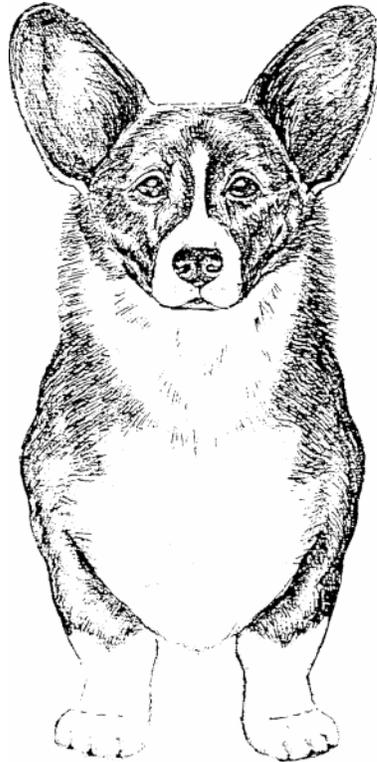


The Cardigan Front

Norma Chandler, 1995



When I was asked to write a commentary on the Cardigan front, I immediately thought of the statements so often heard around the ring, or in general conversation, "That judge always puts up the dog with the straightest front!" or "Judges just don't understand Cardigan fronts!" In defense of judges, have you taken a good look when they judge our breed? Be painfully honest - wide fronts and straight fronts (no, they're not the same problem); east-west fronts; straight shoulders and shoulders set too far forward; short upper arms; knuckled over pasterns; ugly thin feet and gnarly fronts with all the crook they need but no chest? With such diversity, no wonder some judges look askance at the Cardigan in the ring. It must seem to them we'll never get it right! Perhaps they are even as confused as we breeders by the many different fronts they see. In other breeds, you see a "sameness" even when faults are in evidence, in ours, it seems to be anybody's guess!

So what is the correct front, and can it ever, in all its crooked glory, be an attractive feature of the breed? In fact, when the structure is correct, none could ever think it unattractive. Peculiar to few breeds other than the Cardigan, the properly crooked and structured front is an important component of breed type, and quite lovely as well as functional.

To begin - no clear discussion can be had regarding fronts without first defining front, as opposed to forequarters. Canine Terminology (Harold R. Spira, author), defines forequarters as, "the combined front assembly from its uppermost component, the shoulder blade, right down to the feet." It then goes on to say, under Front Types - "Although technically the word 'front' includes all the components of the forequarter assembly, either singly or in combination, in practice it is generally used to describe that portion from the elbows to the feet as viewed front on..." It further lists and defines sixteen front types, illustrating seven, all of which pertain to straight-on views.

AKC's The Complete Dog Book (glossary) defines forequarters exactly as in Canine Terminology, and front as the "forepart of the body as viewed head on; i.e. forelegs, chest, brisket, and shoulder line." (Note that chest and brisket are included in the latter definition.)

For the purpose of this article, when I say front I will mean as the dog is facing me, and forequarters as the entire assembly from the shoulder blades down to the feet.

The Cardigan standard mentions chest and brisket under both NECK & BODY, and again under FOREQUARTERS. Under NECK & BODY, it describes the chest as follows: "Moderately broad with prominent breast bone. Deep brisket, with well sprung ribs to allow for good lungs." Beginning the section under FOREQUARTERS, we read the following, "The moderately broad chest tapers to a deep brisket, well let down between the forelegs."

Note the importance given to "moderately broad" and "deep brisket" in both these sections. Lung room is essential for a dog that must have endurance; else he would be winded and unable to carry on. Correct chest size and shape give him that room. This chest, from the front, has been described as "egg shaped", with the broadest part of this "egg" being uppermost. The chest then tapers to a deep brisket, permitting the legs to converge inward in an attempt to single track and maintain balance.

SHOULDERS - slope downward and outward from the withers sufficiently to accommodate desired ribspring.

Breeds such as the Saluki and the Greyhound have streamlined bodies with comparatively less ribspring than the Cardigan, but they also have very great depth of brisket for the lungpower so vital to the chase. The Cardigan, being a dwarf dog and low to the ground, makes room for his lungs by being as deep axis functionally possible and having good spring of rib. The shoulders slope down and out from the withers to accommodate this spring.

Shoulder blade (scapula) long and well laid back, meeting upper arm (humerus) at close to a right angle. Humerus nearly as long as scapula.

It is often difficult to feel the shoulder blades on a mature Cardigan, due to heavy muscling in this area. I sometimes "push" the leg upwards (as though the dog is standing

on uneven ground) while feeling for the blade with my free hand. You can then find the top of the blade and the shoulder joint as the blade moves. Keeping the fingers on the blade and joint, allow the leg to assume its natural standing position. Find the upper arm (much easier), this time using the hand that was pushing up the leg, and measure from its most forward end to the elbow joint. Remember not to measure to the point of the elbow, but just inside, at the joint. The elbow itself is but a protrusion of the leg bone (ulna).

Now you have your fingers stretching from the top of the blade to the shoulder joint, and from that joint to the elbow joint. They should be nearly equal in length and meet at close to a right angle. We have a serious problem with short upper arms in the breed, and should strive for optimum balance of shoulder and upper arm. It is not impossible for a dwarf breed - the Dachshund standard calls for these to be equal!

You may, at times, wish to assess a dog without the opportunity to actually lay hands on him, such as when you are at ringside. If you train your eye to know proper balance, you can become fairly accurate in your assessments.

A good way to "see" angulation and symmetry in the forequarters is to view the dog from the side in a natural stance - not set up or pulled together. There should be a well-developed forechest. The prominent part of the chest, the prosternum, should be only slightly lower than a point mid-way between the throat and the lower part of the brisket, where it disappears between the legs. Balance is the key here - the positioning of the "point of chest" an important clue to good forequarter structure. Studying the placement of bones in the skeletal drawing in the Illustrated Standard allows you to see under the coat and muscle - a good tool to understanding conformation.

It is not my intention to explain the multitude of problems which may occur as a result of faulty angulation and bone length - these are endless and involve many combinations, as well as wrong placement of the whole assembly. Several "looks," however, which are quite wrong, and only some of the problems which cause them, are:

Lack of adequate forechest- can be due to straight shoulders and upper arms. These dogs appear "stuffy" due to upright blades encroaching on the neck. They sometimes have some forechest showing, but the steep assembly hides the depth of chest. Worse yet - almost no forechest, usually caused by the steep assembly also placed too far forward. It is necessary to assess angulation from the side, for many times these dogs have ample chest from the front.

Legs "pinned on" at the front (also viewed from the side) - no matter how well the shoulder is laid, short or straight upper arms will always place the legs too far forward. These dogs will have forechest, but the legs will appear to come out of the lower front of the chest.

The balance of all these parts is crucial. According to The Dog in Action (McDowell Lyon, author) "The front assembly must assist or actually do the relifting of the center of gravity..." What more important argument can be made for good forequarters?!

Elbows should fit close, being neither loose nor tied.

A dog's elbows should fit snugly against the chest wall, but not so much as to restrict movement (tied). Neither should they be loose, causing loss of strength and energy and ruining the appearance by jutting out from the body. The appearance will be well fitted, neither too tightly held in nor protruding outward.

The forearms (ulna and radius) should be curved to fit spring of ribs. The curve in the forearm makes the wrists (carpal joints) somewhat closer together than the elbows.

We are now looking at the Cardigan front on. Our new Illustrated Standard shows two wonderful examples of the correct front (pp. 18, 21). The legs bow just enough. The chest is correctly shaped - the brisket deep. Think of the bow in the forelegs as a cradle for the chest, everything fitting together as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. As though they were made for each other. This is a beautiful front! Now take away the depth of chest, or make it wide or flat or round - is it still beautiful? In an attempt to single track, the dog now rocks. Poor dog, how tired he will become! Add another insult - that of straight forelegs with no bow - and you now have wide and straight. A Bulldog might be proud of this front, but are we? Now look at the dog that lacks adequate ribspring. The forearms curve to fit spring of ribs, placing the wrists closer together than the elbows. The narrow dog must be either too straight or his wrists will nearly touch. The correct front must have sufficient width and taper to a deep brisket. It must fill the crook, be "cradled" in the crook, and if that is accomplished it is lovely. Watch the Bassets and the Dachshunds in the ring - it is an education! They, too, are achondroplastic dwarfs, but they have pretty much mastered their front problems. Study them from the front and in profile. We see many of our front problems in these breeds in pets, but not in the ring. They have learned how to breed good fronts - so can we!

The feet are relatively large and rounded, with well-filled pads. They point slightly outward front a straight ahead position to balance the width of the shoulders. This outward point is not to be more than 30 degrees from the centerline when viewed from above.

Big, fat feet - I love them! Well-filled and "cushiony," round, never long or thin (although I'm sure most of us have at least one Cardi like this!) Never splayed. These feet point slightly outwards to balance the width of the shoulder. When the crook is well filled by the brisket, the outward turn is not at all unattractive. It is only when there is no depth that it becomes unsightly, for then the out turned feet and crook appear out of place and purposeless. Even too much turn is not unsightly if there is good drop of chest! Lack of chest, too much crook and east- west feet are what I think of as "gnarly" and unsound.

The pasterns are strong and flexible.

From the front, the pasterns should be fairly straight, or as straight as possible and still allow a slight turn. They should never slope outwards like an inverted V, which denotes weakness. In profile, the pasterns should slope slightly forward (not as in broken down). Think of them as a set of shock absorbers - following the setting down of the foot, the flexible pastern then provides lift to the center of gravity - pushing off, so to speak, with the next stride. Straight pasterns knuckle over and quiver, a serious fault. To demonstrate "quivering," The Dog in Action tells us to place the knuckles of the hand on a table top and press straight down on them, holding the wrist joint vertically. Then move the wrist slightly forward out of line, still pressing down, and notice the quivering that comes into the wrist. Our wrist is the equivalent of the dog's pastern, and while we cannot quite duplicate the slope of the pastern, we can see what happens with knuckling over.

The toes should not be splayed.

Nice and compact - not spread out.

Dewclaws removed.

They serve no purpose today; and the danger of a torn dewclaw is not worth leaving them on. And it's one less nail to cut!

Overall, the bone should be heavy for a dog of this size, but not so heavy as to appear coarse or reduce agility.

Quality of bone is foremost. Good, dense bone, carried all the way down, does not mean coarse bone! The bone should be heavy for a dog of this size. In other words, more than a terrier, but certainly not what you want on a Mastiff! Not sharp, but rather smooth as though carved in ivory. Under General Appearance the bone is described as "moderately heavy" and that is just what it should be. More doesn't mean better, and can in fact mean clunkier!

Knuckling over; straight front; fiddle front are serious faults.

We've discussed these three, the fiddle front being the "gnarly" one.

Although the standard makes no mention of length of leg, this would not seem complete without doing so. Look at the skeleton presented on page 13 of the Illustrated Standard. Notice how nearly symmetrical are the proportions of shoulder blade, upper arm, and leg. Notice, also, how the elbow is positioned above the bottom of the rib cage. A dog is not leggy when his ribcage is below the elbow - yet, take the same picture and raise the rib cage so that it is shallow and does not fall below the elbow and the dog is leggy. Same amount of leg but no depth of chest! When you have a truly short foreleg, the dog with a correct amount of chest will be too low.

Think of basic body structure rather like the chassis of a car. One chassis may be the foundation for many different styles, but the chassis stays the same. It looks different because of the features built on the exterior, but inside, it is still the same chassis. The frame of a dog is rather like that - all the same bones are there in a specific order determined by nature ("the leg bone's connected to the knee bone," etc.) What gives each dog its "look" as a breed, or an individual, is the manner in which the parts are attached, as well as the shape, length, size and angle of these parts.

In conclusion, remember always to look for balance. Good forechest almost centered between throat and lower brisket; rib cage below the elbow; slightly sloping pasterns and good feet. And, while not part of the section under forequarters, look for the moderately long, well set on neck, indicating good layback of shoulder.

And from the front, the egg-shaped chest, cradled by and filling the curve of the forearms; the rather straight pasterns with only slightly out turned feet; smoothly fitted elbows and no bossiness of shoulder.

When you have all this, you will have balance of forequarters and front - easier said than done, but it can be done! Talk to the breeders who have done it - learn from them – understand what you are breeding and what you can do to achieve this goal. We have all bred dogs that fall short of the ideal. The difference between breeders is – the good ones learn, then use that knowledge in their breeding program. That knowledge can be yours, too, if you look for it.