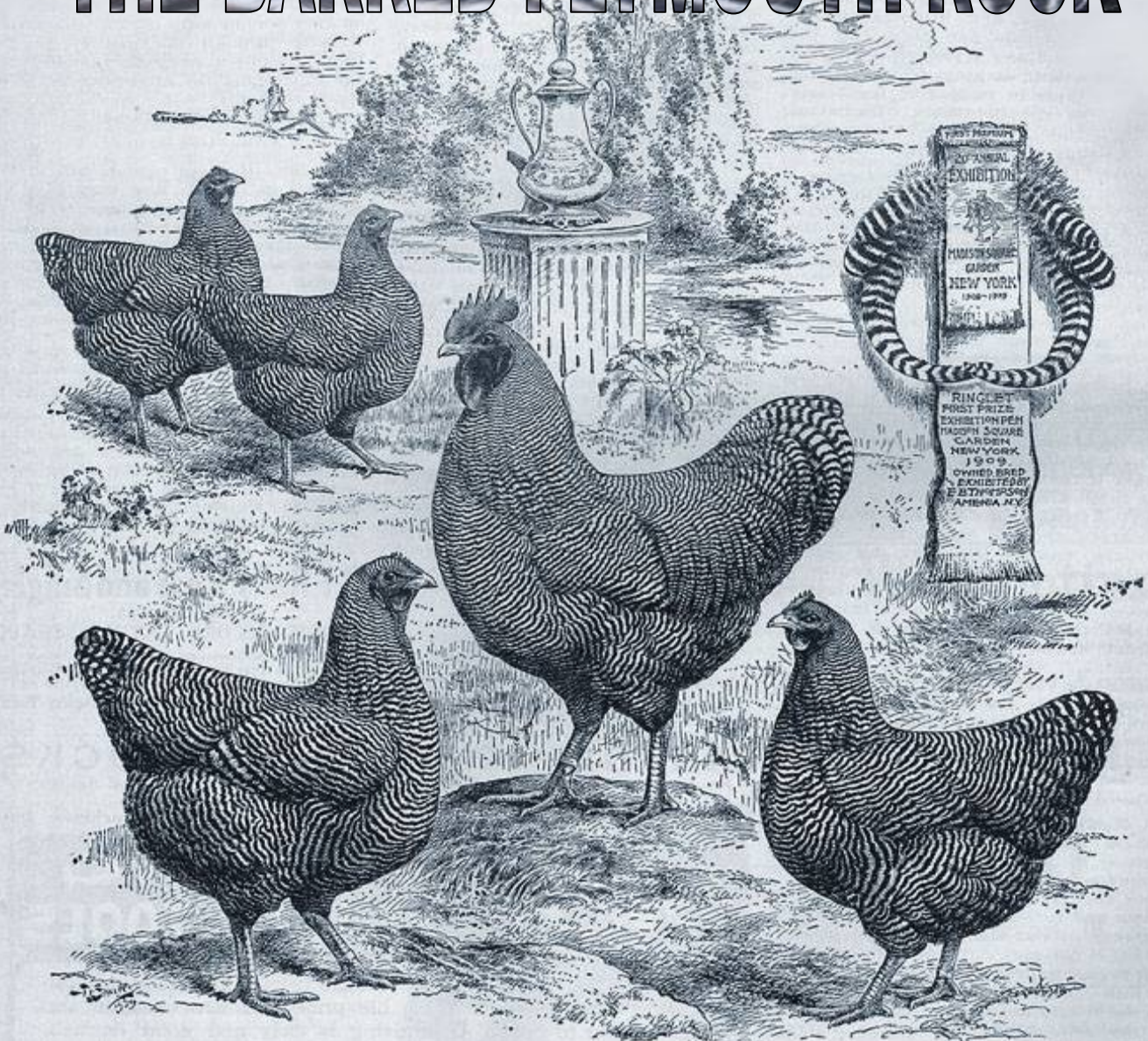


THE BARRED PLYMOUTH ROCK



Old drawing by F.L. Sewell, USA, 1909.

THE BARRED PLYMOUTH ROCK

By: Volker Lortz (Germany)

I am pleased to take the opportunity to write an article on the Plymouth Rock breed. For over thirty years I now accompanied the fortunes of this Breed in Germany right from the beginning the beauty of this breed held me under its spell which has lasted to this date. Of course it is natural as young breeders to be fired with enthusiasm for improvement of a breed and winning prizes, you will want to equal or exceed the achievements of other top exhibitors and when we are honest, the winning of a Prize (Band) of Honour at a National Show in Germany is enough stimulation to push one forward to more success.

But all in its own time; age and experience brings a certain logic and sensibility. Once all the Titles are won, the main concern is the maintenance and improvement of a Breed or rather more simply put, to preserve it for the next Generation.

Breed Qualities

The path to success are almost always the same in each breed, but I will come to that in the course of this article. First, however, I would like to introduce the breed and its main characteristic to the readers, in the hope of stimulating more interest and curiosity in this wonderful poultry breed.

For any fancier in search of a new breed, the appearance is in most cases a decisive role in the selection. Only on second look, is the nature and behavior of a chicken breed more evident to the budding breeder.

With its unique defined coloration and markings the Plymouth Rocks delights at first sight but also the character and temperament plays a major role. When handled calmly and with confidence this breed is extremely trusting and easy to manage, responding with good behaviour in the Hen House. I will not hide the fact however that occasionally the odd cockerel will defend his hens and territory against his keeper, however uncomfortable this may be, it is a sign that as a rule the cockerel will possess good fertility.



With the Plymouth Rock we are dealing with a dual purpose breed, one where the hens should be expected to produce a satisfactory supply of eggs, and a good and relatively fast maturing flesh production especially in the males; however both sexes should be able to supply the household with a good supply of tasty flesh.

Left: A group of 6 month old pullets with nice even barring.

Right: Young Cockerels, three powerful boys with good breed characteristics.

Breed typical characteristics

First we will talk about the typical breed features and the evaluation and selection for breeding.

The particular form/shape should conform to the breed ideal, that's very important, an individual breed feature if you will.



This breed silhouette must be instantly recognizable for the breed.

The rump is a raised rectangle and this shape is the basis of the typical Plymouth Rock form. The chest is well-rounded and full; when this roundness is missing the animal will look triangular. For this typical look the cocks have more difficulty than the hens, so always pay attention to a long sternum in the selection of breeding cocks. Here one should not make any big compromise. A deep chest like the broiler types should not be sought, as this would lose the Breed elegance.

The topline starts after the full hackle as the lowest point of the top line and goes up slowly and evenly to the base of full tail where the highest point is reached just before the tail an approximate 18° angle, but this reference is only for technically interested for breeders; please do not start measuring angles and lengths! The contours of the back should follow the gradient. From the side view this line should not be interrupted. The sight of a perfect back line, full of elegance and grace should be typical of the Plymouth Rock. From above a good width is required across the shoulders, which tapers as little as possible to the tail.

To achieve the above-mentioned squareness, an appropriate body length is of course a prerequisite; this is actual body length, not the appearance of length given by the sickle feathers.

Right: 3 week old chick.

Below: The slow development of the feathers is totally normal in the barred variety.



Ideally the tail should form a roof shape, almost completely covered by the saddle feathers. Loose hanging, open tail or tail feathers growing in flat are incorrect, a fault with unfortunately quite a few cockerels. Often the main tail feathers are not the correct number, uneven, or incorrectly positioned, in this case the sickles are lacking the support of the main tail feathers.

Years ago there were no males with perfect tail. Now-a-days, cockerels of top breeders may be seen at every one the big shows with excellent tails. This

breed characteristic is not yet deeply rooted in all strains/breeding lines; so many young cocks still do not meet these demands.

In front and behind the leg the body must be clearly visible, only this way is a good underline possible, failure in this point and the body form resembles a triangle, not a square and is untypical for the Breed. The body feather and underline behind the legs forms an upward sloping line to the under tail feathers. The most beautiful, or should I say the most Standard correct Rump is of little



value without a free and horizontal stance. For this, medium length legs are wanted with distinct thighs, not hidden in long loose soft feathering; this is untypical for a Rock and should not be tolerated either with the Hen and certainly not with the cockerel. The leg colour is a deep yellow colour, when this feature is firmly fixed in a breeding line there will be no fading of the leg colour. Any other colour legs, either flesh colour, wheat green or dark colour, are faults and should be strictly de-selected.

Above: One of the chicken house outside, here the cockerels can crow as much as they like. There are no chickens kept here during winter.

Right: Coops and runs at home in the backyard, with the pullets. During winter this is used as an accommodation of the breeding pens.



The Head Points

The head points of the Barred Plymouth Rock are very imposing and vary considerably from the other colours in the Rock 'Family'. The Comb is broad and not too high (large) and in surface structure has seemingly large 'pearling' rather than fine. The comb points are broad at the base and not too deep. The blade of the comb should follow the line of the neck without touching the neck or going upwards; creases, lumps and other unwanted irregularities reduce the worth of the animal appreciably.



The Ear and Throat wattles should match the relative small head and be only small to medium size. Ideally the throat wattles should not have any creases, a small longitudinal crease should not be too critically evaluated but horizontal creases are another thing and not tolerated and better not to present to any Judge who would heavily penalize such a fault.

Left: Head study of a young pullet with super head points and the typical expressive look of a healthy bird.

Right: Good head points, I have seen better wattles though, these are a bit wrinkled up from the bottom.

The Beak is powerful and well curved, yellowish colour in the Male, for the Hen, partly yellow with darker pigmentation. The Eye colour is red to orange and the eye surround lightly raised, the overall impression is reminiscent of a bird of prey, this is inherited from their distant ancestors from the Asiatic poultry breeds. This gives an added vital look to the Breed.



The Colour

Alongside the form (shape) often the Colour and Marking will be decided over success or failure.

I will say in advance there are no few characteristics that will determine this.

On one hand it is nice to be able to select animals early but when this is done there may be few animals remaining on which to build your further breeding. Here we are dealing with the Plymouth Rock, a breed with the most defined and contrasting barred markings in the poultry world. The breeder has a duty to maintain and improve this characteristic. To this end such early selection might not be the best choice.

The barring consists of a black ground colour with a white stripe, this is important and everyone should remember this whenever the talk is over barring in the Plymouth Rock. Forget completely all the fantasy descriptions over colour such as 'sky-blue', blue-grey and such; the actuality is as stated, the stripe is white. On the Hen only the last stripe or bar is there for us to see; what for us is seemingly blue-grey, is in fact only the black ground colour of the underlying feather showing through, optically this changes the white of the bar to appear blue-grey or however you may wish to describe it. In effect an optical illusion.

The barring crosses the feather in an exact straight line over the same coloured feather shaft; the deep black ground colour must be distinctly divided from the white and not blending into one another. The proportions of black ground colour versus white stripe, is with the cock 1:1 so each with the same width, with the hen (female) 2:1 or even 3:1, so 2 or 3 parts ground colour versus 1 white.

Often the Fancier or Judge will talk about the narrow stripes (barring) of the Plymouth Rock, this has often happened to me, this expression is however not exactly correct, why? Let us look closely at the cock, here we should recognize a failure in thinking. The cock should have 1:1 equal width, black-white; if a narrow stripe was wanted that would mean the ground colour would be broader and this would be incorrect. So logically when we are talking about a narrow stripe we just mean the narrow white band, and it is the narrow white band together with the ground colour that makes the complete feather marking.

The Marking must be distinctly seen through to the under feather and the end of each feather end in a black tip. The black end stripe gives harmony and a smooth effect to the overall markings; when seen from a distance the Barring Plymouth Rock should appear to be evenly marked over the complete body. A totally even effect on all parts of the bird is however not possible, according to

the varying breadth of feather on varying parts of the bird, such as the neck feathers, flights, or saddle feathers etc.



Left to right: Hen feather, cock feather, down feather. Photo AE.

When trying to improve the overall composition of the markings however, the ideal breadth of feather should not be sacrificed, that would be false and illogical. We should learn from the breeding efforts of the past. In the 1950's fanciers tried to breed birds with the finest barring on each and every feather. This could not succeed, as it sacrificed the breath of feather, vitality and the quick and healthy feathering of young birds. This was also the time when the Plymouth Rock cocks would have virtually no main tail feathers to support the tail.



Left: Flight feathers; a good example of good barring on the primaries, secondaries and wing coverts and note the super broad feathers.

The maintenance of the correct optimal markings is an ongoing process that should always be steered in the right direction. The pairing of 'just a few' good looking animals could often lead to deterioration in the required markings in the offspring. Because of this it is enormously helpful to look at the colour variations in the two sexes.

With the Cuckoo there are three colour variations. First, the so called Pale Cuckoo; he has a ground colour that is almost pale grey, and in the hackle, saddle markedly paler than the mantle feathering. The underfeather is not always completely marked and the two main sickle feathers towards the feather base fall almost completely in colour.

At the Shows you would not see such birds in any winning position and also as breeding stock is to be used with caution.

Second is the Dark Cuckoo; the ground colour is a deep black, supposedly the ideal wanted, however on the saddle and hackles you will find a brown or copper colour shading, also the distinction between the ground colour and the individual markings (barring) is not as good as desired and it often comes to a blending of the markings into one another.

In the winning list these Males also have no place.

However as breeding stock these cocks when paired to pale hens can bring needed colour reserve into the offspring.



Left:
Young cockerels; the head points are already well formed but the feather still needs some patience.

Below:
Young Hens; these hens are not yet finished in their development but some show already the typical Plymouth Form(shape).



The Barred Cock and his Sister

The correct breeding and exhibition cockerel that is the basis of the breeding unit, is the medium coloured cockerel with deep even ground colour and distinct stripes/barring with a ratio of 1:1. He is the guarantee that it comes neither to loss of colour or too much colour. One should always be aware of which hens could match the aforementioned cock. Using the example of a darker cock, we see that the stripe ratio of his sisters automatically will be even a little darker. Flights without a sign of barring, too many pure black feathers or blending of the ground colour and barring are the negative results of this mating.

What can we expect from the sisters of the pale cockerel? For the novice the markings look clear and distinct but the grey ground colour without green sheen is a sure indication of the beginning from loss of colour and often the intensity of the neck feathering is lacking.

From this fairly broad range of faulty colour/marking it is easy to see that pairing will almost always be a matter of compromise. If the ground colour in the breeding line is too weak or dark, it would be sensible and useful to pair to a darker or paler cockerel. But careful; a paler cockerel paired to a darker hen will possibly give a lower percent of correct marked offspring, the larger percentage not passing in the picture of the perfect marking.



Left: This cockerel is a vital fellow and will do well in the breeding pen.

As can be seen, the homozygous cockerel is always slightly paler than the Hen, this is natural and irrefutable law of colour, because of this the basis of the breeding should not be based on the Hen, so much we should have learnt by now.

In the 1930's this was not understood and the distinctly marked but paler hen has often been the basis of a breeding pen. The following result was that the corresponding cockerel was the first to show signs of colour loss in the hackle and saddle feathers. In just a few generations the ground colour failed overall. Then it was very difficult to bring back the lost colour into the breeding stock. In this case it was only by importing dark and intensive coloured cocks from America, the homeland of the breed. There the rule of colour genetics was recognised earlier and the breeding was guided accordingly.

Because of this it is so important the basis of the breeding should be fixed on the medium coloured Cockerel and his sisters and should be acted upon by future generations of Fanciers.

I have worked in my long years as a breeder only with very small breeding groups. When there is more than one hen in the breeding pen, these should be closely related, mother/daughter or sister/aunt etc. In this way the parentage and outcome of the matings was easy to map and which positives and negatives from the respective matings resulted.

Complimentary pairings are often needed in the absence of alternatives and I am not a fan of such pairings, or this method. The variation in the offspring is often too wide with few fulfilling the required breed standard markings or form.



'Good' paired to 'Good' is my preferred strategy, better with a few good ones than too many average stock in the breeding pen.

You do not need many birds, I think 4 Hens is enough, just don't make the failure of only using one cockerel in the breeding plan, 3 or 4 is better, so as to be not so reliant on out crossing too quickly.

Left: A pullet with great breed characteristics, in the photo the back line could be more straight.

Below: An ideal cockerel, unfortunately the photo is a little blurry.



When you breed in such a way and select in the first instance on Vitality (Health) and then select what has been described in the foregoing text, then you can quickly produce a stable and consistent breeding line of Barred Plymouth Rocks.

Sooner or later however you will need to introduce new blood. Here it is recommended that animals are obtained from fanciers that have had animals from your own breeding line and have themselves bred good birds.

Even today I enjoy the daily contact with this wonderful breed and their unique form and markings. Maybe others will also like to try this wonderful breed and I would like to offer my help in obtaining suitable birds to start with. I can be contacted under my email address: volker.lortz58@gmx.de

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