Very few subjects can elicit as hot a debate among Ridgeback fanciers as color. The role color plays in the value of the dog, the wording in the original Standard, and the frequent changes in wording over the years reveal a great deal about the way the breeders and judges perceived changes in color. The wording in the original Standard revealed that no other section of the written Standard had been altered as much, with as much dramatic effect, as that about color. If we examine the history of the Ridgeback, much can be learned regarding color and the role personal preferences and urban legends have had in altering the original Khoikhoi dog.

In 1652, Kolben recorded his impressions of the Cape of South Africa. He tells us about the native Khoikhoi or bushmen dogs and says the "white chest" in color only refers to a patch of short, bristle-like white hairs mainly in the Ridgeback are recorded in the 1700s, the 1800s, and over tups through the 1900s. In fact, Major T C Hawley refers to his first Ridgeback, obtained in 1939, as being "mouse-colored." You can look at the current-day Thai Ridgeback and know the Khoikhoi dog probably looked like, as both color and physique closely resemble the descriptions of the bushmen dog.

Vast infusions of imported European breeds greatly altered the appearance and color of the bushmen dogs. Utilizing the dogs they brought with them, the Europeans bartered or purchased bushmen dogs, because they greatly admired their hunting and guarding capabilities. However, they did not care for their color. The mouse-like coloring was disliked and never in favor with the European breeders. The black, bluish white, and red are all colors introduced via a wide variety of European breeds.

It is interesting to note the gray color first noted in the native dog is not included in the original Standard, nor is it apparent that this native color of our breed was ever considered to be acceptable. Though very rare, we still see gray puppies born in purebred Ridgeback litters.

The original Standard was drafted in 1924 and accepted by the South African Kennel Union (now the Kennel Union of South Africa, KUSA - Ed.) in 1926. As it was then written, color was defined as "Brindles, fawns, sable, whole colours or mixed with white." A wide variety of colors were present and acceptable, with the exception of gray.

The first alteration to color in the standard occurred in 1931, six years after KUSA accepted the breed. The color section read, "Wheaten and fawn preferable, whole colours, or with white points." Brindle and sable were eliminated. Why brindle and sable were dropped is unclear and will not be pursued in this discussion other than to note occasional brindles still occur in purebred Ridgeback litters. Wheaten was added and stated (with fawn) as preferable and white was changed from "mixed with white points, to "with white points." This change reflects white occurring in the Ridgeback as not mixed with other colors, but occurring as patches or points on the dog.

In 1936, only five years after the first revision, color wording was altered again. It stated, "Wheaten preferred, fawn permissible, white points undesirable." In 1948, the only preferred color and fawn was demoted to permissible. The wording change for the color white now more clearly defined how white occurred on some, but not all, dogs. It can be assumed that judges and breeders alike would see what the Standard intended, and not a change in the way color was done at night. That is why the guarding capabilities of the Ridgebacks were so highly regarded. The urban legend encourages you to believe that the dogs would be easier for predators to locate and kill at night if they had white points. Again, examination of history dispels this theory. Ridgebacks today guard home and family the same way they did then, by hiding from the lanterns blinded the dogs, which cost them their lives.

Modern day science can help understand what really happened. Lions alive incredible night vision, they can see six times better in the dark than we can, and most of their hunting is done at night. That is why the guarding capabilities of the Ridgeback were so highly regarded. The urban legend encourages you to believe that the dogs would be easier for predators to locate and kill at night if they had white points. Again, examination of history dispels this theory. Ridgebacks today guard home and family the same way they did then, by sounding the alarm when something is amiss and if necessary dealing with the problem. Camouflage and sneaking up on the intruder are not part of the Ridgeback Repertoire. In her book The Rhodesian Ridgeback, Indaba, Janet Murray interviewed older breeders who helped establish the breed in Africa and subsequently around the world. She has this to say about their responses to limiting white: "When I discussed this with some of the older breeders, they suggested that it was not, as later enthusiasts believed, because of the danger of lack of camouflage of the hunting dog on the hunt, but rather to avoid the amount of white acceptable becoming so great that albinism would become a problem as it was with the Boxer dogs, and with some lines of Dalmatians." Fear of albinism initiated the changes to white, not the inability to camouflage during the hunt!

Major T C Hawley, whose book The Rhodesian Ridgeback, is the pinnacle for our breed and who helped establish many of our foundation kennels, has stated that "it is my firm conviction that we shall rue the day that we shall have succeeded in totally eliminating white. One of the important factors in the color white is a single factor, which could simply be pencilled out. Its occurrence in the best dogs yet produced is too significant to escape mention...We are unanimous that it should be kept at a minimum, but we must at all costs avoid a fetish that white is a taboo."

He is not the only foundation breeder who warns against eliminating white. In proceedings from the International Symposium of the Rhodesian Ridgeback and published in The Ridgeback July/August 1996, Miss L Venter states that both the Bococks of Gazeley Kennels and Mr Howard of Rockridge Kennels in Africa emphasized the significance of keeping white or "forever losing something of great value to the breed."

We have learned regarding color and the role personal preferences and urban legends have had in altering the original Khoikhoi dog. The urban legend encourages you to believe that the dogs would be easier for predators to locate and kill at night if they had white points. Again, examination of history dispels this theory. ridgebacks today guard home and family the same way they did then, by hiding from the lanterns blinded the dogs, which cost them their lives.

The complex association of genes places divergent and diverse coloration on our dogs. Modern science presents a much more important reason for our dogs to be more than just red. Genetic diversity is why color variety should be kept, including the return of wheaten, liver-nosed and white.

Every day new markers are found to identify carriers of genetic defects in humans and animals. These markers are found on the genes that are part of the DNA's double helix that defines each of us and describes in minute detail how to produce new generations. Part of the benefit of these advances in science is the ability to examine the breadth of our gene pool.

If we examine only the color portion of the gene pool in Ridgebacks, you would see an alarming trend. We have eliminated gray (the original color) brown, brindle, sable, fawn, black, and white. This solid black phenotype is being attempted to create true wheaten, liver-nosed and white. Each colour we have eliminated carries with it more than just the information for color. The complex association of genes places divergent and frequency limited can associate and interfere with these locations. With each color eliminated, we have also inadvertently removed characteristics of which we are not aware.

If you consider that we have eliminated virtually 80% of our colors, then we have discarded many possibly desired but unknown genes.

What we can do today is understand the importance of genetic diversity and the role color has in keeping genetic diversity. We can stop the urban legends regarding color and teach our novice breeders and judges that wheaten and white are not supposed to die out but that the dog should be judged fairly. Balance, type, structure, movement and the ridge are more important than color.


About the Author. Jillyn Myers has been involved in Ridgebacks for 15 years. She has bred three litters and finished nine dogs. She is a member of the Bocock of Gazeley Kennels. Her research for this paper was inspired by the study of the Rhodesian Ridgeback's history. She has written about the breed in several journals. She is a member of the RRCUS.