

JUDGING THE FIELD SPANIEL

By Nicole Dooley

Judges have the unique opportunity to make an impact to a breed's progress by being diligent in learning and applying the standard to dogs they reward. What is most challenging in a rarer breed, such as the Field Spaniel, is applying "type" to this equation, as well. Considering that Field Spaniels have always been on AKC's "low entry breed" list, it is within reason to assume that many judges have not had the privilege of viewing a large entry for the breed, or have had that opportunity on multiple occasions. That said, it is of the utmost importance for you to know and understand what makes a Field Spaniel unique regardless of the limited opportunity that prospective and current judges may have to evaluate the breed in person.

History

While the Field Spaniel was one of the earliest registered breeds in the United States, dating back to the 1880's, it is in reality a breed with a young history from a conformational standpoint. Due to a decline in both the US and the home country of England, and near extinction, the breed had to be reintroduced to the US in the late 1960's by way of three littermates imported from the UK. The breed has come a long way since that time due to the commitment of diligent breeders. While this lovely breed continues to grow and improve, breeders have also proved and maintained the breed's natural working ability. It is very important that the breed remain one that can stand up to the requirements of a day in the Field.

Beauty, Balance & Type

What three things should you as a judge keep in mind when evaluating a Field Spaniel? The answer is easy: Beauty. Balance. Type. But how are these reflected in individual dogs? How would you go about judging the breed? How do you define

recognize in the breed? What about movement? What makes the Field Spaniel head distinctive? Are there any hallmarks of the breed? The most significant line from the Field Spaniel standard is, "Symmetry, gait, attitude and purpose are more important than any one part". You will want to remember this as you continue reading.

The Field Spaniel is described in the standard as a combination of beauty and utility, a well balanced, substantial hunter-companion of medium size, built for activity and endurance in a heavy cover and water. It has a noble carriage; a proud but docile attitude; it is sound and free moving. Symmetry, gait, attitude and purpose are more important than any one part. The Field Spaniel is a breed in which there is no division between bench and working dogs. Considering that they are bred with this in mind, it is imperative they be judged with this in mind as well.

Your judging begins the moment the dogs walk in the ring. Watch them as they enter. There are many owner handlers in this breed, and they are usually handling inexperienced dogs. Keep this in mind as you move through your assignment. This is a breed that can be reserved at first meetings and may be unsure of the goings on. This is especially true if the dog is young and the handler is inexperienced. However, this is by not an excuse for an overly shy or timid dog, particularly in the open or bred-by class. As the standard says, "They may be somewhat reserved in initial meetings. Any display of shyness, fear, or aggression is to be severely penalized."

Proportion

"A well-balanced dog, somewhat longer than tall. The ratio of length to height is approximately 7:6."

Look at your entry of exhibits in line and take a moment to assess the overall outline of the dogs. The front of the dog should be in balance with, and not heavier than the rear. Front and rear angles should

be both moderate and balanced, as well. The initial appearance should be neither coarse nor weedy, but have adequate bone and substance. There should be no extreme exaggerations in any direction. The Field should be longer than it is tall in a ratio of 7 to 6, with the length being measured from the forward most point of the shoulder to the rear and the height from the withers to the ground. The depth of chest should be roughly equal to the length of the front leg from elbow to ground. The rib cage should be long and extending into a short loin with little to no tuck up in mature dogs. The upper thigh should be broad and powerful; the second thigh well muscled. A key point to remember when viewing the outline of a Field Spaniel is that it is incorrect for this breed to have a sloping topline. The neck should smoothly slope into the shoulders, followed by a strong level topline. Over extended or, worse, over angulated rears are also not desirable. Overall balance is of the utmost importance. The front must be in balance with the rear with a deep loin connecting to the two! And it is essential that that there is balance between size, proportions, and substance.

Head

Look down the line and view the head and expression. Per the standard, expression should be "grave, gentle and intelligent." The head should convey the impression of high breeding, character and nobility, and must be in proportion to the size of the dog. Eyes should be almond shape and a dark hazel to dark brown color. A round eye and/or light eye is incorrect is likely to express a harsh or hard expression, instead of the grave and gentle expression the standard requires. Adding to the distinctive head and expression is an ear set slightly lower than the level of the eye, a moderate stop, a strong long muzzle neither snipey nor squarely cut, flews covering but not extending beyond the lower

“...‘**SOLIDLY BUILT,** *with moderate bone, and firm smooth muscles.*”

jaw. The nasal bone should be straight and slightly divergent from parallel with the plane of the top skull. While the breed should have a distinctive head we are NOT A HEAD BREED. Please do not judge the head first and foremost and put primary importance on the head.

Movement & Gaiting

When moving your entry together or individually it is important to ensure they are gaited at the proper speed for the breed. The breed standard reads, “The Field Spaniel should be show at its own natural speed in an endurance trot, preferably on a loose lead, in order to evaluate its movement.” A natural speed in an endurance trot is appropriate for the breed. They should not be shown charging out and pulling at the end of the lead or zipping around the ring at top speeds. While there is good forward reach from the shoulder, coupled with strong drive, proper Field Spaniel movement should remain effortless in a long and low majestic stride. Fast, tight, and strict movement is incorrect. A loose lead is best to appropriately evaluate movement. While the standard allows for some convergence in front at higher speeds, there should not be extreme toeing in.

When gaiting a dog to assess front and rear movement, elbows and hocks should move parallel, just as they should be when standing still. Pay attention to this. You will be hard pressed to find a specimen that moves in parallel that does not stand in parallel, especially the rear. Dogs that are cow-hocked but move straight may be reflective of weakness in the second thigh. The legs move straight, with slight convergence at increased speed, however single tracking is incorrect. Please watch for toeing on frontward movement this may reflect lack of forechest or depth of chest. Lifting from the pastern is common in younger dogs; however mature dogs should be reaching beginning at the shoulder if moving correctly. Energy wasting movement is incorrect. Specimens should

not be throwing out elbows or hocks and the down and back exercise is the best opportunity to judge this. Movement in this breed should be very clean and fluid.

Substance

“Substance—Solidly built, with moderate bone, and firm smooth muscles.”

Upon examination, the bite is to be scissors or level, with scissors preferred. While a good dog should not be totally overlooked for an incorrect bite, correct bite is not insignificant to type. The forelegs are straight and well-boned to the feet. As you move along this is your opportunity to let your hands be your eyes. The neck should be well set into the shoulder. The proster-num should be prominent and well fleshed. Elbows are closed-set directly below the withers and turned neither in nor out. The ribcage should be long and extending into a short loin. (The 7:6 length in this breed is to be picked up in the rib, not the loin.) Ribs should oval and well-sprung, but not overly round or barrel chested. These dogs should not be narrow from any angle. The loin should be deep with little to no tuck up. The croup should be short and gently rounded. Hocks should be well let down and should be parallel when viewed from the rear. Tail should be set on low, in line with the croup, just below the level of the back with a natural downward inclination. Docked tails are preferred, but natural tails are allowed.

Coat

The coat should be single and moderately long, flat or slightly wavy and silky. It should be dense and water-repellent. “Amount of coat or absence of coat should not be faulted as much as structural faults” according to the breed standard. Moderate setter-like feathering

typically adorns the chest, underbody, backs of the legs, buttocks, and may also be present on the second thigh and underside of the tail. Overabundance of coat, or cottony texture, impractical for field work should be penalized. Colors are black, liver, and golden liver. Golden liver is generally considered the color of a Sussex Spaniel. Tan-points acceptable on any of the aforementioned colors and are the same as any tan-pointed breed (Gordon Setters, Dobermans, etc.).

The breed is either a self-colored or bi-colored dog. Bi-colored dogs **MUST** be roaned and/or ticked in white areas. White is allowed on the throat, chest, and/or bris-ket, and may be clear, ticked, or roaned on a self-color dog.

Always remember that this is a sturdy hunting companion. Symmetry, gait, attitude and purpose are more important than any of the parts. Look at the whole dog in this light. Fault judging does a disservice to the breed. Applying personal preference above all else to one area of the dog is also not in the breed’s interests. Look at the whole dog and then weigh each dog’s faults and attributes from there in order to make your selections. Type and purpose should go hand in hand. There are no disqualifications in the Field Spaniel standard. Remember that the breed has had only a few decades of to hone conformation here in the United States, and your selections can either help or inhibit a breeds’ path in the future. The search for breed type and proper structure, one that can stand up to the requirements of a day in the field should always be at the forefront of your judging process. ■

