

WING CARRIAGE - LENGTH OR STRENGTH?

by Matt McCammon, originally published in the March, 2012 Poultry Press

During the Club meeting at Indianapolis 2011, Judge Jamie Matts gave a synopsis of the class of Cochin bantams. The one area he faulted in most cases was the prevalence of weak or poor wings, especially in males. That has been a problem for years, as is evident in this reprint of an article I had written for the Club Newsletter in 2002. The article was entitled "Length or Strength":

"Length or Strength"

"In the past few weeks, I have attended large Cochin meets at Lucasville, Ohio and Columbus, Ohio. At both of these shows, I was able to view some of the nicest Cochins in existence today. I was also able to speak and listen to some of the most knowledgeable breeders of Cochins. It is my humble opinion that the biggest problem or defect facing the Cochin bantam today is wing carriage. I took the opportunity these shows offered to get some ideas and opinions from breeders from all sections of the country. I would like to share some of these with the membership.

It seems that not all breeders agree that wing carriage is a problem. Some feel the lower than usual carriage is due to the profuseness of the feather, especially in males. They prefer to have excess fluff and don't worry as much about the angle of wing carriage. Others feel that the wing carriage is a problem, but not everyone agrees how to correct it. I strongly feel it is the main problem facing Cochins, so I will share some of the various ways that breeders suggest solving the problem.

Some claim that the problem is a conditioning issue more or less. They claim that increasing the height of the roosts or raising the height of the waterers as chicks are growing will strengthen the muscles in the wings of the birds; thus creating better, tighter wing carriage. Others claim that the problem lies not with the strength of the wing but with the length of the primary wing feather. Birds that have primaries that are too long are not able to fold the wing up properly into a tight bundle. Therefore, portions of the wing hang loose out of this bundle or package and cover thigh feathering that should be so prominent. So which is it, the length or the strength?

I am not certain which it is, or if either one is a possibility. I have taken notice, though, that females of all varieties have better carriage than males. If the problem has its roots in conditioning, would not the females and males share this problem equally? I do notice that within the mottled males I have, some have longer primaries than others. I have done some data gathering. After measuring the lengths of the primaries at various ages of development, I have waited to see if the birds with shorter primaries had tighter wing carriage. The results as of now are inconclusive. (See update at end of article.)

I only keep birds that have wings that will “snap” back when opened. Still, though, these birds can tend to carry their wings too low as adults. I would tend to agree more with the length of feather argument. This makes the most sense to me. I have also read in old Cochin yearbook articles that breeders of old watched the length of the feathers on the feet closely. One suggested that foot feathers that are too long go hand in hand with wing feathers that are too long also. This, he writes, will lead to an “open wing”. I believe our wing carriage problem is just what he was warning about.

If the problem does lie with the long primary feathers, the only way to correct it is through selective breeding. This will take a concerted effort on the part of all breeders. Hopefully, this article will spark some healthy discourse and suggestions. This Club is blessed with some of the most knowledgeable and dedicated breeders in the poultry world. Let’s consider these possible solutions and share ideas with others. Together, we can further perfect the beautiful Cochin bantam!”

UPDATE: Ten years have passed now, and I can say that the wing carriage on my mottled males has improved dramatically. To me, the wing carriage looks similar to those Schilling drawings I have kept in my barn that depict the desired wing carriage. I think I was on to something with the measuring of the primaries, and I continue it to this day. I have also had the opportunity to examine some of the best large fowl Cochins being bred, and I was amazed how short and wide the large fowl’s primaries are! No long, pointed narrow feathers. Only short, thick, rounded blunt feathers. Keeping notice of these finer points of our breed will only make them better and better.

