

Brittany Judging Simplified

By: Diana Kubitz

I am the judge's education coordinator for the American Brittany Club. One of the comments I hear routinely is that the Brittany is a hard breed to judge. When I ask why they think it's hard, usually they start by listing the difference between Brittanys and the other sporting breeds.

- Scissors bite – The Brittany is required to have a scissors bite, while most sporting breeds call for an even or scissors bite.
- Height Standard – The Brittany height standard is 17 ½ inches to 20 ½ inches for both males and females. Most of the other sporting breeds have one height standard for males and one for females. We generally explain that you can have a 17 ½ inch male and a 20 ½ inch female and have it be perfectly correct. Anything below 17 ½ or over 20 ½ is a DQ. (The only other DQ is black in the nose or coat.)
- Movement – The Brittany calls for having an athletic gait that is ground covering without clumsiness, but we also have an overreach. The standard says that the back foot should step into or beyond the print left by the front foot. Most of the other sporting breeds do not overreach.

Of the three differences stated above, movement give judges the most trouble. First, a Brittany should never be judged standing. Judge's mouths drop open when I say this or they disagree right away. I had a judge recently take up 15 minutes of a hands on class telling me what he liked about each dog standing. I finally looked at him and said, ok, now let's have them move. When the dogs began to move, his jaw dropped and he looked at me and said, "I see what you mean. The dogs I liked standing fell apart when they moved." Now this isn't always the case, some dogs that look good standing, look good moving too, but that is the point. Many dogs' toplines change the moment they start to move, some dogs have a short upper arm that causes them to "flip" their front and others lose their "balance" when they move. Balance being the overall balance of the dog's conformation.

I tell judge's about what I call the "3M's" – Movement, Moderate, and Medium. Add balance to those three things and you have a true Brittany type. Everything about the Brittany standard is written so that the dog can perform in the field. The American Brittany Club's mission statement includes the phrase: "to keep the Brittany forever a dual dog." We have more dual champions than all the other sporting breeds combined – at last count I believe it was 608.

All through our standard you hear the words moderate and medium, describing various aspects of the breed's conformation. As I stated above if you add movement and balance, you have the essence of a Brittany. AKC reps sometimes get on judges because they think a specific dog may have a better head than the one the judge put up. One judge recently called to tell me of his experience and he said, "I told her the breed does not run on its head, and the dog I put up had much better movement than the one you liked." He couldn't see my smile over the phone, but I was beaming! As a JEC I love to hear that judge's like this one actually listen to our presentations, but it concerns me that most AKC reps haven't even attended our classes.

When judges ask us what percentage the head makes up in our standard, we smile and say we took that out of our standard because this is NOT a head breed. While we like them to have beautiful heads, it's more important that they have a prominent brow that protects their eyes in cover, that their nostrils are full and open so they can smell birds and that they have a good bite so they can pick up the birds for a retrieve. The most important thing is their movement, because if they do not move correctly, they will wear out quickly in heavy brush. When they have that short upper arm, they can actually injure their front legs moving through the brush. While coming and going is important, most important is the side movement, because that is where you can see our breeds beautiful ground covering stride.

I would be remiss if I didn't point out the other problem that judges sometimes have with our breed. Square is in the eye of the beholder. A dog can look long in body, but when you have a chance to measure from the top of the withers to the ground and then measure from the forechest to the rear of the dog, it should be the same length. Measuring from the top of the withers to the elbow should equal the measurement from the elbow to the ground. The length of a Brittany is in the chest which allows it to have adequate room for an athlete's heart and lungs. If you think a dog is long, be sure to look at both sides of the dog, because many times they have markings that further that illusion of length. A dog that is overly square will crab or side wind, because they can't get out of their own way. I encourage students of the breed to make the opportunity to try this measuring experiment as it will help you develop your "eye" for the correct look for a square Brittany.

That brings me to the final point I'd like to make, coat. The Brittany's coat should protect it in all types of cover. Our standard points out that "too little is preferable to too much." It says that because if you've ever seen a heavily coated dog after running in the briars for an hour, you just have to wonder how long it's going to take you to get all those pesky little briars out. The Brittany still functions in the field and while an individual may never get the opportunity of a field experience, if he was turned loose in a field, could he function without injury and in an athletic fashion? That is a judge's responsibility to determine when judging this wonderful, energetic, intelligent, and athletic breed, with "the soft expression of a bird dog."

