

This article may seem to ramble a bit, as it is a compilation of emails posted to the ShowDogs-L forum over the period of several weeks. The general discussion was about what determines TYPE for a breed, how differences in desired function affect type and how the “drag” of a breed complicates maintaining the type that the standard defines. I endeavored to encapsulate what I felt were the essentials of type for the Labrador and why it is so difficult to standardize it in the United States.

Drag of the breed

People were asked to comment on what they thought the “drag” of their own breed was and how that should affect judging selection. What I was taught to consider the "drag of the breed" were those traits that were part of the "generic" breed, not the result of breeder selective intervention. It includes those traits that detract from breed type which keep popping up DESPITE the efforts to breed away from them. I consider soundness to be a requisite of type in Labradors and there are often unsound ones seen in the show ring. I must observe, however, that I have not seen a breed tendency toward bad fronts when sound individuals are mated for generations. In fact, I've seen some very sound pets over the years, so the drag seems to be toward functionality and working ability. So, what is the unwanted "drag" in my opinion?

In my time and looking back at a century of photos, I'd have to say proportion is the most critical “drag” element. The standard calls for a square, short-coupled dog. That is what the developers of the breed selected as the proportion for an agile, athletic water dog. The length/height/girth ratio they envisioned had a specific purpose in the water—providing buoyancy, strength, mobility and effortless performance. This is essential to type (along with the specific coat and the otter tail). The drag of the breed seems to opt for longer backs—and especially longer loins. The "generic" dog is somewhat longer than tall, with more length and flexibility in the loin for running instead of swimming. My breeding experience would reinforce that idea, since one can breed two short-coupled, square individuals and get up to half a litter of longer-cast offspring (we refer to those as the "pets", for those of us who admit to ever producing litters that are not all show quality).

To better understand the impact of a short loin, one has to consider the overall implications of changing the shape of the bones. If one gets a short loin, that selects for a shape of lumbar vertebrae that is shorter (and more square). This means that the vertebrae in the whole spine are typically that shape also, so the neck also appears short and thick (a detriment) as does the tail (a benefit). The IDEAL type specimen (assuming other features are correct) is the square, short-coupled Lab with a tail to match that also has a decent length of neck and a bit of angulation (not extreme, but adequate to do the job and well-placed). This dog is an anomaly of nature, and just the sort of Lab that can help to set breed type more firmly. I am always looking for these dogs and have been lucky enough to find a few over the years.

So, overall, the drag of the breed (as I understand the term) is toward a running-dog conformation, with length of loin and all the off-square proportions that go with it (longer head, longer tail, less width, etc.). This is what I would penalize in the ring as it is what drags the breed back to the generic gene pool. As a judge, I would select the specimens that have the athletic features of the gymnast over the proportions of the distance runner that the "drag of the breed" tends to produce despite our best efforts.

Labs in motion

One person commented, "I do not know the standard, but in comparison to most other sporting breeds, many labs seem to have far less sidegait. Whether this is correct or not, I do not know."

The problem is that many group judges ALSO do not know! An extended sidegait (or flying trot) is not appropriate to a dog structurally designed for swimming. A short-coupled, square Lab should move square and parallel all around. Although good reach and drive make for efficient movement, the dog was not selectively bred for covering ground as an upland game dog. Many are used that way and are excellent for springing game, however, the real advantage to their structure is in how they negotiate open water and strong currents. This leads to a less extended "sidegait" than the pointing breeds or spaniels. It may not be "flashy" but is rewarded by knowledgeable judges when it is correct. So, perhaps the problem is not the lack of "flash" of today's Labs, but the lack of knowledge by the judges. Considering some of the "judge's seminars" I have attended on the breed, I can't see this tendency changing greatly in the near future.

A couple of movement quotes from the Standard are: "Above all, a Labrador Retriever must be well balanced, enabling it to move in the show ring or work in the field with little or no effort." and "Movement of the Labrador Retriever should be free and effortless." It doesn't say "fast" or "ground-covering" or "driving" or any of the other things that go into "moving out" in dog show terms. To put this in perspective, when was the last time you hunted all day in the field at the trotting speed you use to "move out" a dog in the ring? If the dog is to stay with the hunter (as retrievers do) instead of casting and quartering to find the game (as pointing or spaniel breeds do), the speed at which their movement is effortless is a brisk or ambling WALK!!! This allows them to conserve energy for those brief intervals when they are in a headlong run or swim to retrieve the game.

Retrievers were selectively bred to work differently from the other gundog breeds. They were designed to be "specialists" not "generalists," as they are so often currently used. The Labrador's ability to handle water—and the structure that makes it efficient doing so—does not lend itself well to hours of running in a field as a game finder. It CERTAINLY does not translate well to a flying trot, as is too often expected in the show ring by many judges. Let the retrievers be good at what they were designed to do and reward them for the structure that supports that use. Form follows function... and they are supposed to move like a water dog, not a pointer. Knowledgeable judges will reward it. The others will continue to put up the dog that gets around the ring fastest with its feet in the air the greatest percentage of the time.

In fact, the FUNCTION of the Labrador is the real crux of this discussion - and determines the issue of TYPE. Some think all retrievers are supposed to be generic gun dogs, as adept at running all day as in handling water. It is that thinking that leads to generic traits and indistinct type. In Labs, as I said earlier, it is the "drag" of the breed. As long as the breeders accept that generic type and judges reward it because it moves "faster" or "flashier" in the ring (with a big side gait like a pointer or setter) we will continue to fight the drag that tends toward the longer-backed, longer-tailed (or even leggy), generic, all-purpose dog.

Comparing the Retrievers

A "strongly-built, short-coupled, athletic dog" does not describe a dog that runs all day. The short loin and strong, square build is efficient for certain kinds of work demanding power and agility, but quartering in the field all day isn't one of them. As to how this compares to other retrievers, let's look to the standards for information –

* Flat Coated Retriever: A level topline combined with a deep, long rib cage tapering to a moderate tuck-up create the impression of a blunted triangle. ...never cobby, or short legged.

* Golden Retriever: Length from breastbone to point of buttocks slightly greater than height at withers in ratio of 12:11. ...not long in the leg.

* Curly Coated Retriever: Outline, carriage and attitude all combine for a grace and elegance somewhat uncommon among the other retriever breeds. ...when comparing height to length, gives the impression of being higher on leg than the other retriever breeds.

* Chesapeake Bay Retriever: Height from the top of the shoulder blades to the ground should be slightly less than the body length from the breastbone to the point of buttocks. *Body* is of medium length, neither cobby nor roached, but rather approaching hollowness from underneath as the flanks should be well tucked up.

* Labrador Retriever: Short-coupled; length from the point of the shoulder to the point of the rump is equal to or slightly longer than the distance from the withers to the ground. (with equal being the first stated preference!). The underline is almost straight, with little or no tuck-up in mature animals. Loins should be short, wide and strong

Now, having read all of these descriptions, who thinks that all these dogs have the same proportion? Who thinks that different proportions of body length, loin length, leg length, body depth, or underline (tuck up) do NOT affect how the dog moves and works? If you are still with me and have not raised your hand yet, you will begin to understand why the Lab SHOULD not move like a Golden ... or a Curly ... or ... you get the point.

Ok, for those who want a different metaphor, let's talk about figure skating (considering the number of hours that the TV networks devote to it, it must be popular enough for the average person to use as a comparison). Some skaters present a beautiful "line" and "elegance" when they perform. This length of line is a product of their body structure as well as their style of presentation. Other skaters prefer very athletic programs that show off their strength and tight body rotation in jumps. In fact, you will begin to see as you watch the skaters that body TYPE actually dictates the STYLE of skating at the top levels. Picture Brian Boitano (5'11", 170#) in one of his beautiful, elegant glides. Compare that with Elvis Stoiko or Scott Hamilton for pure athleticism (couldn't find height or weight for either, but both are much shorter and squarer than Boitano). There is no doubt that each of these performers is GREAT at what they do.... but they certainly don't look or move alike when they do it. The Labrador is the Elvis Stoiko of the sporting group... able to move with power, athleticism and agility, but with a shorter, muscular stride and different style of presentation from Brian Boitano (perhaps the Flat Coat?) or the long, lean Robin Cousins (the pointer of the bunch!). I enjoy watching all of these guys skate! They're great performers, but each is different, with different skills and strengths—and should be.

When it comes to judging at the top levels of skating (as in the top levels of dog shows) the placements will depend on "technical merit" (fewer missed elements or "faults") and "artistic interpretation" - how the performer translates their standard and skills into what the judges see. In both venues the preferences of the judges for a particular style of presentation will ALWAYS be a factor in the ordinal scores (1st, 2nd, etc). Does that mean that Stoiko should deliver a performance choreographed for Boitano because the judges for a particular competition prefer elegance to athleticism? NO... each will perform in the way that best suits his physicality and talent. The Lab (and each of the other dogs) should be able to do the same. The difference in what is rewarded is more a product of the knowledge and preferences of the judges. Each should be evaluated according to the standard and what is correct TYPE (in proportion AND performance) for that breed.

Legs and body

One person commented: "Dogs like Ch Sam of Blaircourt, Ch Dark Star of Franklin and that yellow Shamrock Acres dog that was a multi BIS winner were up on leg and didn't have a particularly heavy body, a lot like the original Labs way back when."

If you look closely at these three dogs (pictured at <http://www.nimloth.com/pastlabs.htm> along with another famous winner, Ch. Sandylands Midas), they really didn't look anything alike!!!! I mean, they not only do not look like many of the dogs in the ring today, but mostly, these three dogs did not look much like each other. Each is a different style and even very divergent in TYPE. The dog used as the representation of the breed standard for so many years, Ch. Sam of Blaircourt, could never be called "up on leg", as he was not a tall dog. Actually, a Lab should never look "up on leg" according to the standard—it should be square. If you want an "up on leg" look, I refer you to the Curly standard. The outline and proportion of these three famous dogs actually represent how different our concepts of TYPE can be in the breed. In fact, the web page shows a comparison of two pairs of dogs that were winning groups at the same time many years ago. Even then the preferences of "type" and "proportion" were very diverse in this country.

Although I know pictures can be deceiving depending on the angle and such, in general I would tend to agree with many who say that the Labs shown today are less leggy than the above mentioned dogs from the past. Not to say these dogs were *leggy*; but perhaps more so than most Labs today. I also noticed several current champions have their depth of body reaching a good inch or more below the elbow. Is this correct for a Lab?

Ok, take a trip with me down memory lane. It is the late 60s and the standards for the Lab in both England and America have been recently updated. The English standard still describes the body as "deep" in two different paragraphs. The American now only says "deep" in one (the description of body). Could this mean that already the Americans have decided for hunting in THIS country—with more wide-open spaces and less waterfowling—they felt the depth of body might not be as important? Let's follow this clue to the description of the legs (or forequarters in the English standard). The English standard simply describes the forelegs as "well boned and straight", while the Americans have reinforced their differing view of the dog with this description "of medium length, showing good bone and muscle, but not so short as to be out of balance with the rest of the body." Are you beginning to get the idea that even 40 years ago, this same debate about the APPEARANCE of leg length was an issue?

However, it is in the area of "movement" that we get a very different viewpoint. The English standard (which did not have a separate section on movement prior to the revision in the 60s) just states that it is "straight and true", while the Americans wax poetic about how they want the dog to look when it is in motion. "Watching a dog move towards one, there should be no signs of elbows being out in front, but neatly held to the body.." Now, picture for a moment how the bones work when a dog is moving. When the dog reaches forward, the scapula changes position on the body AND the joint between the scapula and humerus opens up (that is the front angle of the shoulder) as well as the angle between the humerus and foreleg (that is the angle at the elbow). This 'spring loaded' system loses its (ideally) 90 degree bends and tries to become straight. If the shoulders are "long and sloping", as is called for in both standards, this would move the elbow a LONG way forward of its standing position. So, in order for there to be no sign of the elbow being out in front, but neatly held to the body, the body MUST have a forechest (prow for the boat while in the water) in front of the front angle of the shoulder AND enough depth of body between the elbows (keel for the boat providing buoyancy and control) for the elbows to never be clear of the body when the shoulder is extended.

So, even though the Americans may have specified a balance of leg (think of this as length from ground to elbow being equal to length from elbow to withers), they did not confuse length of leg with the appearance of being "up on leg", which typically goes with a shallower body. Despite indicating that there is a preference for more "daylight" under the dog, the IDEAL Lab still had to have a sternum that was below the elbows so that the elbows were held "neatly" to the body when standing and moving. A body depth that only comes to the elbow (unless it is really oddly shaped body!) would clearly allow the elbows to be "out in front" of the dog and not anywhere close to the body when in motion or standing. It is at this point that the American standard becomes contradictory.

OK, so where does this leave us today? The current American standard still gives us some clues about the functionality of body depth in these passages: "Correct chest conformation will result in tapering between the front legs that allows unrestricted forelimb movement" - indicating that the chest extends to BETWEEN the front legs. It also specifies that the length of leg should be half the height, clarifying the earlier "medium length" statement. So, individuals with "the front legs ... perpendicular to the ground and well under the body" that are "equal to one half of the height at the withers" and a chest "tapering between the front legs" will NOT appear to be up on leg, but will be balanced and correct, even though they might not have as much "daylight" under them as some of the shallower-bodied specimens. If the forequarters allow for "forward reach" with "elbows ...held neatly to the body", then the body will have to have both forechest and depth of keel to meet the requirements of type and movement.

Unfortunately, this does not seem to be in keeping with the statement "the brisket should extend to the elbows, but not perceptibly deeper", which creates a conflict between what is defined in the form section and the function section of the standard. This is one reason I have tried to address this more from an "old" standard viewpoint—especially as there has been so much controversy about the "new" AKC standard. Also, since the topic is the difference in balance between the "old" dogs and the new, I thought it might be more appropriate. The breed has only been recognized in this country for about 70 years, but we have definitely voiced the American differences within our standards over that time.

Type – a work in progress

Last, but not least (in fact, an important issue in any discussion of type), let's talk about "original Labs way back when" in context. The Labrador was only recognized as a separate breed in England (country of its development, if not indeed its origin) in 1904. The breed is only a century old. From the beginning, breeders developed a standard for what they WANTED the breed to be, not necessarily what it already was. It has been updated periodically to reflect additional specifications for the blueprint. That is the way most breed standards are written. It describes the ideal dog—not any particular existing one—with enough laxity to accommodate differences in style while setting out the requisites of breed type.

If Labradors today looked just like those of a century (or even half-century) ago, then we are not doing our job as breeders, are we? If we have not made any strides in moving the proportion, balance and physical traits (not to mention the health, soundness, temperament and talent) closer to that ideal in 100 years of breeding such a young, diverse breed, then we should be ashamed. The relative youth of this breed (and diversity of stock that went into its origins) is one of the factors in the "drag" toward a more generic dog. Are today's Labs squarer than a century ago? Within conformation lines (around the world) I'd have to say yes. Are they heavier (not in fat, but more muscular with more bone) than a century ago? Again, in conformation lines, I'd say yes. However, they are not so different from some individuals of a half-century ago, such as many of the Blaircourt dogs.

My real concern is NOT that our dogs in this country don't look like the dogs of a century ago, but that there is still so much diversity of type in this country—perhaps even more than a century ago. In many other parts of the world, the type and proportion of the average Lab may not be perfect to the standard, but it falls within a much narrower range overall. As long as breeders, exhibitors, trainers, performance enthusiasts, and judges each have such a different vision of the FUNCTION of the Labrador, we will continue to have a great diversity in the FORM that is the expression of these diverse visions.

For those who are still with me, you must have the patience of a Labrador ;-))

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