

GRADING CONFORMATION PUPPIES

*Adapted for Beagles by Peggy Shaw (Shaw's) and Ruth Darlene Stewart (AlaDars)
with permission from original article written by Theresa Mullen Terrylane Dobermans*

Is there a method or methods for picking puppies? Yes, and over the years this is just one that we have developed that works well for both of us. We will try to outline all the things that we have used when evaluating puppies.

Don't try to analyze and grade puppies too young. They all hopefully look good at 6 weeks, unless you are experienced in evaluating puppies and recognize when you see a serious problem. Concentrate on getting the puppies used to being on the grooming table and relaxing up there and work with the tails so you can get a realistic idea of what they look like stacked on the table. It's good to watch and observe behavior and temperament and generally which ones are confident and have an outgoing general attitude.

You will be constantly evaluating puppies as they grow. When you first start breeding you may want to use a structured method for evaluating your puppy. Some breeders "grade" puppies three times---first at 7 to 8 weeks, 10 weeks, ---then again for the final time at about 11 to 12 weeks. It is also good to take pictures at these ages. This is helpful when comparing size, maturity and bone and substance at these ages. With experience and development of an "eye" for puppies, many breeders have a good feeling for which puppies may be show prospects and those that will be pets by eight weeks of age.

Observe the puppies running around in an area with them moving on their own and how they interact with one another. Look for the puppy that carries himself with style and attitude with tail up and moving confidentially. Get a general "feel" for which puppies stand out from the rest. Taking pictures and videos of movement may help in evaluating the puppies.

Next, each puppy is put on the grooming table. If possible, have someone stack the puppy on the table---without bait, hopefully. It is good to have a mirror behind the grooming table to help stack the puppy correctly. What you see in the mirror is what a judge will see. Take pictures at each age to help compare puppy to puppy at a later time.

Look for: Balance and harmony overall:

- 1) A great head---evaluate head planes, ear set/length, eye shape and size, etc.
- 2) A smooth puppy overall---no wrinkles over the withers. If roughness and wrinkling into wither is pronounced it is probably due to high set (upright) shoulders.
- 3) A level topline from the withers to the tail. A noticeable dip behind the withers, where the vertebrae change direction will get worse and is highly inheritable. Problems such as sloping croup, sagging topline, low tail set, or high in rear usually do not get better with maturity.

4) Look for the front assembly to be very angulated in shoulder placement and especially the upper arm placement and length. This is a **SERIOUS** problem in our breed---straight upper arms, short upper arms or a combination of both. If the puppy is straight or shows an upper arm angle that is **JUST** acceptable if he were an adult---you can bet the upper arm will be too straight once the puppy is mature and an adult. The angulation-- -both front and rear assemblies-- -will get steeper on the great majority of lines. A few lines stay the same, and even fewer seem to get more----but a majority of the lines will **LOSE** angulation as they mature.

SO---look for front assemblies that are angulated properly. This is the one most serious mistake most people make when evaluating puppies. They look for the puppy that has **ADULT** proportions. This is a very difficult concept to go against----looking at puppies **DIFFERENTLY** than adults.

5) The front legs should be straight as they leave the body and proceed to the pasterns and the foot. The width between the legs should be moderate. The elbows should lie close to the body---but not pinched under the body with the front legs toeing out. Any puppy that toes in or severely toes out will be graded as a pet. Toeing in is very faulty in a young puppy. Toeing out---if it is ever so slightly, often corrects itself as the body widens and the puppy matures---as the elbows will be pushed out slightly and this in turn allows the front legs to correct and turn more straight ahead. Too little or too much bone, weak pasterns, and poor feet will probably not improve and are faults that can be problematic to remove from breeding program.

6) From the side the puppy should show some forechest, good length of sternum, and proper length of ribcage. The brisket should be deep (almost too deep if you were looking at an adult) and at or slightly below the elbow. A sternum that ends between the front legs or just slightly behind them is indicative of a short sternum. Remember the $2/3$ to $1/3$ ratio discussed and illustrated on slide 54 of the NBC Judge's Education Power Point Presentation. Puppies that have a shallow or concave forechest probably has a front assembly that is straight and too far forward. The deep body makes the legs look too short. When puppies are "tall, leggy and not deep and full" through the brisket, with depth and spring of rib and nice width through the loin----the "tall drink of water" look continues to be just that----often being taller than long, more slab sided, instead of beautiful spring of rib and proper loin development.

7) The rear assembly should be scrutinized like the front. The tail set should be proper---with the puppy carrying the tail at 12 to 1 o'clock when moving around happily. The stifle should have good angle at this puppy age and short hocks perpendicular to the ground. Remember, most lines will lose angulation-- --front and rear----and will be straighter than the puppy angulation. This is why it is important to look for more exaggerated angles in a puppy. Pasterns and hocks should look short and firm. Hocks that turn in (cow hocked) will probably remain and become obvious as the puppy matures. Some puppies with lots of angulation may move loose in rear but standing still should stand properly without signs of being cow hocked.

8) Observe the puppies moving on their own and on leash. Do they toe out, flip the front, elbow out? Is the movement restricted? Do they hock in or have that “dirty diaper” look in rear when moving? Does topline dip while moving? Tail carriage while moving correct?

9) Puppies should come to people happily at this stage. Any puppy that is stand offish and does not show confidence and happiness in life will need more work and never be a “show dog”. A puppy that cowers or runs away constantly is a pet.

Breeders need to be critical when grading their puppies. Pronounced problems in puppies usually do not get better. This is a big mistake. Ask the opinion from someone who is or has been where you want to be in your breeding program. Ask the “experienced” breeder/exhibitor who has been successful in breeding/showing good beagles. Many people have never seen a "great" litter that had many Champions in it, or even a litter that had a Top Twenty dog in it. Try to ask to be present when a top breeder is grading their or someone else's litter and listen to their critique and what the overall litter looks like. Experience is the greatest teacher.

Don't be Sentimental! Sentimentality is the downfall of breeders. It causes breeders to make poor decisions and rationalize their decisions. Don't do it! Be realistic with yourself and your litter.

A nice, average Champion Bitch bred to a good producing sire will probably produce a nice litter with a Champion prospect in it. Don't sell a marginal puppy as a “show prospect” that you would not buy. It is so disappointing to talk to your puppy owners that fail to win because their dog lacks quality. It is better to place marginal puppies as pets and sell the “star” into a great show home.

Be critical –Be brutal—Be honest—Be realistic

Additional articles on a structured evaluation of puppies may be found at <http://www.aladarbeagles.com/jdsystem.html> (Jean Dills Method) and <http://www.aladarbeagles.com/evalua2.html> (Darlene Stewart).

