JUDGING THE
BELGIAN SHEEPDOG

You've reviewed the standard. You are well versed in flaws and faults of structure and movement and with this knowledge, you enter your ring.

It is doubtful you will have huge entries of this mostly owner-handled breed as they are few and far apart. It takes a while to get to know them well. Ah, there are only two entries today. Being a solid-colored dog, you know you must look more closely because the details can get lost in poor indoor lighting. But you also know most herding, working breeds don't appreciate direct stares. Now you are ready.

The day is sunny with a soft breeze flowing. He is standing naturally, square on all fours and alert. He seems totally engaged in his handler. He is lively and eager to get going. He's not inclined to stand still, particularly if he's young. His jet black medium harsh coat drapes over him sparkling and shimmering in the soft wind. The beautiful mane which frames his head is full and characteristic of a male. On the other hand the female carries a shorter but equally dense coat and her head is framed by a colarrette around the neck.

by LINDA MCCARTY

He has no white spot on his chest or on the tips of his back toes. It's not to be faulted as long as the chest spot or strip is small to moderate. He has some short white hairs on his chin which is called “frost” and some white between pads of feet and that's okay also.

Sometimes black hair can have reddish tinges when the sun reflects off the finer hair behind the ears, in the feathering, behind the shoulder and tips of the chest hair. Shedding dogs have reddish tinges when the hair is dead and ready to drop. Puppies in particular have more delicate coats which burn easily from the sun. When he's shed out, it can appear as if the thigh and shoulder on the side have been scurried or cut out but that's just temporary until more hair grows in. The mane should be distinct from body hair. They do not resemble Collies in coat. They should never have an open coat.

He exudes elegance in his silhouette due to his balanced proportions and square body. His height is between the preferred 24 to 26 inches. His length is measured from point of breastbone to point of rump and equals his height. His outline, proud head carriage and erect ears are his trademark. He reminds us of a black stallion. On occasion, you see dogs who appear short on leg and this definitely detracts from elegance but be sure he's not in tall grass or has excessive length of chest hair. Other illusions with big coats are lack of neck and length of body. This is where you must use your hands.

He turns towards you because he sensed you long before you think he did due to his inherent aptitude as a guardian of flocks and protectiveness of the person and property of his master. He appears all at once extraordinary. Tentativeness on your part would only breed suspicion. You approach him directly and with confidence. He senses your confidence and he stands his ground. Sometimes youngsters can be unsure and you always give them the time, patience and gentleness they require and deserve.

He has a full mouth and a scissors or level bite covered with taught black lips. Though pink on his gums is distracting, as long as the outside of his lips are black, it's perfectly fine. His head is clean cut and proportionate with his body. The skull is topped off with small triangular and well-cupped prick ears and the base of the ears comes well above the center of his eye. Running your hands along the sides of his skull finds flat cheeks and sides. Looking from the top you see a one piece head and blunt wedge. Your hand finds a flat topskull and a muzzle that is at least equal in length to the topskull. From the side, his head is not deep. The stop is moderate. The planes though not mentioned in the standard, approach parallel and his bottom jaw is well developed. The gaze from his dark brown, slightly almond shaped eyes is direct, intelligent and questioning, but not bulging, fierce or piercing.

Going past his head, you find that he has a well arched elongated neck which is essential to his silhouette. His slightly high wither blends into his strong level back. His shoulders are long and oblique and form a sharp angle to his upper arm which is well under him. His loin is short but strong. His croup is gently rounded and gradually meets his beautiful plumed tail which he holds low, the tip bent back level with the hock. The bone of the tail reaches his hock. His chest is deep and to the elbow. His prosterum, though not mentioned in the standard either, is well developed and prominent. His underline smoothly sweeps up to his loin. His bone is oval and his legs and hocks are straight and parallel to each other. He has the feet of a herding dog. His front feet are cat feet and they are well padded. His hind feet are slightly elongated but also well padded. His pasterns are of medium length, strong and very slightly sloped to give him the resilience he needs to move effortlessly.
In the rear, his thighs are broad and heavily muscled. The upper and lower thigh bones form a relatively sharp angle at stifte 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 stumpy tail and any coat 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.