunted, not just feathered creatures of mild interest and amusement. These features must have been inherited as a result of long and careful selective breeding carried out by skilful dog breeders.

It seems that we have the opportunity to develop strains of birds with very definite character traits. I for one will be attempting to do so, not only for showing purposes, but because I believe calm, bold birds are also the best breeders; the ones that tend their chicks most carefully, and almost have to be lifted off their chicks and eggs. These are the birds that can hatch out five and six chicks and will feed them all with enthusiasm. So, if I am right and these two things go together, temperament is the most important show feature for us to breed for, because it gives a foundation on which everything else can be built.

**Some Matings**

I'll start by quickly reiterating the main points of my first two sections of this article. Initially I presented a point of view that the pursuit of birds just because they were "English" in the hope that there was an easy way to breed winners would be a sure way to disappointment. If the birds do not carry the desired features they will be no use to you whether they are "English" or not. Selection and planning will still be the only reliable way forward, and even then you need a fair slice of luck. I went on to say that features may be carried visibly or in a hidden form. I illustrated my explanation with examples from colour breeding. The inheritance of show features is determined in just the same way as the inheritance of colour. If you can understand colour inheritance you are on the way to understanding the inheritance of show features. The conclusion I would draw from all of this is that you should plan the whole of your breeding program basing your matings on close observation of your birds, good records concerning the breeding of your birds (and that doesn't mean having a few ring numbers. You need to know what features the parents had) and some idea of how the various show features may be inherited. You will not have any birds that carry all of the desired features, but you should set out a breeding plan so that wherever possible a desired feature is carried either visibly or in hidden form on both sides of each mating, and every feature is carried somewhere in the overall breeding plan. You won't be able to avoid having some matings that are not visually ideal, but every mating should be for a purpose. This article sets out to illustrate this idea using my own birds as examples. I can also give some indication of whether my plans have worked out as I hoped. One thing I am sure of is that it is better to have a plan than to try to breed winners without one.

**Pair Number One.**

. This pair set out to add greater length to an imported cock bird which was very strong in feather quality but short in body. He was mated to a greygreen hen which is very long and solid in body, but very poor in spots. Her mother was very well spotted and I know that she produces a number of off- spring carrying her body shape. She is also split for greywing and I know that the cock carried English clearwing. The mating resulted in six chicks; two greywing greygreen cocks and four normal light green hens. All of the chicks show the desired solid body shape and one of the hens has excellent feather around the head. The overall standard of the chicks is very high.

**Pair Number Two:**

This pairing set out to give greater impact to the family of birds descended from an imported Erie Lane bird. This bird is very stylish and has everything in proportion. He is what the English call a 'yellow feathered' bird. He was mated to an opaline skyblue hen with very strong spots and head features. The results have shown that the Lane bird produces chicks which are very like their father in stylishness. It remains to be seen if they will moult out with greater impact in feather, mask and spots.

**Pair Number Three:**

The imported birds from Mrs Angela Moss have produced a number of outstanding descendants. Last year the best daughter was mated back to her father and two outstanding cock birds were bred. The cock in pair three is one of those cocks. He has length, substance and balance, but he lacks showi-ness in his deportment. He was mated to a hen which had won best young normal in an open show and had all the presence and impact you would hope for. The young appear to have com- bined the best from both sides, but I'll have to wait until they moult through to judge their feather quality. I could go on to cover all my matings, but you will see what I mean when I say each mating has a purpose. I am always thinking of the potential for next breeding season.

**Other Matings**

Other matings this season have included two half brother / half sister matings from Eric Lane birds aimed at bringing to the surface any recessive features that may be carried in this family. I have also mated the Lane cock to his best daughter in the hope of breeding something even better. Most of the other matings have been aimed to combine more impact in the feather around the head, mask and spot areas of the birds with the style that the best birds have. It was obvious that the winning birds at national level are high impact birds and our best Tasmanian show birds did not have the necessary power in comparison.