

# JUDGING THE CAVALIER KING CHARLES SPANIEL

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Judging the Cavalier well is a bit like catching a genie in a bottle. Just when you think you've "got it right," up jumps some new aspect of the breed to remind you that you really didn't quite understand it at all! Nonetheless, we persevere, and if you are a careful student, you will find that you can succeed in spite of the pitfalls before you.

For one thing, while the Cavalier is a true Toy Spaniel, he should not be light-boned or fragile. Just as his ancestors (bred by the Duke of Marlborough) had "to be able to go all day behind a horse," so too the modern Cavalier must be a sturdy little dog with good spring of rib to accommodate adequate heart and lung room. He must be easily able to enjoy a good hike with his family. He must be as sound as any good-moving dog is sound—even though he is not called upon to race, or to pull a cart, or to bring a wild boar to bay. In other words, his Toy status does not give him license to be a weakling or unable to physically exert himself. The Cavalier is actually a very sporting dog and those who own one will soon learn that they have a keen penchant to chase things that move—butterflies and birds beware!



Size is another slippery slope for many judges—and breeders alike. While the Standard tells us 12-13" inches at the withers, it is sometimes difficult to grasp the very significant difference in appearance that variation represents. Add to this the acceptable weight variation of 13-18 lbs and it is easy to see that there is considerable—acceptable—difference in size for this breed. [Then] add gender considerations and the presumption that males are larger than females (but not always in every case), you can appreciate the dilemmas facing judges in the ring. The best solution is to educate your eye by immersing yourself in the breed; watching literally scores of Cavaliers in order to sort out what is ok and what is not. Oh, did I forget? There is no DQ for size. So maybe, just maybe, your best Cavalier in the ring will be a little under or a little over that 12-13" recommendation. We need to remember that the world will not come crashing down if we reward the very best specimen who may be a bit outside the guidelines.

Temperament and ring behavior is another area where the unwary judge may find himself wanting. I have encountered any number of judges who are convinced that the only good Cavalier is a Cavalier whose tail is constantly wagging. Now, a

wagging tail is a very nice thing in our Cavaliers, and the tail does wag when the dog is in motion. But as judges, we must remember that these animals are not automatons. When standing, many of them will wag sometimes and other times...not. As judges, it is up to us to discern that the exhibits we like and want to reward are happy to be in the ring. We can tell this by the expression in the eye, the willingness to do what the handler wishes, and overall "biddability." Any single dog's worth should not be measured in terms of wags per minute. Please understand that I am not advocating any Cavalier be rewarded for atypical behavior. Temperament is the very essence of this breed—a glad, kindly expression, friendliness to all, and an abiding, happy outlook on life. There are any number of ways to determine whether or not you are judging a happy dog. Wagging is perhaps one of them, but no Cavalier should be penalized because he forgot his "wagger" at a crucial moment during judging. Quality is all.

The head and expression of the Cavalier is a quintessential part of his breed type. The Standard is explicit about many aspects, but one of the things it does not address fully is that there should be cushioning under the eye—to contribute to the dog's soft, gentle aspect—helping to give that melting "look" that we've come to know so well. The dark eyes are frontally placed, round and full—never oblique. Another thing to keep in mind is that while the Standard says that the skull is "Slightly rounded, but without dome or peak; it should appear flat because of the high placement of the ears"—it usually appears flat only when the ears are alert. When the dog is at rest, there actually can be a slight rounding at the top of the skull (not a pronounced curve). This is perfectly acceptable in the breed.

The Cavalier is not a breed that single tracks at a brisk trot. Rather, his rear legs move parallel to each other though there is slight convergence when speed increases. They should move straight and true—and angulation front and rear should balance so that reach and drive is maximized. Hackney action in front is not acceptable. Again, he may not be doing arduous tasks in the field, but he is built so that he could do whatever came his way (commensurate with his size limitations). Note: The Cavalier was bred to be strictly a companion animal. Along the way his ancestry undoubtedly included some Sporting and perhaps hunting breeds—with lineage as diverse as the Spanish truffle dog!



While he may exhibit some traits that acknowledge his roots, he was never intended to be anything but a lap dog and companion.

Tail carriage is sometimes a sticking point to judges. Ideal carriage should not be much above the level of the back, with carriage between 2 and 4 o'clock being acceptable. But remember, males will sometimes posture in the ring and raise the tail. As judges, it is up to us to decide what to do about that. Personally, I would forgive a tail that I deem to be a bit excitable, rather than put up a poorer conformation specimen. Remember, any one of us can see a truly gay tail in the air (it doesn't take rocket science), but sometimes I think the easy criticism takes undue precedence when we reward, instead, a dog with straight shoulders or sickle hocks.

Bites in the Cavalier sometimes give both judges and breeders absolute fits! Our Standard says that "A perfect, regular and complete scissors bite is preferred..." If we are lucky breeders, our hopeful puppy has a scissors bite from birth and never changes. But this breed is notorious for having its occlusion alter over many months and even years. That promising puppy may go from scissors to undershot and back to scissors again—I know of one that "came right" at the age of five! Of course, as judges we can only judge on the day, but many judges do tend to give the benefit of the doubt to Cavaliers who are still in the Puppy Classes and have a slightly undershot bite. It's up to you. Overshot bites are rarely shown and I have never known one to improve.

Please do not expect the Cavalier to stand at riveted attention in the ring—or at least not for very long. The Cavalier nature is to fidget and dance about, and this should not be held against him. At the same time, he should be shown on a loose lead and not hard stacked in the ring. Handlers may get their attention with bait or toys, but bending or kneeling down to re-set a leg on the floor or the grass is not an acceptable way to show this breed. Meticulous stacking is reserved for the table exam.



Just as we want their true, happy nature to shine through with a wag or a dance, we also demand that they not be trimmed. No sculpting, no thinning, no trimming! "Specimens whose coat has been altered by trimming, clipping, or by artificial means shall be so severely penalized as to be effectively eliminated from competition." Judges, please heed this and have the fortitude not to reward the trimmed dog, even if he is the best one before you. Or else, what are Standards for?

The Cavalier may not be an easy breed to judge, but he is such a merry, happy dog that most judges enjoy their Cavalier assignments. Just remember to catch and tame that genie in the bottle!

