

## Size Matters

A recent survey in a popular show dog magazine asked readers if their breed's standard needed to be changed (and how). As you might imagine, there were all kinds of answers. My favorite answer was: "[It] does not need to be changed, it needs to be followed."

Discussions about English Setters and how our current dogs fit the standard could be described in the same way. For example, there's a lot of conversation about the height of English Setters today. Are they too small? Too big? Not enough leg? Does it depend on where you live and the dogs you see most often? Does it depend on how big your own dogs are? And, how much does it matter in terms of breed type?

I've had English Setters for a little over 30 years. There are certainly people that have been breeding and showing longer than I have. I can recall beautiful top-winning and top-producing small bitches that were definitely under the "about 24 inches" called for in our standard. And we've all seen terrific male dogs that were well over the suggested "about 25 inches" in the standard. You've probably even seen large bitches of excellent quality and superior males that were on the small side.

These dogs and bitches of varying heights might not be acceptable if our standard said dogs had to be 25 inches and bitches had to be 24 inches. But that's not what it says. It wisely provides some leeway for the size of our English Setters.

Why is it wise for the standard to be open to allowing some deviation in size (usually considered about an inch up or down – though that is not written anywhere in the standard). Because we should not dismiss or disqualify dogs without a good reason. The overall quality of a dog and all of his parts considered together should always be more important than whether he is a little taller or smaller than the standard suggests.

That said, I doubt that most people who love English Setters wish to see them become a giant breed. Or a smaller breed. They are not meant to be "comfort Setters." If all dogs, male or female, begin trending toward 30 inches, there is a problem. Likewise, if English Setters are headed toward 20 inches, the breed is in trouble. But that doesn't seem to be the case. We need to keep a variety of dogs and bitches of these varying sizes in our gene pool. Many of them may have something positive to offer for the future.

As for whether English Setters are too short on leg now, that's harder to determine, especially when adult dogs have such long coats. Shown indoors in small rings where it's hard for dogs to stride out, it can be difficult to tell how a dog really moves or how long their legs really are. In order to really see the length of leg you might have to see the dog move in the open or put your hands on him to feel the underline and the legs. In some cases it can be easier to see length of leg in younger dogs, before they have a full coat.

Once you see a dog that is low on leg, it really sticks with you. It's not a matter of a dog being small. A dog can be small yet still be perfectly proportioned. A dog (or bitch) that is low on leg is proportioned differently than an English Setter is normally proportioned. However, with certain grooming and handling, a dog that is low on leg can look nice to a judge and do a lot of winning. It's up to breeders to look at dogs carefully and decide whether they want to use this kind of dog for breeding. If you do breed to a dog that is short on leg you will probably get at least some offspring that have a similar look.

It should also be noted that there are dogs that are well-proportioned which can be made to look short on leg quite inadvertently through less than careful grooming. Sometimes a very long coat can make a dog's legs look rather short. When you're finished grooming your dog it's always a good idea to stand back and take a good look at the overall picture he presents.

The long and the short of things is (if you'll forgive the pun), our breed standard serves us well regarding the height of our dogs. We should have no reason to change it.

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