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## W J Rasbridge - The Breed Standard

*Forward by Rita Bryden*

I decided to share this chapter, entitled The Breed Standard from the manuscript written in the early seventies by W J Rasbridge. Sadly he did not complete the book dedicated to the breed nevertheless he has left a valuable legacy.

He quietly, contributed, on request, to books written by others about the Irish Setter and other breeds. The author's appreciation for his encouragement and unquestionable knowledge was written on the flyleaf page of the copy sent to him on publication.

This chapter is offered for publication in the hope that all interested and involved in the breed will read, absorb what is written and this will assist both judges and breeders to firstly assess their stock, acknowledge good points, criticize shortcomings and give them the motivation to address and put right faults, prevalent in the breed today. Unsound movement for example resulting from faulty conformation.



Hopefully, many will agree that this explicit understanding of the breed and the standard from the pen of W J Rasbridge is a treasure. Would it not be a fitting tribute to his lifelong devotion and the huge contribution he made to the well being of the breed that all, officially, adopt Bill Rasbridge's elaboration of The Irish Setter Breed Standard.

# W J Rasbridge - The Breed Standard

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The official standard is not, and is not meant to be, a detailed description of an ideal Irish Setter. It merely sets out the essential and main characteristics. The first breed standard was drawn up by a committee of the Irish Red Setter Club, Dublin and was published in April 1886. The present day standard varies very little from that of 1886. The men who drew up that standard were nearly all practical shooting men and, when preparing it, had in their minds the configuration of a dog which experience had taught them was required to do the job of bird finding under the conditions to be met with on an Irish shoot. In passing it may also be mentioned that they were also clearly concerned, from personal motives, to boost the all red to the detriment of the parti-coloured. This idea of function must always be kept in mind in assessing an Irish Setter, even one that is intended simply as a pet. Only if it is can the requirement "must be racy" be correctly interpreted. Shooting in Ireland where conditions can be rough, weather inclement and birds scarce requires a dog which can combine stamina with speed, which is not cumbersome but can turn quickly into to its birds, which does not get discouraged by rain and wind and which keeps on the job with zest even when there appears to be no game. A whippet dog with the build of a sprinter is hardly likely to fulfil these requirements, neither is a heavily built cloddy dog. An Irish Setter is sometimes described as being "cobby". If it is it is not racy and therefore not typical.

Quality is a difficult thing to describe. All that can be said of it is that a dog of quality has an air which does not come just from sleekness of coat and a well groomed appearance. Its carriage and general appearance at once proclaim it a well bred animal.

Expression is again difficult to describe but once seen the true Irish Setter expression is unforgettable. It is at once wistful and alert. Nothing is more untypical than a flat deadpan look in an Irish Setter or a hard harsh look. The eyes should always give the impression that there is life in the brain behind them. Expression is not how the dog appears to you but how it looks at you. It is dependent not only on the alertness and mind of the dog but on the shape of the eyes, their spacing and how they are set in the head. A small beady eye is wrong, as is a large round one. Expression must suffer if the eyes are placed too close together or too far round the side of the skull. They should be on a line at right angle to the dog's long axis. Nothing helps more to ensure correct expression than a well marked stop, an almost perpendicular step-up from the top of the foreface to the top of the skull and prominent sharply cut brows below which the eyes look straight out along parallel lines.

The next section of the Standard, that dealing with the head and skull, is the one most frequently misinterpreted. Because the head is required to be "long and lean" there is a tendency to think that the longer and leaner the better. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There is one essential requirement in any dog, that there should be a harmonious relationship between its parts typical of the breed. That is what is meant when a dog is said to be "well balanced" or "proportionate". This applies to the head as much as to any other part of an Irish Setter's anatomy, from which it follows that a head may be too long or too narrow relative to the dog as a whole or may be too narrow for its length. To put the same thing another way, it may be too long for its width. An Irish Setter's head, broadly speaking, should fit into a system of parallel lines. Looked at in profile when the dog is standing normally on a level surface the top of the foreface should be horizontal, with the top of the skull parallel to it on a higher plane. It is entirely wrong for these two lines to converge towards one another. Setters in which that occurs usually lack stop and have blunt brows lacking chiselling. A Roman nose, that is to say a downward curve to the end of the foreface, is entirely untypical, ugly and undesirable. A slight upward tilt to the foreface such as a Pointer should have was more common at one time than to-day. It is not desirable but is more excusable than a Roman nose. The underline of the jaw should be clean cut and parallel to the top line of the foreface. There should be an absence of throatiness. Looked at from above the sides of the skull and of the foreface should be in parallel to one another and to the head tail axis of the dog. Any coarseness in a Setter's head usually occurs not in the skull pan itself but in the zygomatic arches, the bony structure at the side of the head just behind the eyes. The less these arches bulge the better. There should be no falling away before the eyes. As regards the foreface its width which should be maintained throughout its length should not be much less than that of the skull pan. It should finish in a square muzzle making an angle of near 90° degrees with the topline. An over jutting nose with a muzzle cut away and devoid of lip is abominable. On the other hand too much lip is undesirable.

Here I refer the reader, to the photograph on the facing page, of the late Mrs. M. Hempel's Danny o'Moy (a litter brother of Ch Norna) and Flair of Bowland. Note the cut away muzzle of the bitch and the rather overdone lip of the dog, the downward slope behind the eye of the bitch's skull and her. too low-set ears. Above all note how the topline of her foreface begins to slope up to the topline of the skull instead of being carried without change of direction to between the eyes. The stop should come midway between the point of the nose and the occiput, the bony protuberance at the rear of the skull. when the Standard says this should be well marked it does not mean that it should be exaggerated at the back of the head. The skull pan should be elliptical, in a horizontal plane and should not be broken up by bony ridges running down its long axis, or from that axis at an angle towards the eye. The other requirements of this section, as of that headed "eyes". are self-explanatory and



call for no elucidation.

The positioning of the ears is important and can affect expression. A keen dog will often lift its ears. That can be excused whereas misplacement cannot. As a rough guide, the top of the ear should be on a line somewhere near half-way between that of the eye and the bottom of the zygomatic arch. A fault which has recently tended to increase is that of the overlong ear. Such an ear is one which when stretched forward reaches well beyond half way between the eye and the nose.

It was not until the K.C. assumed responsibility for all breed standards and set itself the task of fitting all of them into a uniform frame that the standard of this breed made any mention of "mouth". Pre-war it was rare for any specialist judge to examine mouths. In other countries however "mouth" has always had much attention paid to it and in some of them malformation there or faulty dentition is a disqualifying fault. That is something to be borne in mind when exporting. How a British judge rates a faulty mouth depends on his general attitude to the fault and the degree in which it is manifest. Personally I would not be greatly concerned if a tooth was missing or if a dog was slightly over or undershot because teeth were misplaced or growing at the wrong angle. If however the jaws themselves were of unequal length I would take a more serious view but how serious would depend on the extent of the inequality.

Coming now to the Neck section, it is again necessary to give a warning against exaggeration. An overlong neck is just as faulty as a short one. It is often found that such a neck emerges from the body quite

wrongly and results in what is described as "a ewe neck". The proper neckline is tied in with correct shoulder placement. It should emerge in a smooth running line from the shoulders so as to appear of a piece with, and not stuck on to, the body. Shoulder placement is all important. The shoulder blade must slope both backwards and inwards towards the spine and it must be fairly long and proportionate to the humerus, the bone which makes an angle of just over  $90^{\circ}$  with it and links up with the foreleg, at the elbow. If the shoulder blade is too upright or too short and out of proportion with the humerus the elbow will be misplaced and front movement will suffer. If the area of the blade is small relative to the amount of muscle that is attached to it the latter will be haunched and the dog will appear "loaded in shoulder". When the Standard says "rather narrow in front" that does not mean "as narrow as possible". If the dog is to have any capacity for sustained galloping there must be some width of chest, all that is required is that that width should not be excessive so that the dog appears broad chested and heavy. It is a bigger fault for a setter to give the impression, when looked at from the front, of "two legs coming out of one hole" particularly if, as so often happens, with this formation the front legs are splayed with the distance between them less at the top than at the bottom. Again the over narrow front is usually accompanied by lightness of bone which accentuates the impression of weakness, which is one an Irish Setter should never convey. It is equally important that the dog should not be too short or too long in the leg. The latter with the "up in the air" appearance is creates even in a

deep chested dog is the worse fault. If the length from elbow to ground is much more than from elbow to withers (it may be rather less) the dog is hardly likely to be typical. The requirement that the "body should be proportionate" is so vague and meaningless as to constitute a serious blot on the standard. For what it is worth my view is that the right set of proportions is one where the height at withers is slightly less than the horizontal distance between withers and set-on of tail. The body should reach to or only slightly short of the point of elbow. If an imaginary perpendicular dividing line is dropped through the point where the fly rib leaves the spine the impression conveyed by the portion of the dog in front of that line and by the portion behind it should match and be of a single dog. If the front section suggests a substantial solidly built dog and the rear a light whippet one the setter is unbalanced. An over long loin, particularly when it lacks muscle and gives a "wasp-waisted" impression, is functionally wrong and therefore a bad fault. The spine must be straight, neither dipped nor arched nor forming an arc, with the withers as its highest point. It sometimes happens that an irregular vertebrae placement occurs between the dorsal and the lumbar regions I think this fault is hereditary and I have found it usually results in the dog's having a lean, unthrifty appearance. Whether the straight topline should be in a horizontal plane or sloped very slightly from withers to tail is a matter of opinion. I, basing myself on those at whose feet I sat to learn about the breed, have a preference for the slightly sloping topline. A dog gets its propulsion from its back legs. In one which was evolved to gallop effortlessly and for long periods over heavy and rough ground it is essential therefore that there should be great strength in the hindquarters and therefore width and that the action should be smooth. An Irish Setter should not taper away towards the rear but should be at least as wide in the pelvis as at the ribs. While there should be a gentle rounding off at the rump any sharp falling away is a sign of weakness and a fault, colloquially described as "goose rumped". The second thighs should show plenty of muscle. The line from hip joint to stifle should be nearly vertical and that from stifle to hock making an angle of about 45° with the ground, while the distances from hock to stifle and stifle to hip should be roughly equal, . Since the War there has been a tendency, in some strains, for the former length greatly to exceed the latter. This may result in what; passes for a "nice bent stifle" but it is faulty and a source of weakness. When it is accompanied by a hock set too high, the hock to stifle line becomes almost parallel to the ground, the dog leaves his behind him when moving and consequently lacks propulsion. A low set hock is a very desirable characteristic. When the dog is looked from the rear the hind legs should not incline either inwards or outwards at the hock and when moving should go in parallel lines. Faults in hind movement are failure to flex the hocks, a dragging moving of one or both legs and their moving too closely together. The forelegs should be parallel when viewed from the front or side. The dog is "back at the elbow" if its foot is in advance of its body. This spoils the profile view.

The tip of the tail should not extend beyond the hock and when moving the dog should display animation by moving its tail briskly from side to side. The tail should be of a fair circumference and strong at the root. A good indication of substance in a puppy is provided by the root of its tail. It adds greatly to an Irish Setter's appearance if it carries its tail naturally straight out behind it even when standing still. On the other hand a tail carried above the back like a hound's detracts from an Irish Setter's appearance.

The two final sections of the standard require little elucidation or comment. To-day, unfortunately, there is a tendency to over trim the ears, the feet and the back of the hind legs between hock and heel and so to take away from the dog characteristics the standard requires it to display. The removing of dead hair and trimming to show the outline of the ear is one thing, the shaving of it almost down to the ear produces a pointer ear which is quite wrong. Similarly the removal of all hair from between the toes tends to defeat its object of making the foot appear small, for it produces gaps between the toes and gives the foot a spread appearance.

Two faults are now to be seen in the breed, thin coats deficient in furnishings ("Pointer coats") and wavy coats. I regard the former as much the more serious simply because a "pointer coated" Irish Setter not only fails in appearance but also functionally. I have seen such dogs shivering in a wind, something no Irish Setter should ever do. The breed does not show the same wide range of coat colour that it used to do, say 30/40 years ago. The yellow and ultra dark liver coats are now seldom seen and taking the breed as a whole coat colour has never been so uniform as it now is. The colour of a newly shelled horse chestnut remains the ideal. Light feathering and linty ears detract from an Irish Setter's appearance. How a judge regards thin coats, wavy coats and light "breechings", if he objects to them at all is a matter of individual taste.

Discussion of the Standard must close with a warning. Although the Standard considers the Irish Setter feature by feature no dog should, or can be judged bit by bit. It must be seen as a whole and assessed in the light of the overall impression it makes. More important than any individual point is whether there is that harmonious relationship between the various parts which should characterise the typical specimen, what is usually referred to as balance or symmetry. To reason thus is, in a sense, to argue in a circle but the dilemma is inescapable. In the final analysis knowledge of what constitutes a true and typical Irish Setter will come not from repeated reading of the Standard but from careful and objectively detached study of the best specimens in the light of the Standard. Equally a dog cannot be judged with a ruler and protractor. The only measure to apply is the eye and that must have behind it a mind backed by experience and knowledge of the breed and free from all preconceptions and irrelevant prejudices