

How important is Size and color

by Dan Smith

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Two of my favorite subjects about our breed's Standard are color and size. Many of the following remarks will be highly opinionated, and you know what they say about opinions. Yes, everybody has one. Okay, let's keep it on the light side. (The time to get serious is when you have your Open Dog entered at a distant Specialty and when you get there, your handler tells you another Open Dog is entered that bred three of the judges bitches recently. Heavy, huh?) So if you disagree with my opinions on color and size, keep it light, but let me know your thoughts.

Let's take color first. I believe if we conducted a poll of, say, 100 exhibitors, judges, etc., you would find the color preference to be as follows:

45 would refer the black saddles with dark reddish tan elsewhere; 20 would like the black and lighter tan; 15 would select a dark bicolor; 15 would prefer a sable or gray; and 5 or less would choose solid black.

How important is color? The Standard mentions that strong rich colors are preferred, and pale, washed out colors, blues and livers are serious faults. A white dog must be disqualified.

It would seem to me, as long as a dog's color is acceptable, as per the Standard, color should not be a determining factor when a judge selects his winner. (Unfortunately, this is not the case. We have far too many judges who are looking for certain colors when they judge.) What about movement and mentality? The absence of correct movement and proper character are "very serious faults."

So why is it then that we have so many judges, breeders, etc., who openly criticize certain colors? You've probably heard the comment by judges, who almost apologetically admit they just can't see a black. I'm convinced and experienced that an impartial judge will have less trouble evaluating a solid black than any other color. The reason is that there is no color break in outline of a black dog; therefore, standing or moving, he is easier to evaluate. Incidentally, did you know there were three solid blacks in the R. Vom Osnabruckerland litter? A pedigree study shows Reina and Rena, black bitches, and Roland, a black male. I found that surprising, but also very interesting.

Then we have those who just can't see a sable. I really don't know what their excuse is. Personally, I think a good colored sable is very appealing to the eye. And if the other important qualities of structure, movement, and mentality are present, they should certainly not be penalized because they are sable. There is a color that is sometimes mistaken as sable: A dog with a fading black saddle. Here, the trim colors of tan and sometimes lighter tans come through in the saddle, giving a mixture of coat colors similar, but not as uniform as a sable.

We have only to mention Brix and Del Dena, and the K Waldesruh litter and the sable F. Arbywood's Fortune (the sire of Lance) to realize how important the sable has been to our popular American sires. There are many more.

In my 28 years in the breed, I have been fortunate in having had the opportunity to live with, train and show GSDs of all the acceptable colors. I have never been able to favor or categorize any of them because of color. I sure do get goose bumps, though, when I see a great mover go down through the yard. I lose sight of color, and if that same mover has great mentality and working dog potential, I believe I become color-blind.

Realistically, it's only natural to have a color preference, but we should not penalize a superior dog because it did not come in our favorite color.

Now, that other not-so-often discussed subject of size. Again, let's turn to the breed Standard and see what it says about size. Quote: "The desired height for males at the top of the highest point of the shoulder blade is 24 to 26 inches; and for bitches 22 to 24 inches." It does not mention the seriousness of oversize or undersize as a fault. The German Standard mentions the same size for dogs and bitches as the American Standard, but adds quote: "Anything outside these limits detracts from the suitability of the animal for working or breeding purposes." The British Standard agrees with the American and German versions in size, but does not mention faults or consequences outside of the desired limits.

Now that we have reviewed a few Standards pertaining to what the size of a GSD should be, let's get to the points of my writing:

First, let me say, I believe we have many, many dogs and bitches who are perfectly within the guidelines of our Standard size, and consequently, are being penalized for being too small. Yes, what I am saying is, our breed is growing in size. It seems like we Americans like everything big. Big cars, big homes, and now in our breed, it's the norm rather than the exception to see 28-inch males and 26-inch bitches in the show ring.

Someone asked me recently, what's wrong with a big male? My answer was, 'nothing, so long as what you consider big is somewhere around 26 inches at the top of the shoulder blade. That's the higher limits for our breed, and if we stand a 24-inch male beside the 26-inch male, I'm sure the 24-inch male will look very big. Anyone see a 24-inch male in the ring lately? (Okay, wise guy, so your 6-9 month puppy is only 24 1/2 inches. I'm talking about mature males.) My point here is the person asking what's wrong with a big male is campaigning a male over 27 inches at the whither.

His 27 1/2 inch male does not look out of place in most adult classes at the show, and herein lies the problem. The 26-inch male now looks small; the 25-inch male looks smaller; and the 24-inch male looks very small. **Before I get into the problems of the larger animal, let me point out the real tragedy of oversize: It is causing dogs of correct size and proportion to be penalized in the ring for being small.** This problem is generated from judges who continually put up larger dogs, and handlers and exhibitors who know they will be consistently more successful with an oversized dog.

An interesting comment so often heard from the fancy is that a large dog is more masculine. As I said earlier in this article, everyone has his or her opinion, but I don't believe oversize has much to do with masculinity. Would you say 7-foot Wilt Chamberlain is more masculine than Mohammad Ali? Or what about Bogey, Edward G., or Robert Conrad? Where they less masculine because they didn't reach 6 feet? Well, I am sure there are some that would say yes, but I believe you are in the minority.

Our breed is not a large breed. Its size is relevant to its purpose in life. Whether its herding, police work, leading the blind, searching for avalanche victims or protecting his master, the ideal GSD is strong, agile, and well-balanced. The desired size referred to in all Standards is the same. Why change a good thing?

There are many arguments about oversize from those who condone it. One breeder/judge in defending the oversize mentioned that the larger dog will take less steps to cover the same amount of ground as compared to the correct size dog. Now I've got to admit, that makes a lot of sense.

I could only say that with the additional weight carried by the larger dog, if proportions and all other structures were equal, I believe the correct sized animal would extend to his maximum gait for a longer period of time, and could endure longer than that of the oversized dog. The correct size dog should hit his period of suspension sooner rather than the oversized dog, since he will need less distance to acquire his maximum trot.

Again, the human comparison, there seems to be more medium sized distance runners and sprinters than the larger, taller, if you will, competitors.

I believe the most contributing factor to the larger dog is the success they have at the dog show. Breeders want to produce winners. The handler wants to win. If the oversize dog is winning over the correct size dog consistently, who is going to be brave enough to campaign an entry of proper size?

How serious is oversize? I've been at shows where a 26 1/2 inch male looked small. Yes, there are many large classes of dogs and bitches that have few or none of the correct size.

Should the oversize animal be penalized? If so, how? If a male or bitch is obviously over the desired size, the first thing that we would hope is that the judge is aware of the oversize. If there are other entries more correct in size, and overall, are equal in quality in every respect, the correct sized entries should be placed higher. In too many cases, however, the larger dogs are of better overall quality, and should, and do win. I certainly do not believe we should penalize a superior quality dog or bitch who has slipped over the top of their desired height a bit. Especially, if overall, there is no competitor on that day that equals his quality otherwise.

In summary, I believe breeders, handlers, exhibitors and judges should not give added credit to a male or bitch if they are oversize, and by all means, do not penalize a dog or bitch within the Standard's desired size as being small.