

Judging the Cardigan

by Andrea Georgi

The Cardigan is definitely a real clown; he is a zealous herding dog; he is a wonderful, loving family pet; and he is also hard to judge. But we're here to help by giving you a few main points to always keep in mind. There are, of course, many minor yet important points (such as correct huge round feet and fox brush tail), but we will concentrate on the 'must-haves',

I like to list four points which I feel are very basic to the correct Cardigan. They have to do with recognizing the silhouette of a Cardi and identifying it at a distance - key needs. My chosen qualities are:

- Long
- Low
- Correct ears
- Correct front (seen from the front)

Correct long length is a quality you must never compromise on. We have moved beyond this point in the breed some years ago and it is possible to find Cardigans of acceptable length in every entry. Short backed Cardigans are stuffy, incorrect, lacking in type and can't move correctly. The correct long length should come from rib cage, not the loin.

Low station is another point not to give in on. Leggy Cardigans are very incorrect and look like the pictures from many, many years ago. Don't misunderstand the lack of fill on the puppy, however. Generally, with a little visual examination you can see the puppy's structure and see that his chest just hasn't dropped yet, but the appropriate build and bone is there. Do not accept leggi-ness in an adult.

The Cardigan is not a head breed, but correct ears go a long way to establish type. Ears too highly set ("bunny rabbit ears") and the dog lacks breed type. Ears set too low are a fault, but not a breed type fault. Puppies in particular carry their ears low; as the judge, make an attempt to see the ears up at least once so you can observe correct carriage. These are really very large ears, rounded, never pointed.

Ears mean a lot. Card is are not hyper and super showy. They are a more relaxed breed and fun loving. They will gait with their ears laid back; they are not nearly so animated as their cousins, the Pembrokes, and shouldn't be expected to be.

Now for the front, difficult subject that it is. We're not talking here about layback and short upper arm, and so on. (Actually Corgis tend to have decent layback, but rather short upper arms.) We're talking about the front viewed from the front, a major breed consideration. Most judges wouldn't dream of rewarding a Basset or a Peke with a dead straight front, but there have been plenty of times when judges have done so with Cardigans, to the exasperation of knowledgeable breeders.

The leg bones of achondroplastic dogs bow - the rear ones as well as the front ones. The bowing on the rear legs is covered, however, by heavy muscle and is not visible. The forearms should curve to fit the well dropped, egg-shaped chest (very important). This is the so called "wrap-around" front and it puts the wrists closer together than the elbows. The feet turn out. It doesn't have to be a lot (and it shouldn't be more than 30 degrees), but the feet do need to turn out. This is for engineering reasons and to support all the weight that a Cardigan carries in its front assembly.

This turnout is very important. A straight front is a serious breed type fault; a front that turns too much is a soundness fault, but not a breed type fault.

The worst front is a flat chested (not dropped), wide, dead straight "terrier" front - and a lot of them used to win! We see lots of lovely fronts now, but unfortunately not in every entry. A correct front is something you may have to compromise a bit on. Not that one wants to, but it is a difficult thing to breed and you don't always find what you want as a judge.

The first three characteristics listed above one doesn't really want to give on - although I have put up a gorgeous dog or two with smallish ears - but you may have to put up with a less than perfect front. As long as there is some bowing and turnout, you're on the right track.

Finer points? Coats should be harsh - a soft coat is a working fault as this coat will hold mud and brambles and impede the dog's working ability. Sickie hocks can be a problem in the breed. Tail set should be low, but please be aware that any tail can be carried up if the dog is excited. Check the actual set on, don't just look at the carriage. A tail streaming out back is lovely to see; a tail carried over and touching the back is distinctly unlovely. Long 1:1 heads are not the most attractive, but again it is not a head breed.

Don't tolerate bad bites, however. Toplines should be level, but aren't always. I sometimes tolerate a bit of variance if the topline is firm but has a rise over the loin as this is present in the breed and is often due to heavy muscling and thick coat in that area.

Movement is pretty straightforward. There's no room here for short-stepped, hopping movement with little reach or drive. But much lackluster movement, believe it or not, can be actually handling/training error (especially if the dog is correctly built).

This breed works at a gallop and can turn on a dime - it's amazing to watch. The dog needs plenty of body length to do this-the short backed dog just hippity hops in this situation. (A good example of "Form Follows Function"!)

The fronts, when slowed down on film, are seen to straighten out when coming toward you and the legs and feet move true. However, you can't see this in the ring - the paws will appear to move in a little circle, with the wrists close together.

Temperament is generally very sweet, easy going, merry in a young dog, often more serious in an older dog. These are very bright dogs, excellent in obedience and very enthusiastic herders. They are very easy to live with. They are short legged, but not really small - they are pretty tough dogs and can take a lot of work. They are wonderful with children and good therapy dogs. Never accept shyness or aggression in the ring. Unsure but very sweet puppies are sometimes seen and just need reassurance and gentle treatment.

And don't forget: long, low, correct ears and correct front (if you can find it). Good luck and enjoy this wonderful breed!