

YOU BE THE JUDGE

By Robert Cole

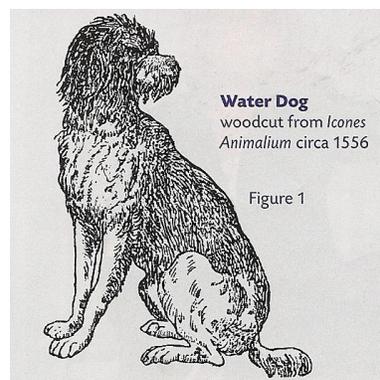
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THE IRISH WATER SPANIEL

HISTORY

According to Harry Glover, author of *The Standard Guide to Pure-Bred Dogs*, there's little doubt that the Irish Water Spaniel owes its origins to the European Water Dog (Figure 1), which he informs us was also an ancestor of the Poodle. This woodcut is from the 4,000-page *Icons Animatum* produced by Conrad Gessner over the period 1551-57.

For the book *General History of Quadrupeds*, Thomas Bewick (1752-1828) produced a woodcut of the Large Rough Water Dog (Figure 2), which is closer in appearance to today's Irish Water Spaniel than Conrad Gessner's woodcut. This woodcut also resembles the Otterhound, a breed said to be an IWS ancestor (in addition to the Portuguese Water Dog and a setter or two).



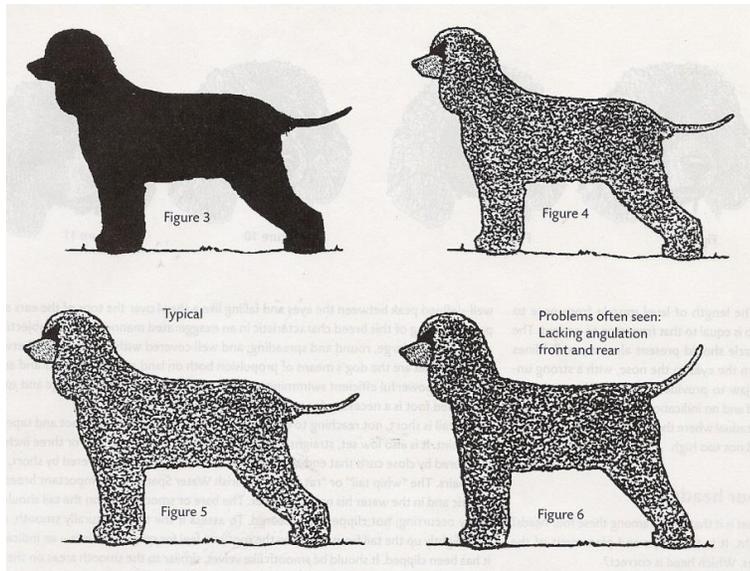
The Irish standard (FCI) informs us that the exact origins of the breed remain obscure. Generally it is thought that water spaniels evolved from dogs that originated in Persia and came to Ireland via Spain. The first Irish reference to water dogs that pursue waterfowl dates from 1600, so we know that dogs with waterproof coats were used in Ireland even before the advent of the flowing piece. There is no real evidence of the ancestry of the Irish Water Spaniel except in its most peculiar feature, the rat tail. This feature appears in no similar dog and makes it very likely that the modern breed had an indigenous Irish ancestor. The tail has given rise to the names "Whit Tail" and "Rat Tail".

By the mid-1800s the breed had changed considerably. It would appear that the breed as we know it today began with a Mr. Justin McCarthy, although nobody knows how. Poodles, Curly-Coated Retrievers, Afghan Hounds, Bloodhounds and many others have all been suggested as partly responsible, but the truth will probably never be known.

Mr. McCarthy's most famous Irish Water Spaniel was 'Boatswain', who was born in 1834 and lived to be 18. The breed gradually became established over the years, both in the show ring and in the field. In 1862, the Birmingham Dog Show became the first to hold classes for the breed. Over the years, things were not always easy for the IWS. During the First World War, the breed was saved from near extinction by a few dedicated enthusiasts.

The breed progressed gradually between the wars and after the Second World War. Today the Irish Water Spaniel, although ranked 121st with the AKC, is still widely sought for its unusual qualities, and is to be found in every state and province.

There is no member of the Sporting Group with a more distinctive silhouette or more distinguishing features than the Irish Water Spaniel (Figure 3). He has been described as the Clown of Spaniels due in part to his smooth face, shaved neck, large feet, long oval-shaped ears, unusual closely curled coat (Figure 4) and his somewhat ridiculous tail, which starts off at the base looking like a dog's tail but turns into one more resembling that of a rat. He works as a hunter, puts up game, retrieves, has a good nose and is a great companion.



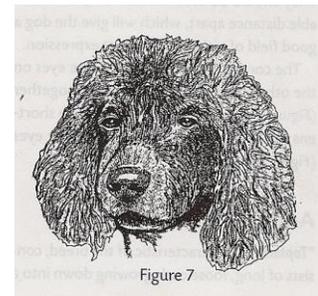
TYPICAL AND LACKING ANGULATION

With the original purpose of this breed in mind, the desire for good angulation front and rear is taken into account.

Figure 5 represents typical. Figure 6 demonstrates departure from correct structure, having a short upper arm, and insufficient angulation in the shoulder blade, stifle and hock joint. There is a sharp break rather than a smooth flow of neck into withers. The forequarters are too far forward and the tail sets on high. Having touched briefly on major breeder concerns, let's turn now to those features that set this breed apart, beginning with the head. (Figure 7).

THE HEAD

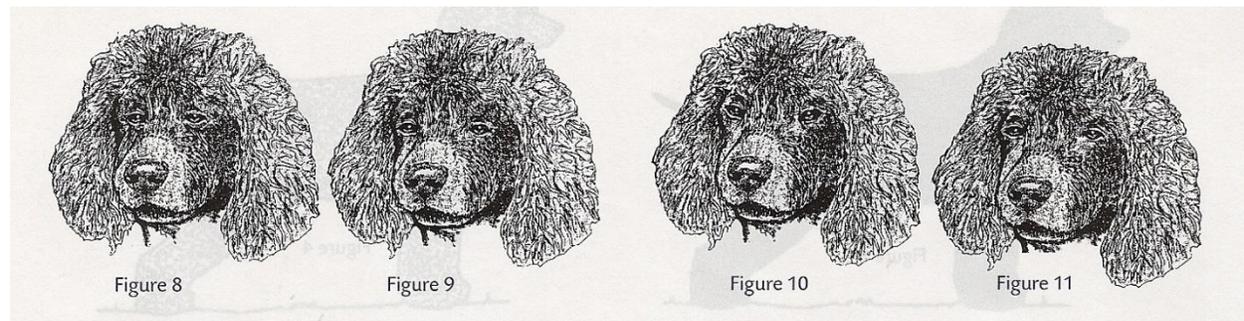
“The head is a cleanly chiseled, not cheeky, and should not present a short, wedge shaped appearance. The skull is rather large and high in the dome, with a prominent occiput and a gradual stop. The muzzle is square and rather long, with a deep mouth opening and lips fine in texture. The nose large and liver in color. Teeth are strong and regular with a scissors or level bite. The hair on the face is short and smooth, except for a beard which grows in a narrow line at the back of the jaw.”



The length of level muzzle from nose to stop is equal to that from stop to occiput. The muzzle should present almost parallel lines from the eyes to the nose, with a strong underjaw to provide mouth depth to grip the bird and no indication of snipeyness. The stop is gradual where the eyes are set into the head and not too high.

FOUR HEADS

What is it that differs among these four heads? Right. It is the shape and placement of the eyes. Which head is correct?



THE EYES

The eyes are almond shaped, hazel (the darker the colour the better), medium in size, intelligent and alert. The almond shape is specifically mentioned and should be strictly adhered to. Loose eye rims and oval or triangular eyes are incorrect and should be penalized. Eye colour is a problem, with a very dark eye being genetically very difficult to breed in a liver dog, so any shade of brown (except an eye tending toward yellow) is acceptable. The standard does not mention the positioning of the eyes. They should be set into the head, a reasonable distance apart, which will give the dog a good field of vision and correct expression.

The correct head is Figure 11. The eyes on the other three dogs are: too close together (Figure 8); too low on the head, which shortens the muzzle (Figure 9); and slanting eyes (Figure 10).

ADDITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

“Topknot – A characteristic of the breed, consists of long, loose curls growing down into a well-defined peak between the eyes and falling like a shawl over the tops of the ears and occiput. Trimming of this breed characteristic in an exaggerated manner is highly objectionable.”

The feet are large, round and spreading, and well covered with hair over and between the toes. The feet are the dog’s means of propulsion both on land and in the water and are essential to the powerful efficient swimming motion; therefore, they must be large and spreading. A webbed foot is a necessity for a water dog.

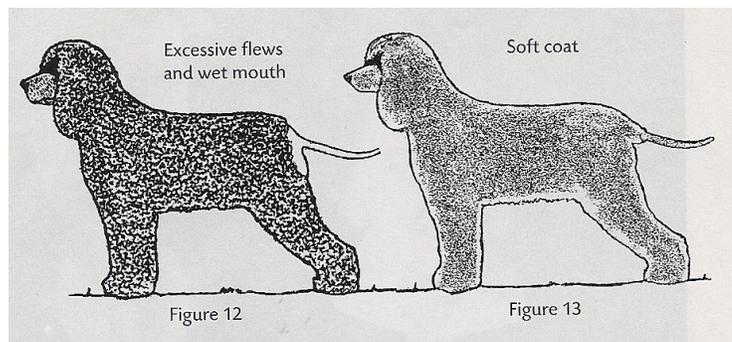
The tail is short, not reaching to the hock joint, straight, thick at the root and tapering to a fine point. It is also low set, straight and carried level with the back. Two or three inches of tail is covered by close curls that end abruptly; the remainder is bare or covered by short, straight, fine hairs. The “whip tail” or “rat tail” of the Irish Water Spaniel is an important breed characteristic and in the water his natural rudder. The bare or smooth area on the tail should be naturally occurring, not clipped or scissored. To assess if the tail is naturally smooth, run your hand lightly up the tail from the tip to the root and feel for spiky short hair – an indication that it has been clipped. It should be smooth like velvet, similar to the smooth areas on the face and neck. The hair on the face up to the peak is smooth and should not be clipped, as the naturally smooth areas of short velvety hair are a major characteristic of this breed.

“Proper double coat is of vital importance to protect the dog while working. The neck, back, sides, and rear are densely covered with tight, crisp ringlets, with the hair longer underneath the ribs. Forelegs are well covered with abundant curls or waves. The hind legs should also be abundantly covered by hair falling in curls or waves, except that the hair should be short and smooth on the front of the legs below the hocks. The hair on the throat is very short and smooth, forming a V-shaped patch. All curled areas should be clearly defined by curls of sufficient length to form a sharp contrast with the smooth coat on face, throat, tail, and rear legs below the hocks. Fore and hind feet should be well clothed with hair both over and between the toes. Dogs may be shown in natural coat or trimmed. However, no dog should be groomed or trimmed so excessively as to obscure the curl or texture of the coat.”

The dog’s coat colour should be solid liver. With the exception of greying due to age, white hair or markings are objectionable.

FIGURE 12 OR 13?

An interesting judging scenario in a breed that is not one of the most popular. If I found myself judging this Open Dog class, I could make an educated choice based on my own experience with similar breeds; however, as part of the learning process I asked for opinions from longtime Irish Water Spaniel breeders. This graphic judging scenario is a way to highlight some of the concerns of Irish Water Spaniel breeders as well as some of the factors involved in the decision-making process. But before you start weighing virtues and faults, you must take into consideration what a “soft” coat is.



According to Frank Johnson’s *The Dictionary of Canine Terms* (1995), an “open coat is one that should be tight but is loose and parted.” In his book *Canine Terminology* (1992), the late Harold Spira describes an open coat as, “a sparsely haired coat, the fibers of which are widely separated from one another.” Either way it is not the “vital” water-repelling coat required by this water spaniel. The question put to IWS breeders as to which was the better IWS included Figure 12’s excessive flews and wet mouth, as well as the lack of hair on his buttocks (which in the breed is called a “baboon butt”), all other things being equal.

BREEDER RESPONSE

The Irish Water Spaniel breeders I questioned were evenly divided as to which of these two dogs should win, so that was a stalemate; however, they made some interesting comments that may colour your soft-coat thinking. One breeder remarked that a soft coat to one person could be the result of another person's failure to prepare the dog properly for the ring. Another breeder informed that a coat could take two to three years to fully mature. And still another advised that a blown coat (abundance of long, dead hairs) could be mistaken for a soft coat. We are informed that it is possible for the IWS to have a soft coat that curls, and lastly it is also possible to have a thickly coated dog without curls.

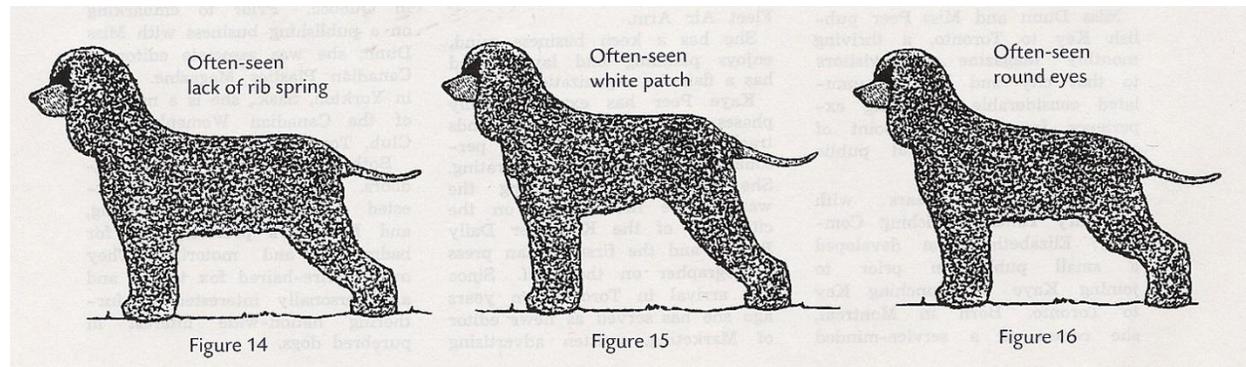
The baboon butt was very common in IWS, and still occurs. It is in the pedigree of nearly every IWS, making it difficult to eliminate. One breeder was adamant that a baboon butt should be more heavily penalized than a soft coat, while another breeder felt strongly that in addition to the bare rear, the baboon-butt dog had excessive flews and wet mouth – two faults that made picking up game difficult and should lose to the soft coat.

MY PLACEMENTS

Have these comments influenced your decision as to first place? The standard asks specifically that the rear should be densely covered, so it is a concern but not as great a concern as a soft coat. The standard advises that a proper double coat is of vital importance to protect the dog while working. Original purpose (and if they both had to work on that day) convinced me to give first place to baboon butt.

FIGURES 14, 15 AND 16

This illustrated judging scenario highlights nine important Irish Water Spaniel features. Each of these otherwise sound Irish Water Spaniels has two visible faults and one that can be seen only on close examination, so it is disclosed above each dog. Determine what these six faults are. Now taking into account the disclosed faults and keeping in mind the purpose of the breed, place these three dogs in order of merit.



MY PLACINGS

Have you decided on your placements? Each of the three have both virtues and faults. Figure 14's two visible faults are a coarse head and a long body. His disclosed lack of rib spring is a concern. Figure 15's tuck-up, long legs and white patch disturb, but not more than Figure 16's sloped topline, long rear pasterns and round eyes. I placed Figure 15 first, Figure 16 second, and Figure 14 third.