

Setters – or in older terms the “Setting Dogges”

Captured as we can be by the ground covering stride and often glamorous appearance of the setter tribe we need to remember the differences of its members. An understanding of the setters requires an appreciation of the basic structural differences amongst the various members of these “setting dogges”. The origin of these differences traces back to the unique hunting styles of each breed.

Without these differences our setters lose their identity and in effect the “type” that separates each, and what in judging dogs is considered essential. In Robert Cole’s book an “Eye for a Dog” he describes one of his favourite definitions, as “Type is the sum of those points that make a dog look like his breed and no other”.

And so to our setters – they may share some similarities, and with the current trend of longer coats it may suggest to the onlooker at the ringside that they are more similar. However for our judges the General Appearance paragraphs in the breed standards provide the first indication of the differences. The Irish setter is racy and moves with the head held high covering ground with good reach and driving out of wide powerful hindquarters, your English setter is a picture of elegance, head high, and a graceful flowing mover. The Gordon setter should convey the appearance of the weight-carrying hunter (as in hunter type of horse), stylish yet displaying strength and stamina, your Irish Red and White setter is strong and powerful but athletic rather than racy. As a starting point these pictures set them apart.

On the stack the differences are also obvious. The Irish is the only one of the setters with a topline that slopes slightly downward; the remaining setters have level toplines. Heads, although all sharing the description ‘long and with fairly square muzzles’, vary greatly: the Irish can have a slightly longer muzzle from stop to tip of nose, the English has equal length of stop to point of nose and eyes to occiput, the Gordon has a shorter muzzle (stop to nose) than from occiput to stop. The Irish Red and White has a more powerful, broader head than their Irish relative but is still aristocratic in appearance. The Gordon and the English both have the greatest depth of muzzle but that relatively shorter Gordon muzzle length gives a more blocky look than the English.

So looking at your line up of setters your Gordon will stand out as the heaviest, most solid of the setters, and your Irish as the finer setter of the four.

The Gordon Setter head was given priority in the early assessment of the Gordon setter as they were derived from the same general parent stock as the English and Irish setters but diverged in important aspects. The Gordon head should go a long way to making him ‘the most noble looking and strongest of the Setter group’ (F. Warner Hill, Dog World). The term ‘bricky’ was used in former times to describe the long, square and not over-wide head of the best Gordons. The head is much heavier than the English setter and the depth from occiput to lower angle of the jaw is greater than the other two setters (ref ¹The Gordon Setter: History and Character – Gordon Compertz)

Skull slightly rounded, broadest between the ears and a well developed occiput. Forehead above the eyes is well developed and defined with a nicely chiselled stop. Eyes intelligent and

¹ The Gordon Setter: History and Character – Gordon Compertz, First Edition 1976.

not small. A long, broad nose giving room for scenting abilities. Nostrils form the widest part of the jaw.

As you go over your setters closer examination of the heads will reveal the long lean head of the Irish that is not narrow or snipy, has a prominent occipital protuberance, low set ears, a dark hazel or dark brown eye, and raised brows showing stop; the Irish Red and White has a broader head and a higher ear set (at eye level) without the occipital protuberance. Eye shape is round and with slight prominence in your Irish Red and White.

Your English has a long head, which is reasonably lean, a well defined stop, and a well defined occipital protuberance, ears are low set and of moderate length, eyes are oval, expressive and vary from hazel to dark brown (darker is better). And lastly your Gordon with a head that is deep rather than broad but definitely broader than the muzzle, the muzzle is not quite as deep as its length, the skull is slightly rounded, and there is a clearly indicated stop. The Gordon has medium sized low set ears, eyes are a dark brown, not too deep or prominent but under the brows.

Again there is that obvious difference of a heavier head in your Gordon than the other setters.

Shoulder assembly in the Gordon needs to be strong to be compatible with the heavier bone and weight of your Gordon. Blades are wider and more laid back than is usual in the Irish and English setters². Rachel Page-Elliot mentions the muscular flexible shoulders required of dogs that drop to set or herd. The NZ std calls for elbows to be well let down and showing well under the body which gives freedom of action. This action is not loose but is flexible allowing the body to drop between the elbows when setting. The well laid back shoulder is there to allow the dog an ease of movement on uneven ground, and combined with a well developed upper arm of reasonable length is the basis for efficient crouching low, moving ahead and turning or leaping at will. The flattened type of foreleg adds to the appearance of solidity and strength and provides the substance for this heavier type of setter.

The body is heavier than the English but along similar lines; tail is short and scimitar like, neck moderately long and strong, but not heavy, feet inclined to be large and strong, arched toes and hair between toes to protect the feet.

The British standard for the breed was drawn up after the Scandinavian and American stds and these were considered in the construction of the British one. Our NZ std is identical to the British Kennel Club std. The American standard expands the general appearance/impression to include a strong, rather short back with well spring ribs and a short tail. Strength and stamina rather than extreme speed and symmetry and balance are also mentioned.

Hindquarter and feet descriptions are the same with long, broad muscular hindquarters and short strong hocks. Loins are wide and slightly arched.

The American std offers greater explanation to the tail and tailset requiring correct placement for correct carriage and for a nearly flat croup the tail will emerge on the same plane as the croup. Temperament is also described as being strong minded enough to stand the rigours of training.

² The Complete Gordon Setter, Jean Sanger Look & Anita Lustenberger, First Edition 1984.

Gait is given description in the American std but not in British/NZ stds. This American std describes a bold, strong, driving free-swinging gait. Our std describes, in general appearance, a stylish dog built on galloping lines with a build similar to a weight carrying hunter. There is description in the American std of straight lines for the front and rear movement, however a parallel movement is not a normal movement in dogs as there is a natural tendency to incline slightly inward and the faster the mover the more inclination to track to a single line³ (ref Rachel Page Elliot “the New Dogsteps” for an excellent description of normal leg movement). This may explain why many of the American dogs appear to have lost their good shoulder angulation with a desire to achieve the parallel motion, resulting in stilted short action instead of good natural reach. In a standing position the legs are parallel but as they move faster there is the natural tendency for convergence to a single track. Normal convergence should not be confused with the fault of “moving close”. The overall appearance of the moving Gordon setter is one of a smooth-flowing, well balanced rhythm, in which the action is pleasing to the eye, effortless, economical and harmonious.

Coat and colour and markings are essentially the same in American, European and English stds. Coat straight or slightly waved – not curly. Colour is important, a rich tan on the inside of thighs. Forelegs tan from the knees down, tan muzzle and tan spots above the eyes and on points of shoulder. Pencilling is seen on the feet.

The emphasis in the American std is greater for the Body, Size, general appearance with the next most important being Gait and Head, Shoulders and Hindquarters. Tail and colour the least emphasised and coat slightly more.

In summary the standards generally agree and may supplement each other.

³ The New Dogsteps, Rachel Page Elliot, Second Edition 1983, Howell Book House.