

# UNDERSTANDING MAJOR STRUCTURAL FAULTS

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**L**ike automobiles, dogs are shaped and reshaped by popular tastes and fashions. Forefaces are compressed, ears are reshaped, and shoulders are rotated and slimmed down, even staples like sense of smell, eyesight and hearing are dabbled with all in the name of bettering the breed.

The problem is one man's so-called improvement is another man's disaster. Often a popularity explosion can be a breed's greatest curse. The main reason for this is the influx of new breeders that come with a popularity surge. The net effect is that we have "genetic engineering" being done by people who, by and large, do not understand the breed and the rationale behind the standard.

Long ago and far away, when I first began to be interested in Cocker Spaniels, I learned most from what I observed in the show ring. The dogs that won were the good ones, weren't they? I thought so and nearly everyone in the dog game I spoke to as a novice seemed to feel the same way. Certainly the winning dogs of the day shaped my "mind's eye" impression of the ideal dog I wanted to breed. Just what was this like and why did I want to breed for that type?

First and foremost it had to have coat. It was obvious that if you had lots of coat you could carve the kind of outline you desired. Next was head – a big well-chiseled head and the more muzzle the better. It was obvious that the judges paid a lot of attention to heads. Next came movement. The fastest ones seemed to get the most attention. I needed to breed a fast one! And that was it. That's what my Cocker Spaniel had to

be.

I wonder how much different it is today in any of the other breeds. Not much I bet. It wasn't until much later that I began to ask why? To learn the construction that led to good movement, to ask the purpose of the neck and shoulders and to question how gait was achieved. All of this came later, much later. Through studying anatomy and as a consequence movement combined with a knowledge of genetics enabled me to at least know the how and why of breeding.

Today as I judge around the world, I still see myself in these novices who come to the show to accept the winner of the day as their model. Having just put up the winner I know what his good and bad points are. At some shows I am very proud of my winners and would be happy to have them serve as a model. At other shows I put up the best ones there that adhere to the standard but I wouldn't want to set them out as a model. How is a novice to know the difference?

Perhaps listing some of the cardinal faults found in most breeds might be of some help. Let me hasten to add I don't think that the various breeds are going to pot. Dogs of today are every bit as good or better than dogs of the past. However, all man-made breeds have their faults. The perfect dog is in the eye of the beholder.

The first imperfection to be addressed is steep shoulders. Many standards state the shoulder should be well laid back. By common definition among the various breeds this has come to mean a 45-degree angle. In fact, many standards talk about a 90-degree angle formed by the shoulder and the upper arm. Let's accept the fact that most dogs are somewhat

steep in shoulder. It's the degree that is important. Many judges and breeders can live with a less well laid-back angle to allow the dog to move as it was meant to. I've seen it work. Then why do we ask for a 45-degree angle? Couldn't it be just as well be some other workable figure? What was the meaning behind the standard?

First and foremost, knowledge of the anatomy of movement will shed some light on the reasoning behind a standard. The greater the angle of the shoulder the farther out a dog can reach. Poor front angulation shortens the stride because the bones meeting at the shoulder joint are steeply set and form a wide-open angle. This limits the swing of the upper arm, thus restricting the reach of the forelegs. This causes the dog to take shorter steps and bounce along as he goes instead of moving with a smooth topline.

In proper movement, the shoulder lays back toward the horizontal helping the dog pole vault forward with a sling shot effect (a proper front will allow a reach to the tip of the dog's nose) The dog automatically raises and lowers his neck muscles to accomplish this. The neck muscles contract to one-half to two-thirds of their length. It follows then that a longer neck yields more lift and reach.

The dog must be given his head in gaiting, otherwise he can't use his neck for the proper lift of his arm. A tight leash yields head movement not neck movement. Many times the handler holding a tight lead screws up a dog, which is correctly constructed, making him move like a spastic alligator!

The steep-shouldered dog, not being able to reach very far forward is





forced to snatch his front foot back early. This early pulling back of the front foot interferes with a "normal" or even worse an over-angulated rear in which the rear paw is being put down in a position that the front foot was supposed to have vacated a split second before. The dog, being a shrewd animal, thinks to himself "ah-ha I had better change where I put my rear feet or I will trip over my front ones and take a pratfall." So, he makes adjustments. He can place his rear feet inside or outside the front ones thus causing him to sidewind or crab down the ring or he can quickly raise his front legs higher in a hackney type gait so as not to interfere with the rear leg's placement. He may also choose to slow down the action of the rear legs causing what has been called the "sewing machine" action of the rear quarters.

So you see the problems of an improper shoulder placement can be seen in a variety of ways. One exception to the rule does exist and it is an important one, a well-laid back upper arm (remember the other half of the 90-degree angle) can partially compensate for a steeper shoulder.

Another factor in assessing a proper shoulder is its relationship to the upper arm. You should place your thumb in the scapula hole at the upper arm joint and stretch your fingers to the tip of the upper arm. They should be approximately equal. A short upper arm also causes gait problems.

A second major problem is improper fronts. You should, unless you are the size of Shaquille O'Neil, be able to get a full hand between the dog's front legs. If not, he is too narrow and will usually lack adequate forechest development. He will also move too close in front and look like he is knitting and purling (which starts with twisting elbows and ends with pasterns crossing over and toeing out.) When a dog is too wide in

front (more than a full hand) it tends to spring the rib cage and forces the elbows out. When moving away from you the paddling out at the elbows are more apparent than when approaching. Be aware that heavy coated breeds may give a false impression because of flying hair.

A third major problem is the lack of a sternum (forechest). Interestingly enough when you reach across a dog's front and find no forechest, you should immediately say to yourself, "I bet this dog is steep-shouldered" and 99% of the time you will be correct. Most of the time the dog will also look long-bodied. The dog's middle piece from the point of the withers to the beginning of the croup should be short. A dog's length should be in the fore and rear assemblies.

A fourth and quite serious fault is the over-angulated rear. Here is a classic example of "if some is good, more must be better"! Some dogs are posed with their stifles nearly touching the floor. With this type of angulation there is no way a normal front can be in phase with the drive produced by this construction (German Shepherds excluded). Combine these with a steep shoulder and you have a caricature of the breed.

But believe it or not many such dogs are being shown. In fact, in some breeds they are accepted as the "norm." In many breeds height at the shoulder, and with extreme sloping topline, they stand posed with their beautiful coats as the epitome of the breed. Fortunately AKC says the judge has to move each dog individually. Their shortcomings are then quickly evident to the practiced eye. It is the unpracticed eye of the novice at ringside that I worry about.

Another problem is the poor angle of the croup. The croup is the three-way fusion of the vertebrae. It tends to be slightly broader in bitches. In a large measure it determines the shape of the hindquarters.

There is a hole just in front of the croup. By putting a finger in this hole and lifting the tail you can feel the angle of the croup. The tailset is determined by the length and shape of the croup. The tail and the croup are under different genetic influences than the rest of the spinal column. A flat croup produces a Terrier tail while a 30-degree angle allows the tail to be carried on a line right off the back. The flat croup also throws the rear legs further out behind the dog when in motion. The so-called Terrier tail is caused by the rotation of the pelvis toward a 20-degree angle. Its basic purpose is to further "let down" the rear quarters to give a more sloping topline.

The trained eye will note the dog with a flatter croup has a limb-swinging angle slightly to the rear allowing the front legs to get out of the way of the driving rear ones. Because of this construction the dog tends to have a topline that makes it look longer. However, when measured down the back, it will measure in proportion.

Now it's up to you to put this knowledge to work in your breeding and exhibiting programs.

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