

German Shepherd Dog – Breed Standard

CKC - Group VII – Herding Dogs – January 2004

General Appearance

The first impression of a good German Shepherd Dog is that of a strong, agile, well-muscled animal, alert and full of life. It should both be and appear to be well balanced, with harmonious development of the forequarter and hindquarter. The dog should appear to the eye, and actually be, longer than tall, deep bodied, and present an outline of smooth curves rather than corners. It should look substantial and not spindly, giving the impression both at rest and in motion of muscular fitness and nimbleness without any look of clumsiness or soft living.

The Shepherd should be stamped with a look of quality and nobility, difficult to define but unmistakable when present. The good German Shepherd Dog never looks common.

Secondary sex characteristics should be strongly marked, and every animal should give a definite impression of masculinity or femininity, according to its sex. Dogs should be definitely masculine in appearance and deportment; bitches, unmistakably feminine, without weakness of structure or apparent softness of temperament.

The condition of the dog should be that of an athlete in good condition, the muscles and flesh firm and the coat lustrous.

Temperament

The breed has a distinct personality marked by a direct and fearless, but not hostile, expression, and self-confidence and a certain aloofness which does not lend itself to immediate and indiscriminate friendships. The Shepherd Dog is not one that fawns upon every new acquaintance. At the same time, it should be approachable, quietly standing its ground and showing confidence and a willingness to meet overtures without itself making them. It should be poised, but when the occasion demands, eager and alert, both fit and willing to serve in any capacity as companion, watch dog, blind leader, herding dog or guardian; whichever the circumstances may demand.

The Shepherd Dog must not be timid, shrinking behind its master or handler, nervous, looking about or upward with anxious expression or showing nervous reactions to strange sounds or sights, or lackadaisical, sluggish, or manifestly disinterested in what goes on about him. Lack of confidence under any surroundings is not typical of good character. Cases of extreme timidity and nervous unbalance sometimes give the dog an apparent, but totally unreal, courage and it becomes a “fear biter,” snapping not for any justifiable reason but because it is apprehensive of the approach of a stranger. This is a serious fault subject to heavy penalty.

Size

The ideal height for dogs is 25 inches (64 cm), and for bitches, 23 inches (58 cm) at the shoulder. This height is established by taking a perpendicular line from the top of the shoulder blade to the ground

with the coat parted or so pushed down that this measurement will show the only actual height of the frame or structure of the dog. The working value of dogs above or below the indicated height is proportionately lessened, although variations of an inch (3 cm) above or below the ideal height are acceptable, while greater variations must be considered as faults. Weights of dogs of desirable size in proper flesh and condition average between 75 and 85 lb. (34 and 39 kg); and of bitches, between 60 and 70 lb. (27 and 32 kg).

Coat

The Shepherd is normally a dog with a double coat, the amount of undercoat varying with the season of the year and the proportion of the time the dog spends out of doors. It should, however, always be present to a sufficient degree to keep out water, to insulate against temperature extremes, and as a protection against insects. The outer coat should be as dense as possible, hair straight, harsh and lying close to the body. A slightly wavy outer coat, often of wiry texture, is equally permissible. The head, including the inner ear, foreface, and legs and paws are covered with short hair, and the neck with longer and thicker hair. The rear of forelegs and hind legs has somewhat longer hair extending to the pastern and hock respectively. Faults in coat include complete lack of any undercoat, soft, silky or too long outer coat and curly or open coat.

Colour

The German Shepherd Dog differs widely in colour. Generally speaking, strong, rich colours are to be preferred, with definite pigmentation, and without appearance of a washed-out colour. White dogs are to be disqualified.

Head

Clean-cut and strong, the head of the Shepherd is characterized by nobility. It should seem in proportion to the body and should not be clumsy, although a degree of coarseness of head, especially in dogs, is less of a fault than over-refinement. A round or domey skull is a fault. The muzzle is long and strong with the lips firmly fitted, and its topline is usually parallel with an imaginary elongation of the line of the forehead. Seen from the front, the forehead is only moderately arched and the skull slopes into the long wedge-shaped muzzle without abrupt stop. Jaws are strongly developed. Weak and too narrow underjaws, snipey muzzles, and no stop are faults. Teeth: The strong teeth, 42 in number (20 upper and 22 lower) are strongly developed and meet in a scissors grip in which part of the inner surface of the upper teeth meets and engages part of the outer surface of the lower teeth. This type of bite gives a more powerful grip than one in which the edges of the teeth meet directly, and is subject to less wear. The dog is overshot when the lower teeth fail to engage the inner surfaces of the upper teeth. This is a serious fault. The reverse condition – an undershot jaw – is a very serious fault. While missing premolars are frequently observed, complete dentition is decidedly to be preferred. So-called distemper teeth and discoloured teeth are faults whose seriousness varies with the degree of departure from the desired white, sound colouring. Teeth broken by accident should not be severely penalized but worn teeth, especially the incisors, are often indicative of the lack of a proper scissors bite, although some allowance should be made for age. Eyes of medium size, almond shaped, set a little obliquely and not protruding.

The colour as dark as possible. Eyes of lighter colour are sometimes found and are not a serious fault if they harmonize with the general colouration, but a dark brown eye is always to be preferred. The expression should be keen, intelligent, and composed. The ears should be moderately pointed, open towards the front, and are carried erect when at attention, the ideal carriage being one in which the centre lines of the ears, viewed from the front, are parallel to each other and perpendicular to the ground. Puppies usually do not permanently raise their ears until the fourth or sixth month, and sometimes not until later. Cropped and hanging ears are to be discarded. The well-placed and well-carried ear of a size in proportion to the skull materially adds to the general appearance of the Shepherd. Neither too large nor too small ears are desirable. Too much stress, however, should not be laid on perfection of carriage if the ears are fully erect.

Neck

The neck is strong and muscular, clean-cut and relatively long, proportionate in size to the head and without loose folds of skin. When the dog is at attention or excited, the head is raised and the neck carried high, otherwise typical carriage of the head is forward rather than up and but little higher than the top of the shoulder, particularly in motion.

Body

The whole structure of the body gives an impression of depth and solidity without bulkiness. Forechest, commencing at the prosternum, should be well filled and carried well down between the legs with no sense of hollowness. Chest should be deep and capacious with ample room for lungs and heart. Well carried forward, with the prosternum, or process of the breastbone, showing ahead of the shoulder when the dog is viewed from the side. Ribs should be well sprung and long, neither barrel shaped nor too flat, and carried down to a breastbone which reaches to the elbow. Correct ribbing allows the elbow to move back freely when the dog is at a trot, while too round a rib causes interference and throws the elbow out. Ribbing should be carried well back so that loin and flank are relatively short. Abdomen firmly held and not paunchy. The bottom line of the Shepherd is only moderately tucked up in flank, never like that of a Greyhound.

Legs

The bone of the legs should be straight, oval rather than round or flat, and free from sponginess. Its development should be in proportion to the size of the dog and contribute to the overall impression of substance without grossness. Crooked leg bones and any malformation such as, for example, that caused by rickets, should be penalized. Pastern should be of medium length, strong and springy. Much more spring of pastern is desirable in the Shepherd Dog than in any other breeds, as it contributes to the ease and elasticity of the trotting gait. The upright terrier pastern is definitely undesirable.

Metatarsus (the so-called "hock"): short, clean, sharply defined, and of great strength. This is the fulcrum upon which much of the forward movement of the dog depends. Cow-hocks are a decided fault, but before penalizing for Cow-hocks, it should be definitely determined, with the animal in motion, that

the dog has this fault, since many dogs with exceptionally good hindquarter angulation occasionally stand so as to give the appearance of cow-hockedness which is not actually present.

Feet

Rather short, compact, with toes well arched, pads thick and hard, nails short and strong. The feet are important to the working qualities of the dog. The ideal foot is extremely strong with good gripping power and plenty of depth of pad. The so-called cat-foot, or terrier foot, is not desirable. The thin, spread or hare-foot is, however, still more undesirable.

Topline

The withers should be higher than, and sloping into, the level back to enable a proper attachment of the shoulder blades. The back should be straight and very strongly developed without sag or roach, the section from the wither to the croup being relatively short. (The desirable long proportion of the Shepherd Dog is not derived from a long back but from overall length with relation to height, which is achieved by breadth of forequarter and hindquarter viewed from the side.) Loin: viewed from the top, broad and strong, blending smoothly into the back without undue length between the last rib and the thigh, when viewed from the side. Croup should be long and gradually sloping. Too level or flat a croup prevents proper functioning of the hindquarter, which must be able to reach well under the body. A steep croup also limits the action of the hindquarter.

Structure

A German Shepherd is a trotting dog and his structure has been developed to best meet the requirements of his work in herding. That is to say, a long, effortless trot which shall cover the maximum amount of ground with the minimum number of steps, consistent with the size of the animal. The proper body proportion, firmness of back and muscles and the proper angulation of the forequarters and hindquarters serve this end. They enable the dog to propel itself forward by a long step of the hindquarter and to compensate for this stride by a long step of the forequarter. The high withers, the firm back, the strong loin, the properly formed croup, even the tail as balance and rudder, all contribute to this same end.

Proportion

The German Shepherd Dog is properly longer than tall with the most desirable proportion as 10 is to 8-1/2. We have seen how the height is ascertained; the length is established by a dog standing naturally and four-square, measured on a horizontal line from the point of the prosternum, or breastbone, to the rear edge of the pelvis, the ischium tuberosity, commonly called the sitting bone.

Angulation

Forequarter: the shoulder blade should be long, laid on flat against the body with its rounded upper end in a vertical line above the elbow, and sloping well forward to the point where it joins the upper arm. The withers should be high, with shoulder blades meeting closely at the top, and the upper arm set on

at an angle approaching as nearly as possible a right angle. Such an angulation permits the maximum forward extension of the foreleg without binding or effort. Shoulder faults include too steep or straight a position of either blade or upper arm, too short a blade or upper arm, lack of sufficient angle between these two members, looseness through lack of firm ligamentation, and loaded shoulder with prominent pads of flesh or muscles on the outer side. Construction in which the whole shoulder assembly is pushed too far forward also restricts the stride and is faulty.

Hindquarters

The angulation of the hindquarter also consists ideally of a series of sharp angles as far as the relation of the bones to each other is concerned, and the thigh bone should parallel the shoulder blade while the stifle bone parallels the upper arm. The whole assembly of the thigh, viewed from the side, should be broad, with both thigh and stifle well muscled and of proportionate length, forming as nearly as possible a right angle. The metatarsus (the unit between the hock joint and the foot commonly and erroneously called the hock) is strong, clean and short, the hock joint clean-cut and sharply defined.

Tail

Bushy, with the last vertebra extended at least to the hock joint, and usually below. Set smoothly into the croup and low rather than high, at rest the tail hangs in a slight curve like a sabre. A slight hook – sometimes carried to one side – is faulty only to the extent that it mars general appearance. When the dog is excited or in motion, the curve is accentuated and the tail raised, but it should never be lifted beyond a line at right angles with the line of the back. Docked tails, or those which have been operated upon to prevent curling, disqualify. Tails too short, or with clumpy end due to the ankylosis or the growing together of the vertebrae, are serious faults.

Gait

General Impression: The gait of the German Shepherd Dog is outreaching, elastic, seemingly without effort, smooth and rhythmic. At a walk it covers a great deal of ground, with long step of both hind leg and foreleg. At a trot, the dog covers still more ground and moves powerfully but easily with a beautiful co-ordination of back and limbs so that, in the best examples, the gait appears to be the steady motion of a well lubricated machine. The feet travel close to the ground, and neither fore nor hind feet should lift high on either forward reach or backward push. The hindquarter delivers, through the back, a powerful forward thrust which slightly lifts the whole animal and drives the body forward. Reaching far under, and passing the imprint left by the front foot, the strong arched hind foot takes hold of the ground; then hock, stifle, and upper thigh come into play and sweep back, the stroke of the hind leg finishing with the foot still close to the ground in a smooth follow-through. The overreach of the hindquarter usually necessitates one hind foot passing outside and the other hind foot passing inside the track of the forefeet and such action is not faulty unless the locomotion is crabwise with the dog's body sideways out of the normal straight line. In order to achieve ideal movement of this kind, there must be full muscular co-ordination throughout the structure with the action of muscles and ligaments positive, regular and accurate.

Back Transmission

The typical smooth, flowing gait of the Shepherd Dog cannot be maintained without great strength and firmness (which does not mean stiffness) of back. The whole effort of the hindquarter is transmitted to the forequarter through the muscular and bony structure of the loin, back, and withers. At full trot, the back must remain firm and level without sway, roll, whip or roach. To compensate for the forward motion imparted by the hindquarter, the shoulder should open to its full extent – the desirability of good shoulder angulation now becomes apparent – and the forelegs should reach out in a stride balancing that of the hindquarter. A steep shoulder will cause the dog either to stumble or to raise the forelegs very high in an effort to co-ordinate with the hindquarter, which is impossible when shoulder structure is faulty. A serious gait fault results when a dog moves too low in front, presenting an unlevel topline with the wither lower than the hips. The Shepherd Dog does not track on widely separated parallel lines as does the terrier, but brings the feet inward toward the middle line of the body when at trot in order to maintain balance. For this reason a dog viewed from the front or rear when in motion will often seem to travel close. This is not a fault if the feet do not strike or cross, or if the knees or shoulders are not thrown out, but the feet and hocks should be parallel even if close together. The excellence of gait must also be evaluated by viewing from the side the effortless, properly coordinated covering of ground.

Summary

It should never be forgotten that the ideal Shepherd is a working animal which must have an incorruptible character combined with body and gait suitable for the arduous work which constitutes its primary purpose. All its qualities should be weighed in respect to their contribution to such work, and while no compromise should be permitted with regard to its working potentiality, the dog must nevertheless possess a high degree of beauty and nobility.

Evaluation of Faults

Note: Faults are important in the order of their group, as per group headings, irrespective of their position in each group.

Very Serious Faults

Major faults of temperament; undershot lower jaw.

Serious Faults

Faults of balance and proportion; poor gait, viewed either from front, rear or side; marked deficiency of substance (bone or body); bitchy male dogs; faulty backs; too level or too short croup; long and weak loin; very bad feet; ring tails; tails much too short; rickety condition; more than four missing premolars or any other missing teeth, unless due to accident; lack of nobility; badly washed-out colour; badly overshot bite.

Faults

Doggy bitches; poorly carried ears; too-fine in head; weak muzzles; improper muscular condition; faulty coat, other than temporary condition; badly affected teeth.

Minor Faults

Too coarse head; hooked tails; too light, round or protruding eyes; discoloured teeth; condition of coat, due to season or keeping.

Disqualifications

Albino characteristics; cropped ears; hanging ears (as in a hound); docked tails; male dogs having one or both testicles undescended (monorchids or cryptorchids); white dogs.