

· BREED PRIORITIES ·

Irish Setters

by Nikki Riggsbee

This discussion is not intended to promote fault or part judging. Nor is it to imply that any characteristic called for in the standard is unimportant. Judging, and breeding, is about prioritizing and about what the judge or breeder must have and what will be forgiven. Discussing priorities can help in learning how to better evaluate a breed. The AKC Standard is printed at the end of this article.

Questions, Comments, or Concerns? Contact AKC Judge Ms. Nikki Riggsbee at nriggsbee@aol.com

The Irish Setter is one of four Setters competing in regular AKC conformation competition, along with the English Setter, Gordon Setter, and Irish Red and White Setter. With its flowing, silky red coat, the Irish Setter is certainly handsome and eye catching. Its standard says that artists have termed it the most beautiful of all dogs. It further says that it has a rollicking personality and that an outgoing, stable temperament is the essence of the breed. It hunts in the field and is a companion at home. How does one prioritize features to serve multiple functions?

We found 44 Irish Setter breeder-judges, more than expected. We reached 39 to invite to take a survey on their breed's priorities. 31 judges agreed to participate, and 24 of them returned completed surveys.

The participants averaged nearly 43 years in the breed. The breeder-judges have been approved to do so for nearly 19 years on average. Most of the judges have judged their parent club national specialty, and all have judged other Irish Setter specialties.

Irish Setter Virtues

The survey included a list of virtues from the Irish Setter standard for the breeder-judges to prioritize. The list of characteristics is below in sequence by the average of the experts' ranks, with 1 being the most important.

1. Substantial yet elegant in build
2. Upper arm and shoulder blades approximately same length, elbows in line with top of withers
3. Topline firm, incline slightly downward
4. (tie) Gait big, lively, graceful, efficient
4. (tie) Hindquarters wide, powerful, with broad, well developed thighs
6. Head long lean, length at least double width between ears
7. Tail set on nearly level with croup, natural extension of topline
8. Neck moderately long, strong, slightly arched
9. Slightly longer than tall
10. Rollicking personality
11. Chiseling along muzzle, around/below eyes, along cheeks
12. Males masculine, bitches feminine
13. Rich red in color
14. Feet rather small, very firm, toes arched and close
15. Plenty of bone
16. Straight, fine, glossy coat

The greatest agreement, amongst 20 experts, was on "Substantial yet elegant in build" (1st), with eleven putting it in first place. The ratio of substance to elegance in all breeds is important in defining balance in a breed, and balance is consistently a most important

characteristic. (I don't include "Balance" in the survey lists since it would rank first in every survey.)

Nearly as many breeder-judges concurred on "Topline firm, incline slightly downward" (3rd). Topline is often important, both standing and moving, holding the dog together. Close behind in number of experts agreeing was "Straight, fine, glossy coat" (16th), with four surveys placing it at the bottom of the list.

Each of the following virtues were valued similarly on 15 surveys: "Upper arm and shoulder blades approximately same length, elbows in line with top of withers" (2nd); "Rich red in color" (13th); and "Plenty of bone" (15th). "Bone" was in the last quartile by the majority, but nine thought it more important, keeping it off the bottom.

"Neck moderately long, strong, slightly arched" (8th) was in the second quartile for nearly sixty percent, while a third ranked it below average, lowering its place. Fourteen experts placed "Feet rather small, very firm, toes arched and close" (14th) fairly low, with six having it last in the list.

Half the breeder-judges thought "Gait big, lively, graceful, efficient" (tied for 4th) middling important, while a third had it more important. A similar split occurred on "Hindquarters wide, powerful, with broad, well developed thighs" (tied for 4th).

"Head - long, lean, length at least double width between ears" (6th) was mid-point and lower for 11 experts, but a third put it in the top quartile, placing it higher in the list. Eleven had "Males masculine, bitches feminine" (12th) as lesser importance, and the others ranked it all over from first to last.

"Tail set on nearly level with croup, natural extension of topline" (7th) was very important for nine, mid-point and below for another nine, with six putting it towards the bottom. Nine experts ranked "Chiseling along muzzle, around/below eyes, along cheeks" (11th) above average in importance, but the same number put it in the last quartile. "Slightly longer than tall" (9th) had a similar split. "Rolling personality" (10th) was ranked first by four, but the other experts ranked it all over.

Additional input would break the tie at fourth. "Neck length" (8th) and "Slightly longer than tall" (9th) had average ranks slightly more than a tenth of a point apart and could easily swap positions.

Irish Setter Faults

The breeder-judges were also asked to rank a list of faults from most serious to least serious. The faults were either quoted from the standard or derived from it. Below are the faults in sequence by the average placement, with 1 being the most serious.

1. Hostility (of temperament)
2. Shyness, timidity
3. Angulation of forequarters and hindquarters not balanced
4. Structural characteristics which interfere with straight, true stride
5. Hackney gait
6. Coarseness
7. Black in coat
8. Topline not firm
9. Sharp drop at croup

10. Elbows (when moving) in or out
11. Eyes deep set or bulging
12. Neck thick
13. Ears set above eye level
14. Coat with curl or wave
15. Upper lips pendulous
16. Variance (height) beyond (the ideal) an inch up or down

Nearly ninety percent of the breeder-judges placed "Hostility (of temperament)" (1st) in the top three, with 16 ranking it first overall. Almost as many agreed on "Shyness, timidity" (2nd). Often, when temperament is a problem, it is considered the most serious problem. Twenty experts also concurred on "Hackney gait" (5th).

"Upper lips pendulous" (15th) was similarly valued by 19 surveys. Seventeen of the group agreed on the seriousness of "Angulation of forequarters and hind quarters not balanced" (3rd), "Coat with curl or wave" (14th), and "Variance (height) beyond (the ideal) an inch up or down" (16th). A majority of 13 had "Variance (height)" absolutely last.

Two-thirds agreed on how much of a problem "Neck thick" (12th) was. "Ears set above eye level" was in the third quartile for 14, but a third of the group put it in the last. The smallest majorities concurred on "Structural characteristics which interfere with straight, true stride" (4th), "Elbows (when moving) in or out" (10th), and "Eyes deep set or bulging" (11th). Incorrect "Eyes" were below average for the majority, but a third had it more serious.

Half of the breeder-judges thought "Coarseness" (6th) was a mid-range issue, but a third put it in the top quartile which raised its rank. Half had "Sharp drop at croup" (9th) above average in seriousness, while nine had it below.

"Black in coat" (7th) was in the top quartile for eleven, with six ranking it first; but seven put it in the last quartile. It may be an issue of "if it occurs," it is very serious; but it isn't seen often, so there are bigger problems. I understand that it used to be a disqualification. "Topline not firm" (8th) was important for nine, mid-point for eight, and less of a problem for seven.

Additional input could change the rank of some faults with close averages. "Coarseness" and "Black in coat" were less than a tenth of a point apart as were "Neck thick" and "Ears above eye level." "Bad topline" and "Dropped croup" were nearly as close. "Hostile" was more than two points above second place, emphasizing that bad temperament is unacceptable.

Eight virtues had majority agreement, a good result, but 12 faults had majorities with big agreements, which is more than normal.

Outlines

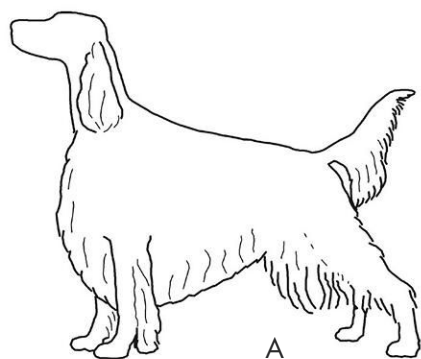
The survey included two sets of Irish Setter outlines, six dogs and six bitches, for the breeder-judges to place first through fourth in each set, and then select Best of Breed. The outlines were made from photographs of real dogs, so none was ideal. Since most were stacked photos, recognize that handlers holding the tails affected the tail carriage.

The favorite dog based on average placements was Irish Set-

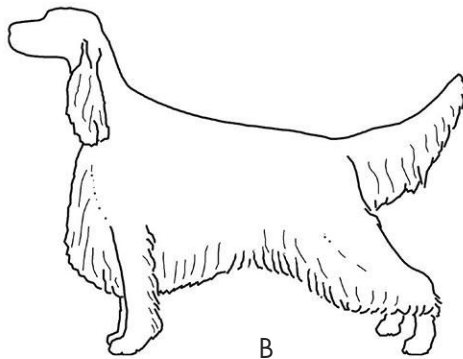
Irish Setter Outlines

Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex

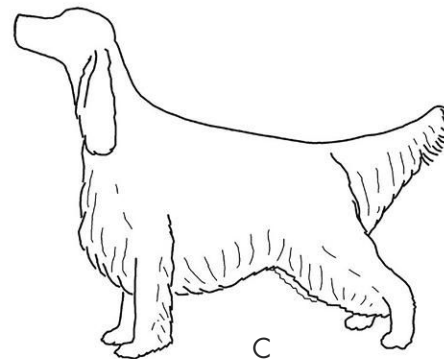
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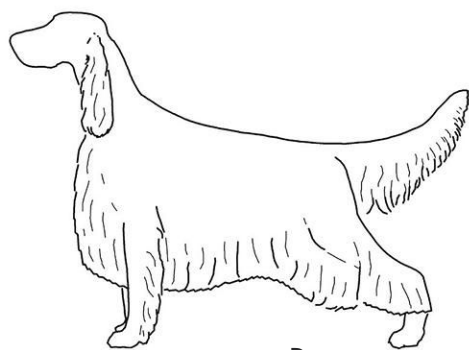
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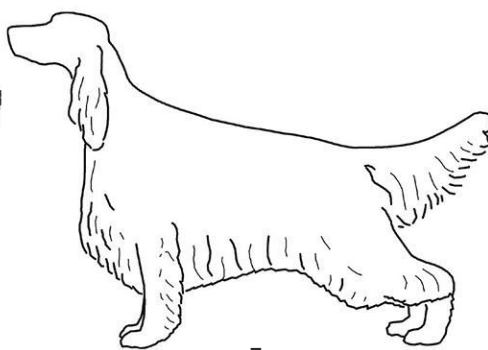
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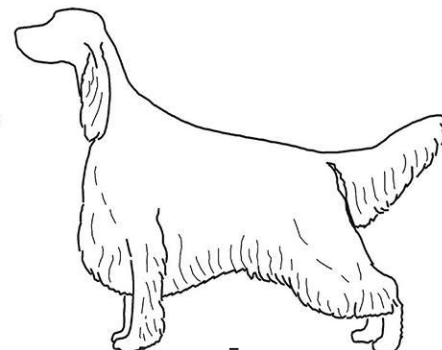
C



D



E



F

ter “B.” Those who selected him first said “best overall balance, arch and length of neck, appears slightly longer than tall, short hocks, good feet,” “correct head planes, good bone and croup,” “well proportioned, balanced angulation,” “best outline,” and “firm topline.”

Second place dog based on average placements was Irish Setter “D.” The averages were very close, less than a tenth of a point apart. “B” had nine first placements and was unplaced once; “D” had ten first placements, but was unplaced twice. Those who placed “D” first commented “best balance,” “proportion length to height, masculinity, correct masculine head,” “structurally good,” “best arch of neck, planes not perfect, too much flew [sic],” “better ear set and neck length,” “elegant, well angled,” “better neck flow into shoulders, good substance,” “short hocks, strong topline, decent prosternum and shoulder layback,” and “not exaggerated.”

The Irish Setter bitch with the best placement score was “V.” Those who placed her first wrote “overall balance,” “best silhouette,” “good bone, short hocks,” “feminine, is ‘the picture I look for,’” “proportion of length to height,” “balanced head, nice slight bend of neck flowing into nice topline, good croup,” “elegant,” “beautifully balanced front and rear, not exaggerated,” and “one piece bitch”.

The bitch with the next best average placement was Irish Setter “Y.” Comments on her included “better height to length ratio,” “elegant, well angulated front and rear, good neck,” “good profile, feet placed correctly, good shoulder and neck,” and “correct topline, tail set, and body length.”

Bitch “V” got twelve first placements, more than any other, had the best average placement of all twelve outlines, and was never out of the ribbons. She was named Best of Breed five times, fewer than half of the times when she was best bitch. Second place dog “D” was selected as BOB eight times, more than any other, of the ten times he was best male. First place “B” was chosen BOB four times. The males dominated the BOB choices.

Bitch “V” was the only outline never out of the ribbons. Bitch “W” was out of the ribbons on every survey. Dog “C” was unplaced on fourteen surveys and dog “A” was unplaced on twelve. Dog “A” and bitch “W” were not placed first on any of the surveys.

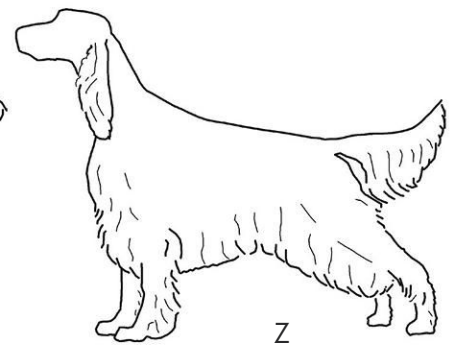
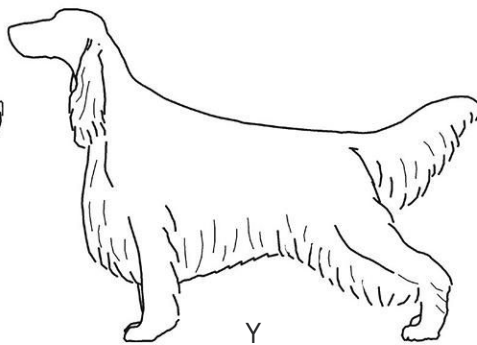
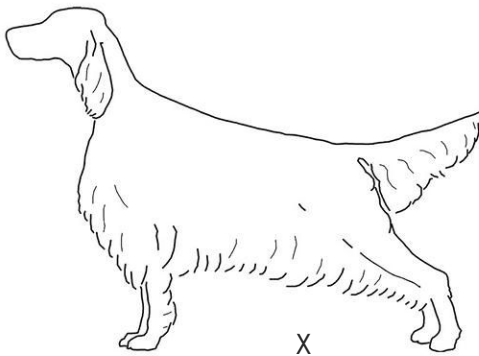
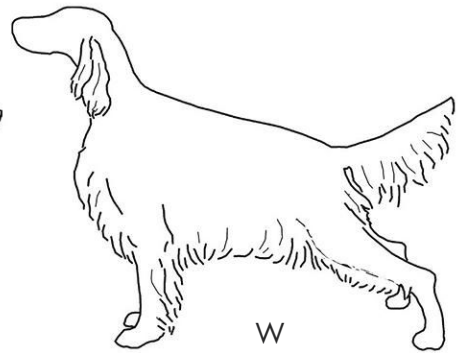
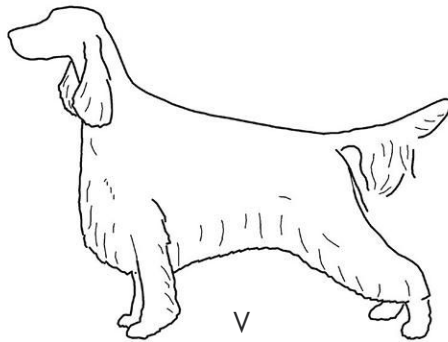
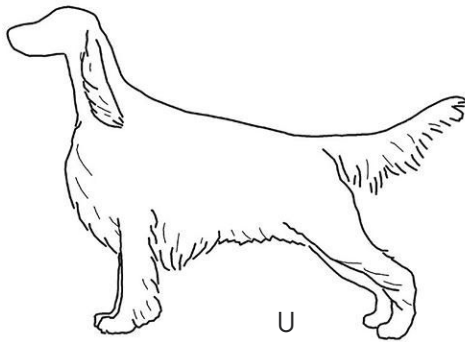
Essential Characteristics

The breeder-judges were asked to list four to six characteristics that a good dog or bitch must have to be a quality Irish Setter. Bal-

Irish Setter Outlines

Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex

BITCHES



ance was mentioned most often, followed by correct gait (efficient, reach and drive, ground covering, big and open). Head features were next, with soft expression, head proportions, and chiseling. The experts also required a stable temperament (happy, rollicking) and a correct, strong topline.

Comments

The Irish Setter breeder-judges offered the following comments for students of their breed:

- Long bodies, incorrect fronts, and over-angulated rears are incorrect. Look for proper length of rib cage, short loin, and balanced angulation.
- When assessing the head, one needs to understand the relative proportions and the meaning of “lean” and “chiseling.”
- Avoid over-exaggeration on angulation and coat.
- When standing, an Irish Setter should be a combination of triangles and circles.
- Coat should be shiny, soft, and free from product, from rich chestnut to deep mahogany, but they are never just one color.
- Know the standard and judge to the standard. Balance is the key to the correct Irish Setter.

- Don’t reward over-sloping topline.
- Balance of front and rear angles is so important, as are well-sprung ribs and a long sternum.
- The dog must be slightly longer than tall to “set.”
- This is both a hunting dog and companion; they must be able to run all day over fairly rough terrain in pursuit of upland game.
- A good Irish Setter must be elegant, substantial, and balanced, never coarse or slight.
- Look and feel beyond the hair and contrived trimming for correct structure.
- A balanced dog will be built correctly; then look for beauty.
- Judge them on the move.
- It is a silhouette breed, all parts flowing together, standing or moving.
- Coat has to be sufficient and healthy; more is not better.
- The Irish Setter is a bird dog, not a cart dog; size is important.
- Type is most important, more than movement.
- A beautiful, functional head is important.

Thanks so much to the Irish Setter breeder-judges for sharing their knowledge and expertise.