

English Setters  
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## Conformation Pet Peeves: Tails

"The reason a dog has so many friends is that he wags his tail instead of his tongue." -Anon

You don't have to spend much time around dog people to start to learn some of their conformation pet peeves. With English Setters, I would bet that one of the biggest pet peeves among show breeders is a gay, or as I like to think of it, "too happy" tail.

It's not just English Setter breeders who dislike gay tails either. I was showing a good dog to an all-around judge once at a show. He was sturdy with good bone, a decent mover, good type, with the most beautiful head you could imagine. He also had a perfectly level topline – not a dip or roll of any kind. But the judge took her time before giving him Winner's Dog. When she handed me the ribbon she told me how much she liked him but pointed to his tail and said, "I wanted to take a fly swatter to his tail the whole time he was in the ring!"

Now, I knew that the root of the dog's tail came level off his back when he was standing still. His tail set was level but he was a very happy dog. He carried his tail like a plumed flag, waving it in the air when he trotted. I never considered it to be a structural fault. I was glad to have a dog that enjoyed being in the ring and felt so happy. He was a nice dog and finished quickly, in spite of his "happy" tail.

On the other hand, I know plenty of owners and breeders who despise this kind of tail. They wouldn't even think of breeding a dog with a tail that waves around in the air.

Some field trial people who like a 12 o'clock tail have a completely different take on the issue. I used to think they liked the 12 o'clock tails on Setters so they could see their dogs in tall grass but there may be another reason. According to professional bird dog trainer and Field Trial Hall of Fame member Delmar Smith, "When you breed dogs you make sure you get a high tail. That way you get an inch to an inch and a half more muscle...that muscle from the hip bone back down there to the thigh. That gives the dog more reaching power and pushing power. He's not choppy." Not all field people agree with Smith.

I don't want to minimize the importance of the English Setter's tail set. The slope of the dog's pelvis has everything to do with the dog's rear angulation. If the root of the tail is too high because of a short pelvis and short pelvic slope, it can affect the dog's gait, along with his appearance. He won't have the power to propel himself as he should. If the tail set is too low, you can get other problems. According to Edward M. Gilbert Jr. and Thelma R. Brown in *K-9 Structure & Terminology*, a low tail set usually indicates a steep pelvis and restricted back reach (goose rump). The book has a good chapter on the hindquarters with descriptions of the pelvis and its slope, along with discussion of a flat croup.

Here is what Laverack said about the tail in 1872: "The tail should be set on high, in a line with the back; medium length, not curled or ropy, to be slightly curved or scimitar-shaped, but with no tendency to turn upwards; the flag or feather hanging in long pendant flakes," *The Setter*, Edward Laverack,

1872 <https://is.gd/VzaSp9> . The breed standard in the UK, with The Kennel Club, retains much of this description of the tail today. Personally, I don't know how you have a tail that is supposed to be slightly curved or scimitar-shaped without a tendency to curve upwards. This is why breed standards and trying to describe dogs can be so frustrating.

Our AKC standard has this to say about the tail today: "Tail - a smooth continuation of the topline. Tapering to a fine point with only sufficient length to reach the hock joint or slightly less. Carried straight and level with the back. Feathering straight and silky, hanging loosely in a fringe." In the Movement and Carriage section of the standard, a "lively tail" is desired. So, our current AKC standard certainly does describe a straight, level tail, as opposed to Laverack's description and the description for dogs in the UK, though it can be "lively." The judge who wanted to bat my dog's tail with a fly swatter was likely within her rights.

Our old breed standard used to allot 5 points for the dog's tail (length and carriage) – which seems about right.

I would suggest that most dogs being shown today don't carry their tails level with their back when they are moving around the ring. Not because they have a high tail set or a gay tail but because they do have a lively tail and it's perfectly natural for the breed. Yes, some dogs do carry their tails straight and level, even when they are moving, but I'm not sure they really look better or more natural. In fact, I suspect that for some dogs the tail may be carried a little high and waving for balance while they are moving. While a gay tail that comes from a high tail set is undesirable, I have no problem with a level tail set and a happy dog that carries his tail a little high. I know lots of English Setter people will disagree with me but I think we need to realize that tail carriage and tail set are not the same thing. Tail set is structural while tail carriage can be, at least partially, a reflection of the dog's personality and attitude.

Do you disagree? Send your complaints, or your puns about dog tails, to me. If you have your own pet peeves about English Setter conformation, I would love to hear them, too.

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