

JUDGING THE IRISH SETTER, by Karolynne McAteer

A breed's standard is like it's own personal piece of poetry; as with poetry interpretations will differ reader to reader, judge to judge. The following is based on maintaining the essence of the breed, the absolute essentials that make an Irish Setter an Irish while still leaving considerable room for a judge's personal preferences. NOTHING is more important than the standard, and adhering to the fact that these are sporting dogs, as such, they are athletes and while they may not be asked to quarter a field for an afternoon of shooting, they should indeed be built to do the job! I personally feel that a deviation from the standard is a fault, but a fault that inhibits the dog from completing its intended purpose is a sin.

As you take your initial look at your class, whether just checking them in, or making a first walk down the line, the snapshot in your mind should be one of elegance and balance. Slightly longer than tall, rich red in color, gently sloping top line.

Starting at the head, its structure is long and lean, with parallel planes, and an overall proportion of equal lengths from tip of nose to defined stop, and from stop to occiput. The skull when viewed from the top is that of an oval. Depth of muzzle should be in proportion but deep enough to easily carry large upland game, lips are squared off but not pendulous. Bites are to be scissor with level being acceptable. You will frequently see dropped teeth, which if in alignment are not to be, in my opinion, penalized. Eyes are oval with tight rims (remember, when hunting this would prevent seeds or grasses from getting into the eye); color ranging from dark to medium brown. The eye has a raised brow which enhances the overall expression of intelligence and softness. It is this construction of the head, and its melting expression that makes this setter an Irish Setter.

The front assembly shows a moderate but evident forechest, with a scapula that is well laid back and with an upper arm that is equal in length, all contributing to good reach. The neck fits smoothly into good shoulders, and should be of a length appropriate to the breed's purpose meaning long enough to reach the ground to pick up game without crouching. Bone on the Irish Setter is moderate, but neither fine nor coarse. Remember, the Irish Setter's origins are the bogs of Ireland where the ground is soft and neither a heavy dog, not a too fine animal would be appropriate for the terrain, so substance without heaviness is key. Feet are small, tight and well knuckled.

As a judge moves along the side of the dog, the chest reaches to the elbow, and a judge's hand will note that the length of our "slightly longer than tall" dog is in the rib cage and not in the loin. The top line is firm and gently sloping (not a ski slide!!) and the tail is a direct extension of that top line, neither tipping downward, nor overly upward. It is important to look at tails with a view to their set and their carriage as tails can rise with excitement (carriage), but we are talking structure at this time (set).

Moving to the rear, the Irish Setter has good rear angles, matching the front angles which contributes to overall balance both standing and moving. Evidence of a wide thigh and second thigh should be noted, with a well defined bend of stifle and with the leg ending in a moderately short perpendicular hock. Again, feet are small, well knuckled and with hair left between the toes. Examining the rear also includes checking for muscling. Step back for one more look, and the overall picture should be a pleasing silhouette of elegance and balance.

Having examined the dog standing, it should be no surprise how it moves. We are a breed that moves as it stands, and correct movement on the Irish Setter is where all the pieces flow together, **with no one piece overpowering the other.** A judge always checks the down and back for basic soundness, (please note a good

dog can move widely in the rear to start, but converge to center after a few paces) but it is on the silhouette that you see the true components of this breed. Proud head carriage reflecting correct head planes, with heads that move slightly forward as speed increases and would definitely move forward when carrying the weight of a bird, neck fitting smoothly into well laid back shoulders, a firm slightly sloping top line ending in a level tail set. The reach and drive should reflect good ground cover, with the feet "clipping the grass" exhibiting no wasted motion or excess picking up of feet. Remember, a full day of hunting would require efficient movement to reduce fatigue.

The coat: Over this dog lies a coat, rich red in color, with a silky quality and with a pleasingly long fringe on ears, belly, brisket and chest. All coat should be as free from curl or wave as possible. You will see small acceptable patches of white, most commonly on the chest, throat or toes, and even on occasion a slight "snip of white" on the head...these are not to be penalized. The standard states that all trimming is done to preserve the natural appearance of the dog. We are currently seeing what could only be considered extreme grooming and sculpting but I am SURE there are none among us who think that a moderate dog in tons of coat outweighs a good dog in modest coat!! Coat can be grown by anyone; good headpieces and correct body type come from good breeding.

Judging puppies: Our breed is not fast to develop, looseness on the move is to be expected (not to be confused with unsoundness), our heads will develop long past 2 years of age, with the chiseling that makes a setter head so special, not evident until maturity. You should expect to see decent planes, good eye shape, and correct body proportions. Frequently the occiput can appear pronounced in a puppy head, but this disappears as the top skull fills in. Remember when examining an Irish pup, the best is yet to come~ Breeders ask that as you approach a pup you not speak to it, just scratch its head to announce you are there and examine it. We always laughingly say if you talk to a pup, you could end up wearing it!! Remember, this breed's standard calls for a rollicking personality and it is likely you will see it more than once during a day's judging. Frequently when moving an Irish pup, it forgets its party manners, just be patient and say "go again please."

Personality: An outgoing, stable temperament is the essence of the Irish Setter, timidity shyness or hostility are uncharacteristic of the breed and are not to be rewarded.

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My book shelves are stuffed with books of breeds I judge, am researching or just want to know about. Two books come immediately to mind to help sort out the Irish Setter – The Essence of Setters: An In-Depth Study of the Four Setters by Marsha Hall Brown, and The Official Book of the Irish Setter, by Connie Vanacore.

For further information on our breed, consult our website www.irishsetterclub.org

About the Author: Karolynne McAteer is a second generation Irish Setter breeder and AKC sporting dog judge. She has bred her own Red Barn line since the 1970s and exhibits her dogs in both conformation and the field. She is the AKC Delegate for Irish Setters.