

NZDJA

Does size really matter?

by Lavina Diamanti

Breed standards are our blueprint for a breed. They instruct us what an ideal specimen of the breed should look like and, in some cases, what deviations we should penalise and to what degree. The breed standard should also give you some direction on the level of tolerance of departure from the standard, but where this isn't clearly defined is where it can start to get a bit tricky. This is where our knowledge and understanding of the breeds, where they were developed, and what they were bred for comes into play.

An exhibitor recently asked me how much attention judges pay to the height and weight listed in the breed standard. My initial response was simple: it depends! Firstly, it depends on the wording in the standard; some give you clear direction. The German Shepherd Dog standard gives a clear height range and lists as a serious fault dogs that are more than 1cm over or under size. The Akita also includes reference to height below the standard as a serious fault and the Chesapeake Bay Retriever standard states "oversized or undersized are to be severely penalised". On the other hand, the Whippet standard lists an ideal height and then goes on to state "Judges should use their discretion and not unduly penalise an otherwise good specimen". Some standards such as the Saluki allow a broad range and indicate that it is an average which is open to interpretation. And then there is the Foxhound standard which gives us no direction at all.

Many of the toy breeds only give a weight range and no height direction. Some judges will tell you that it is harder to assess weight than height. However, the fact that they are in the Toy Group should be an indication in the first instance that they are small. Some standards, such as that for the Pekingese give further direction, stating "The dogs should look small but be surprisingly heavy when picked up; heavy bone and a sturdy well-built body are essentials of the breed".

The next point for consideration is what the dog was bred for. For some breeds it is neither here nor there. Their purpose and function is not so dependent on size. With some breeds size is critical, and we see this particularly with breeds which are required to go to ground. They have been bred to fit down a certain size burrow or hole and an oversize dog which either can't get down the burrow or gets stuck when it does is of no use to the hunter. The Border Terrier, Parson Russell Terrier and Jack Russell Terrier all require that the judge 'spans' the chest for this reason. The Norwegian Elkhound is another breed where height is all about purpose. Too small and they would be ineffective in holding the moose until the hunter arrived and too large and they would pose a threat and cause the moose to take flight.

Watching some of the working breeds going about their duties makes you appreciate that size does matter. A Corgi that was too tall would struggle to dodge the hooves of the cattle and a heavy, oversized Kelpie would be ineffective in the sheep yards.

The last point for consideration is the overall quality of the dog and the competition. If I had two equally good dogs and one was over or under the required size and the standard instructs me to penalise, then that would be my deciding factor. If I had an outstanding dog who was over or under size and they were clearly superior in all other aspects against others in the breed that day then I may be more inclined to forgive the deviation. But how far I would take it from there (ie. breed or group awards) would depend on the degree of variation in size, the wording in the standard, and the level of competition.

Finally, our ability to assess height and weight without measuring sticks and scales (except of course in the case of Miniature Dachshunds and Poodles if the measures are used) can be challenging. Some judges are adept at assessing height, others will have developed a system whereby they measure against certain points on their leg or use the span of their hand for the table breeds. It isn't unusual to see a judge walk down a line up of dogs and stop beside each one at the shoulder as they assess height before making their final decision.

And that, together with every other consideration, is all done in less than two minutes!

Happy judging. 🐾

Important Dates

1 December 2021 Effective date of new judges regulations

31 January 2022 Application close off

22 March 2022 Theory Exams

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