

JUDGING THE BELGIAN SHEEPDOG

by LINDA ROBEY



The Belgian Sheepdog is one of the four Belgian breeds recognized by the AKC. The others are the Belgian Tervuren, Belgian Malinois and the newly recognized Belgian Laekenois. In the rest of the world the four Belgians are varieties of the same breed, The Belgian Shepherd. The AKC standards do have some differences but they are essentially the same so judging each breed will be similar.

The known history of the Belgian Shepherds traces to the 1880s when these dogs along with German Shepherds, French Shepherds and Dutch Shepherds were all called Continental Shepherd dogs. In 1891, the *Club du Chein de Berge Belge* (Belgian Shepherd Dog Club) was formed for the purpose of determining if there was a true shepherd dog representing only Belgium.

The club discovered in one of the provinces there was a consistent type of native herding dog: a square, medium-sized dog with well set triangular ears and dark brown eyes that only differed in the texture, color and length of hair. In 1892, a standard was issued and recognized three varieties; dogs with long coats, short coats and rough coats.

In the US, the varieties were shown together until 1959. In 1959, the AKC gave each variety separate breed status. The long haired black took the original name of Belgian Sheepdog. The Tervuren and Malinois formed new breed clubs and drew up their own breed standards. The standard for each of the Belgians is based on Belgium's single breed standard.

You will find that Belgian Sheepdogs are mostly owner handled. This is true of specials as well as the class dogs. This is a breed that is typically free stacked and doesn't require excessive posing or hand stacking. An important thing to

remember is that the Belgian Sheepdog is very focused on the handler, so be sure the dogs knows you are approaching before you go over the dog. I do this by just saying hi to the dog or you can just speak to the handler. It is important to approach with confidence, as with so many of the herding and working breeds, if the judge is hesitant the dog starts to think something is wrong. Always remember to never accept questionable temperament. Excusing a dog that is having a bad day is okay.

The Belgian Sheepdog standard states in the first lines: "The first impression of the Belgian Sheepdog is that of a well balanced, square dog, elegant in appearance, with an exceedingly proud carriage of the head and neck. He is a strong, agile, well muscled animal, alert and full of life".

When first stepping into the ring, look at the line up of dogs. They should appear square with an outstretched neck that goes smoothly into a level topline. A square body is one of the most important characteristics of the Belgian Sheepdog.

The ideal height is 24 to 26 inches for males and 22 to 24 inches for bitches. We have a strong desire to keep our dogs and bitches medium in size so we have height disqualifications. Males under 22½" or over 27½" and bitches under 20" or over 25½" are to be disqualified. The Belgian Sheepdog standard allows a greater range on either end for the disqualification than the Belgian Tervuren and Belgian Malinois standards. So please check the standards before judging the Belgian breeds. But do remember that the ideal is the same for all three breeds.

The length, measured from the point of breastbone to the point of rump, should equal the height. Bitches may be slightly longer. When looking at the height, the point of the withers to the chest is equal to

the elbow to the ground. The length of hair can hide the proportions, especially on a full coated male. So when judging, be sure to feel for the point of breastbone and the depth of chest. You will see many different proportions; some long in body or short on leg. You will also find dogs that appear shorter in body and longer in leg, which is equally incorrect. So look for the square, balanced dog. When we say bitches may be longer we mean "slightly" longer. We still want a bitch that appears square.

When looking at proper proportions, be aware of the surface the dogs are standing on. If they are outside in long grass it can really distort your impression.

Bone structure should be moderately heavy in proportion to height, neither spindly or leggy nor cumbersome and bulky. This is another area where the standard gives a clear direction on the fact that we want a strong medium-size agile breed that can perform many functions.

While the Belgian Sheepdog is not a head breed, the head is one of the areas that really defines breed type. Here are a few lines from the standard that I think are key in describing an ideal head. Head: clean cut and strong, overall size should be in proportion to the body. Eyes: brown, preferably dark brown, medium size, slightly almond shape, not protruding. Ears triangular in shape, stiff, erect. Base of ear should not come below the center of the eye. Skull and muzzle: top skull flattened rather than rounded. The width approximately the same, but not wider than the length. The standard does not mention skull to muzzle proportions, but we are looking for the muzzle and the top skull to be of equal length. Parallel planes are also not mentioned in the standard but to get the proper expression we are looking for close to parallel planes.

Look for a head that is balanced and a slight wedge. We are not looking for a narrow head as you see with a Collie and not a larger wedge like you would see in the Australian Cattle Dog. What you are looking for is a clean wedge. Look for the balance in the skull and muzzle being equal in length; give the side of the head a quick feel to check for the flatness on the checks. The breed's high set triangular ears are necessary to help define the proper type.

In the standard we ask for a full complement of strong white teeth, evenly set meeting in an even or scissor bite. Be aware that the Belgian Sheepdog standard does not mention faults when it comes to teeth or bite. We do want you to look at the bites and the standard does ask for a full complement of teeth.

When examining the mouth we want you to check (or have the handler show it if you prefer) the front of the mouth for even or scissors bites. Then, gently lift the side of the lips and check each side for evenly set premolars and molars. We don't expect you to pry open the mouth as you would in a Rottweiler or Doberman. If there are missing teeth most likely they will be the small premolars. Since the standard does not address missing teeth there is no reason to open the mouth.

The standard is pretty clear on the body and it is not that different than many of the herding dogs. We are looking for a strong level topline. The lowest point of the brisket should reach to the elbow. With the coat you will not see this so you must check for it with your hands when judging. Front feet are round (cat footed), toes curved close together, well padded. You may find white on the tips of the front toes, it is allowable but a fault. Rear feet are slightly elongated and well padded. White is acceptable on the tips of the hind feet. Please check for flat feet, the well padded feet are necessary in a herding dog.

This is a long coated breed but the coat should never be so excessive that it would interfere with the working ability or mask the elegant outline. Coat texture is more important than the length and amount. Bitches seldom carry the same coat as males, but they should always be

given equal consideration. I often describe the difference in male and female Belgian Sheepdogs as the difference in a Lion and Lioness. Do not let the coat get in the way of finding the best dog or bitch.

The Belgian Sheepdog is a black dog with allowed white in certain areas described in the standard. I hear many people saying it is hard to judge a solid black dog. Please look at the outline and remember the standard. While a solid black dog may not look as flashy in the group ring, it may be an excellent example of the breed. What makes an excellent Belgian Sheepdog are the characteristics discussed in this article and we would love your consideration in the group ring as well as the breed ring.

Proper movement is essential in a herding breed. The standard describes it as smooth, free and easy, seemingly never tiring, exhibiting facility of movement rather than a hard driving action. He tends to single track on a fast gait. The backline should remain firm and level. When you move the dog down and back you should be looking for single tracking movement. When viewed from the side the front legs should extend to about the nose and the rear should be in balance with the front. A square dog can move as cleanly and easily as any breed. The difficulty is the front and rear angles, with a square dog the angles must be proper and in balance. You just don't have as much body to cover up movement faults.

The Belgian Sheepdog is not required to be friendly with the judges, but is expected to be approachable. The standard says, "He does not show fear or shyness." Please do not award points to a dog that displays poor temperament.

The Belgian Sheepdog is not a high profile breed at the AKC shows, but we who are dedicated to the breed care about its future. We would ask all judges that wish to judge our breed to take our standard as seriously as we the people who own and love this breed do.

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In the rear, his thighs are broad and heavily muscled. The upper and lower thigh bones form a relatively sharp angle at stifle joint. The angle at his hock is relatively sharp. Dewclaws are not allowed on the rear feet. He is not over angulated. His rear angles match his front angles. He is robust and substantial but in no way is he cumbersome or heavy. A fat Belgian is not a working dog. He feels solid, lean and well-muscled. Immature Belgians are often very lean due to their activity level. Your hands glide over him finding no abrupt changes of direction over his body. Everything about him "fits" the picture. There are no exaggerations and in this simplicity is great beauty.

Now you ask him to go around the ring. His demeanor changes and he's suddenly alive and ready to get going, finally! His head drops to just about level to his back to allow for efficient movement and maximum reach and around he goes. His foot timing is impeccable and his topline remains firm followed by a tail that is raised and has a curl, which is strongest toward the tip. Although he is moderate in angulation his construction allows him reach and drive that is balanced giving his movement a light-as-a-feather look rather than a hard driving action. His movement is efficient, effortless and covers maximum ground. Going away and as speed increases, his legs converge to a centerline forming a "V". Coming towards you reveals the same action. It is here that you see his marked tendency to herd and circle. His head is often wrapped around the handler, especially if he's young and inexperienced. You might have to let him try that again because you might not have a clear picture of his movement.

He can be quite exuberant as a youngster and may herd his owner, jump up on him, as well as nip at his sleeve or jacket! This is a slow maturing breed with some not reaching their full potential until 5 or more. They can be seen competing in rings as old as 9 to eleven and sometimes even longer!

You know that any deviation from the Belgian Sheepdog standard is a fault. In determining whether a fault is minor, serious, or major, two factors should be used as a guide:

1. The extent to which it deviates from the standard.
2. The extent to which such deviation would actually affect the working ability of the dog.

You are aware of the breed's disqualifications which are under 22½ or over 27½ inches in height for males and under 20½ or over 25½ inches in height for females, ears hanging (as on a hound, cropped or stump tail and any color other than black and lastly, viciousness.

You've covered the essentials and you are content in knowing THIS dog is the Belgian Sheepdog! But wait... now SHE comes into sight. SHE leaves no doubt she is a female. Not as impressive as the male with all his coat and big mane, but, oh my! She's a beauty and she's melting your heart. SHE is equally well made. SHE moves as well and SHE is steady on her exam. Just when you thought you had your winner you may have to reconsider. No one said this is going to be easy. ■

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By Linda Robey

This article is similar to the one I did for the Belgian Tervuren, but there are definite differences in the wording of the two different standards.

The Belgian Sheepdog is one of the four Belgian breeds recognized by the AKC. The others are the Belgian Tervuren, Belgian Malinois and the newly recognized Belgian Laekenois. In the rest of the world the four Belgians are varieties of the same breed, The Belgian Shepherd. The AKC standards do have some differences but they are essentially the same, so judging each breed will be similar.

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Judging the Breed

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General Appearance

The Belgian Sheepdog standard states in the first lines: "The first impression of the Belgian Sheepdog is that of a well balanced, square dog, elegant in appearance, with an exceedingly proud carriage of the head and



neck. He is a strong, agile, well muscled animal, alert and full of life".

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Size, Proportion, Substance

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Movement

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Temperament

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Summary

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for the American Belgian Tervuren Club.

BIO

Linda Robey is the Judges Education Chairperson for the Belgian Sheepdog Club of America (BSCA). She is also a member of the Judges Education Committee



Linda has been judging the Belgian Breeds since 1995 and is currently approved for the Herding group, Sporting group, 12 Working breeds, Dalmatians, the miscellaneous breeds, and Best in Show.

Linda has had the honor of judging the Belgian Sheepdog National twice and the Belgian Malinois National twice, and the Belgian Tervuren National.