

Anna Katherine Nicholas' fourth of the five key words in the vocabulary of a dog show judge is Soundness, and unlike the other terms that had quite specific meanings, the use of this word is fraught with ambiguities. It is not unusual for dog people to give a slight twist to the meaning of ordinary words - but these words then take on a special meaning, well-understood by themselves. The various meanings attributed to soundness by dog fanciers was brought to my attention this past summer when I was exhibiting my puppy, Punky, at a local match. She had won her class, breed, and group and had just left the ring after competing, unsuccessfully, for Best Puppy in Match. A well-known AKC judge of non-sporting dogs whose husband, also an AKC judge, had just awarded Best Puppy to another dog, approached and asked permission to examine Punky. I gladly obliged. After the examination, she remarked on how well she liked my puppy, exclaiming, "She's really very sound. Many Dalmatians competing in the show ring today are not, you know!" I left, feeling quite proud, but not quite sure what this compliment really meant. I knew the dictionary meaning of soundness, but couldn't be certain that was what was meant. By the dictionary, soundness means freedom from disease, flaw or defect, but it seemed not to have the right connotation in this case, especially since most Dals in the show ring can certainly be assumed free from disease.

When I got home, I turned to Anna Katherine Nicholas' book, *The Nicholas Guide to Dog Judging*, where I read: Soundness refers to freedom from disability. It is the word most used to describe the manner in which dogs gait. A dog traveling correctly in accordance with its breed requirements is habitually referred to as a sound dog, though it might be more specific to say that such a dog is a good mover or typical in action.¹

I took this as the meaning that the judge wished to convey, since I was aware that my puppy, for whatever faults she might possess, was a competent mover, reaching and tracking better than any puppy I had previously owned. But, I wasn't absolutely sure. . .

The AKC lexicon defines soundness as the state of mental and physical health when all organs and faculties are complete and functioning normally, each in its rightful relation to the other.²

Spira defines soundness as referring to construction, both physical and mental, that enables a dog to carry out those duties for which it was originally designed. A sound dog, by definition, is one not only physically capable of work, but also one possessing the willingness to perform it. Defining anatomical soundness is a relatively simple task Gauging an animal's mental aptitude in the show ring is another matter entirely: working and/or obedience tests may be necessary to establish it satisfactorily.³

De Prisco and Johnson provide a similar definition stating that soundness refers to physical and mental well being. A dog is said to be physically sound when it can perform well the task(s) for which the breed is intended, i.e., sledge pulling, guard work, etc. For house dogs, or purely pets, soundness can be defined as a dog that is free from disease, has good nutrition, and is well constructed. Mental soundness is a dog's willingness and ability to execute the task(s) for which the breed is intended. Thus, the dog's ability enables it to cope with the mental stress presented to it during the execution of the task(s). For house dogs, mental soundness includes an even temperament, good intelligence, and an overall contented attitude.⁴

So there we have it, four different sources and four somewhat different definitions, only the first of which specifically calls out proper gait while the other three lean more toward the health and fitness attributes. Now a dog certainly needs to be physically healthy and fit to move properly, but the converse does not hold since many healthy and fit dogs are abysmally poor movers. Hence, we are truly left with distinctly diverse usages of the term soundness. The most prominent (by sheer count of references) meaning parallels the usual dictionary definition which is where I started out. The minority opinion holds with the use of the term to connote proper movement.

At this point, I am inclined to side with the minority regarding the meaning to be attributed to the judge in discussing my puppy's merits. However, to be sure, next time I might rather discreetly, so as not to appear the complete novice, ask for clarification.



*An obviously sound Dalmatian enjoying a seaside romp.
photo from Canine Lexicon by DePrisco and Johnson.*

¹Nicholas, Anna Katherine, *The Nicholas Guide to Dog Judging*, Howell Book House, 1989, p 22.

²AKC, *The Complete Dog Book*, 16th ed., Howell Book House, 1980, p 761.

³Spira, Harold R., *Canine Terminology*, Howell Book House, 1982, p 123.

⁴DePrisco, Andrew and James B. Johnson, *Canine Lexicon*, T.F.H. Publications, 1993, p 773.