

The Measure of Balance Amongst Dog Breeds

Why do breed standards differ on their definition of balance?

Jacklyn E. Hungerland, Ph.D.

Posted: Thu Jun 23 00:00:00 PDT 2005

Judges and breeders must be careful to adhere to the requirements of the breed standard. But what if the standard gives little or no guidance on the breed's balance, proportion or size? We can't just toss those breeds into a generic framework. Somewhere, hidden in changes that have been made in the standard, there is some sort of indication of what that breed is supposed to be. Since most judges tend not to do the kind of research required to figure that out, judges must rely on breeders who have been involved with a breed for a number of years and who know the breed's history.

Lately I have been concerned about the several different ways in which breed standards call for or define balance in a dog. Inevitably those definitions involve measurements and the relationship between the height of the dog and its length. This relationship is what concerns me.

What is Balance? It's no wonder I have been puzzled. When I turned to Random House Webster's College Dictionary for clarification I found 24 distinct definitions of the simple word "balance." There followed several additional definitions related to specific forms of balance (e.g. "balance sheet").

However, I was able to find definitions that relate to my dilemma, such as: "The harmonious integration of components in an artistic work" (if we refer to our dogs as artistic creations); "To arrange or adjust the parts symmetrically;" "To be equal or proportionate to." It seems to me that the last option applies to breed standard usage.

Even given that definition, there are increasing numbers of times when I ponder the question of how to measure a dog. I don't mean the one most of us know measuring for height from the withers (I hope you know where those are) to the ground. That one's fairly easy; we are trained for that. I am concerned about the measurements that make a dog square or slightly longer than tall or, for that matter, slightly taller than long.

An example of the dilemma might help. The Bouvier des Flandres is supposed to be a square breed. That squareness is measured from the point of the shoulder (the thing sticking out in front of the dog where the shoulder blade and the upper arm meet) to the point of the rump. If by chance the judge in charge is measuring square from the withers to the rump or the withers to the tail set (!), then by the time you add the distance from the withers to the point of shoulder (or the pro-sternum or forechest, whatever your breed standard might call it) and/or the distance from the tail set to the point of the rump or the distance from the withers to the point of the rump, you have an overly long dog. Not just overly long, but absolutely not square! To achieve a square the dog would have to be much taller and would most likely exceed the preferred maximum size of 27 inches at the shoulder.