

AN EXERCISE IN SELECTION

with Steve Dace

For a few years now I have been invited to my pal Steve Dace's house to 'go through the birds' and offer an opinion on the current year's crop. Let me tell you, with the amount of birds Steve breeds (or has bred in the past), this is no easy task but an enjoyable one all the same.

I'm sure you'd agree that it's a great social part of the hobby looking at your mates' birds and vice versa - often with a beer, a brew or something savoury if you are lucky! But I'm one of those people who has the camera permanently attached to my face, which I'm sure is frustrating. So I'm often caught between trying to savour the moment whilst also attempting to capture it on film; this making for quite a challenge.

Although Steve has kept many breeds and varieties of poultry over the years, his main love is the Silver Laced Wyandotte, so naturally most of the assessment has taken place in the Laced Wyandotte pens. And sorting them out hasn't been easy, but it has been very gratifying for Steve to watch his flocks improve as he's become more selective over the years.

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Being a quick learner, Steve knew years ago what 'type' he was aiming for in his Laced Wyandottes, and

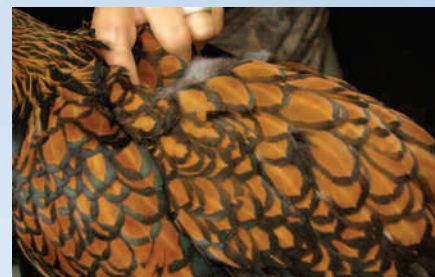
admits: "They always look great running around on the deck - until you pick them up, that is." And I can sympathise with him on this: I've been there many times when that 'superstar' on grass has let itself down badly with something or other in the hand.

I have seen Steve's face drop when I've noticed something he's missed, but also his stubbornness when he's seen something in a bird that I'm pushing as 'a good'un' and how he won't relent: the bird in question is showing a fault so is not a grade A contender for show or the breeding pen.

And with Steve having blended and made his strains from a mixture of English and Continental blood, it goes to prove that 'selection' towards the ideal goal is no easy road to take. Many things are brought to the surface - some good, but many bad points. And Steve has witnessed firsthand how difficult it is to maintain strains of exhibition Wyandottes. We can all get lucky one year with a breeding pen that 'worked out.' But building on that, let alone maintaining it, can be extremely challenging.

Frustration with Laced

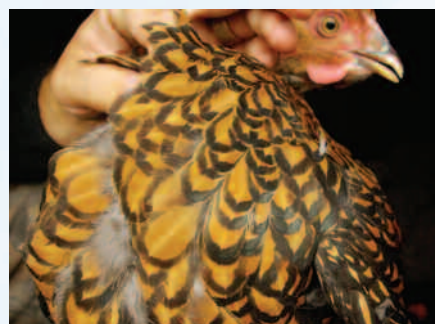
I would happily proffer that the perfect exhibition Silver Laced Wyandotte is a complete hybrid - from a colour perspective - within its status as a 'true-breeding' variety. You may produce that ideal bird, and it will likely be regarded as 'exhibition male or female' line. But try reproducing it, determining the



■ This pullet shows signs of shaftiness, but also that she hasn't been through the final developing moult, and this is evident with the narrow feathers Steve is pointing to in the centre of the back



■ Not good! If your Gold Laced Wyandottes start trying to turn into Barnevelders after a moult, you definitely don't want to keep them!



■ This Gold Laced pullet shows rather bad shaftiness as well as fringing. But how much of a big deal should it be?



■ This pullet was better for leg colour, but her legs were a little 'square' and she had slight webbing fluff



■ Large Gold Laced Wyandottes ready to be sorted through. Decent leg colour for a start?



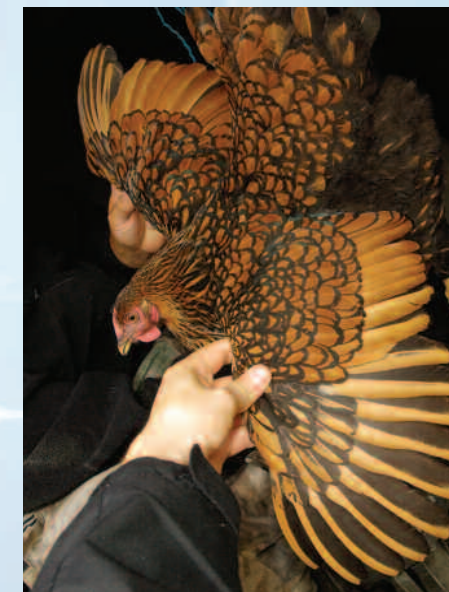
■ This Gold Laced pullet, while having not fully moulted out her juvenile tail feathers, shows many undesirable points: inconsistent wing covert lacing, deficiency in black pigment in the primaries, and white in the secondaries and primaries. Not a good specimen!



■ A bit lemony in the neck, but this may be acceptable. The back feathering is nice and wide with no signs of moss, and reasonable in terms of only slight 'shaftiness' rather than really obvious lighter feather shafts. The thigh lacing is too dark



■ This pullet was a good Gold Laced female, aside from her disappointing legs which were a little pale and showing signs of feather stubs



■ This Gold Laced pullet was deemed to have near-perfect wing markings: excellent saturation of black on the primary feathers, laced coverts and a lack of moss on the secondaries - a pleasing sight for Laced Wyandotte breeders



■ Assessing the breast feathers on this potential show cockerel



■ This male was a 'show hopeful' until the opening of his wings revealed too much white on the primary feathers. A shame because he was quite respectable otherwise, although he did display slight nicotine on the back and a smallish comb



■ The leader of the pack. This male (bantam) was the dominant one and obviously had a better-developed comb and wattles than the rest of his cohort. His wattles are equal and his eye colour is reasonable. His comb also has some work and the leader is almost right. It follows the line of the head but could do with being a few mil lower. The comb could be a little wider too.



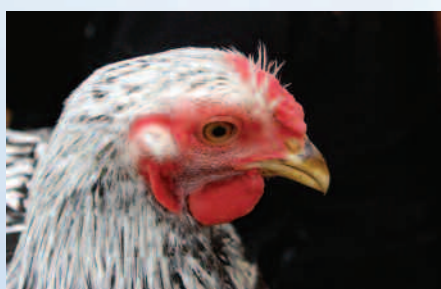
■ Compared to many of the females examined, this one could be termed as 'reasonable' when it comes to wing markings, but she is far from perfect. She also has rather heavy neck markings



■ Moss - the 'scourge of the Laced Wyandottes.' This can happen when pullets go through their first adult moult, but definitely should be disregarded in pullets



■ Assessing the breast feathers of this potential show pullet



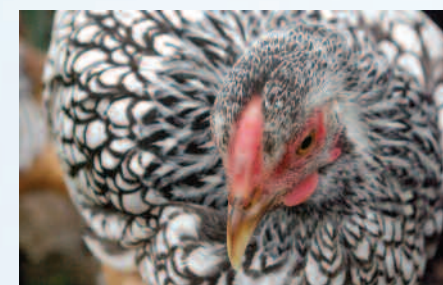
■ A promising bantam male in terms of eye and beak colour. The comb is reasonable but could be twice the size



■ This bantam male's comb has no discernible 'work' and is more like a slug. Not a good look! And not even desirable as a 'pullet-breeder' with a leader that stumpy



■ A bantam pullet with an 'acceptable' comb. At least it's not ingrown. The eye colour is a little light and the beak certainly needs a trim!



■ This bantam female's comb has an ingrown leader and is no good. Little is known about the fault, but it should be avoided like the plague. Hoping that they 'pop out' is just asking for trouble. Breeding them in will just breed them on



■ This bantam male's comb is slightly off-centre, and while it shows a degree of work, the leader is rather non-existent, and what is present is rounded off and split. Not a good comb on this one!

perfect breeding partner for it, and keeping the line going without it showing extremities towards one direction or the other (whilst at the same time retaining the necessary vigour), and you've really got a challenge on your hands.

Mediocrity will breed true

You could argue that 'Silver Laced does breed true!' which is a statement of fact as far as Silver Laced producing Silver Laced goes, but when you want that elusive 'best of show' winner, you are really dealing with things on a whole other level. It's more a case of balancing and complementary mating, and knowing which birds will work together.

Because we want a perfectly Laced bird as well as perfect wing markings, we make it near on impossible for ourselves. When I say 'mediocrity breeds true,' I mean that you can get a certain plumage type to breed true within the confines of the 'Silver Laced' umbrella - as long as you are willing to accept the downsides.

So what are the downsides? I'm sure anyone who's ever bred Silver Laced (female line) would agree that it's easy to get good wing markings - flights with the right amount of black saturating nicely in the broader part of the feather - if you're willing to accept birds with heavier thigh lacing, and these tend to breed true. Conversely, it's easy to breed birds with good thigh lacing if you're willing to make a sacrifice in the wing

markings (lack of black). These also breed true. But in my view, that 'best of show' winner will be a complete hybrid between the aforementioned examples, which is why breeding Silver Laced is not for the fainthearted.

Uphill challenge

And the above just highlights a couple of the challenges that come with Laced Wyandottes. There are many more, one of which is 'moss' - what I call 'the scourge of the Laced Wyandottes' and ruins many otherwise-good-birds. It usually occurs after a moult and on the back feathers of females, but if you have it in the first year then forget it - that bird is no use as a pullet-breeder!

"You just never know what each judge will go for. Some are far stricter than others when it comes to certain faults"

- Steve Dace

Another fault is 'fringing' which tends to happen on the lower throat / upper breast area and shows itself as an additional outer, thinner edge over the black lacing - and is invariably the colour of the interior of the feather. Speaking to Steve about this issue, he said: "You just never know what each

judge will go for. Some are far stricter than others when it comes to certain faults," which is understandably frustrating for breeders, as they never fully know how to regard each specimen on site. But you could argue, to a point, that this is true of all breeds and varieties; not every judge will agree on what constitutes a bad fault.

That perfect bird

Laced Wyandotte breeders are owed much credit for their hard work and persistence in trying to get the plumage right alone, never mind 'type' or any of the other attributes required in a top specimen.

And you could argue that 'type' is just a prerequisite before markings are even considered, and also that faults can just be selected against so should be weeded out quite easily. But we all know it's not as easy as that. How many Fanciers can you think of alone that suddenly had a new fault cropping up one year? How many have you had, despite your line being highly selected?

So the next time you see a Silver Laced Wyandotte that has won its class (or even the whole show), you will know how much effort its owner has put into getting it right, the skill and patience required, and you may even feel it appropriate to doff your hat (if you wear one). And the good news is that persistence pays off. Credit where it's due!



■ 20-week-old Silver Laced Wyandotte bantam pullets to be sorted through. The difference in thigh and neck lacing between specimens is already evident