

THOUGHT WORTHY COMMENTS ON SAINTS

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The Saint Bernard is a working dog. In the working group his function is to pull. His legendary lifesaving exploits are true (except for the press agent's brandy cask) but incidental to his principal function. His muscle and his acute senses of smell and hearing have made him adaptable as a hunting dog, herdsman, watchman, and the one who keeps hawks away from the chickens. He will even chase cats away from a mouse.

Nevertheless, his principal function is to pull. On a pound for pound ratio he can pull ten times his own weight, or somewhat better than a Percheron, which indicates evolution did a good job of machine designing.

I was whelped in Iowa, too late to see the turn of the century decades when the Saint was the farmers' dog-of-all-work and chore boy. At that time the Saint was the most numerous of all breeds, because the most generally useful. Nowadays, we pet them, adore them, feed them, and don't give them enough work to do. They want to work.

Come to the middle west with me in memory. A draft animal stands tall in the rear until he is pulling. Then he digs in and drops under the load. At full load, his back is straight and level. Try driving an empty hay wagon. The back ends of those Percherons looms high before you. As the wagon is filled, the Percherons backsides ... drops, same for Belgians, Clydesdales, or mules ... same as for any draft animal. A machines analogy is a properly designed station wagon which sets high in the back and drives clumsily until it is loaded.

Many judges object to the high behind in a Saint Bernard, therefore the handlers learn to stretch the legs back into an impossible posture. There are styles in these matters. Shepherds are taught to crouch, are being shown lower and lower. Apparently this posture is supposed to signify readiness to attack or something. Many hunting dogs are also being shown lower and lower. The reason escapes me completely.

A working dog, in my opinion, should be elevated in terms of the work he is supposed to do. For instance, the Newfoundland was bred for water rescue. He is relatively long coupled and has a layer of fat, for long distance swimming in cold water. He is a better swimmer than the Saint, who is shorter coupled, heavier boned and hard muscled, all characteristics better suited to a draft animal than a swimmer. We swim with our Saints, and have to teach them not to rescue us, but at best they have low buoyancy and swim clumsily.

That is only one small example among the scores of breeds. Many judges will now cheerfully shoot me on sight. Short of an actual pulling contest, I want a Saint to stand, run, and look as if he were ready, able and willing to pull.