

The Labrador Retriever

An explanation and extension of the Breed Standard Compiled by Mrs Patricia Dunstan Strangways Labrador Retrievers (January 2008)

The Labrador was carefully bred up over time by the British sporting gentry from dogs brought back to England in the 19th century by the early cod fishermen of Newfoundland. These dogs were found to have unique characteristics which made them exceptional retrievers both on land and in the water. The dogs were expert in retrieving and bringing to hand objects which otherwise could not have been recovered.

They were strongly built, short coupled, very active dogs, a hardy breed with exceptionally strong retrieving instincts and a will to please. Added to these attributes they had certain distinct features which enabled them to work under all types of conditions. Great emphasis must be placed on these features, and in the words of the late Mary Roslin-Williams: 'These are not fancy points, but in a subtle way they lead to the correct Type of Labrador'.

The features are: The Head
 The Weatherproof Double Coat
 The Otter Tail

The Labrador's attributes made the dog a very attractive retriever to the 19th-century sporting shooter, whose pastime had become increasingly popular with the inception of the breech loading shot gun. The dog acquired some enthusiastic wealthy patrons, among whom were the second Earl of Malmesbury and his friend the fifth Duke of Buccleuch. In 1822, the Earl of Malmesbury purchased a 'black water dog' from Newfoundland whom he discovered retrieving sticks in Poole Harbour, while the Duke of Buccleuch is recorded as having purchased several of these dogs between 1825 and 1835.

About this time the third Earl of Malmesbury began to seriously breed these imported dogs and finding the name the Lesser Newfoundland far too long decided to call the breed the Labrador.

By the end of the 19th century the Labrador was well established, though before this time the breed had been known to only a handful of people. In 1903, the Labrador was recognised by the Kennel Club as a separate breed with Labrador CCs being offered for the first time at their Show held at Crystal Palace. Prior to this the Labrador had competed in canine sporting events as a variety of retriever, and not as a distinct breed. He competed in mixed classes which were classified as for 'Flat Coated or Wavy Coated Retrievers of any Colour'. From this time on the Labrador increased in popularity as he was recognised for his excellent retrieving skills, wonderful temperament, and remarkable adaptability.

In response to concerns regarding The Kennel Club allowing inter-bred Retrievers to be registered under the breed they most resembled, a Labrador Club was formed in April, 1916. The Club Committee drew up a set of rules and a standard of points which were submitted to The Kennel Club, who accepted and ratified them as the first Labrador Breed Standard.

At one stage it looked as though the Labrador would split into two different varieties of the same breed. 1925 saw the formation of the Yellow Labrador Club which developed an unofficial Yellow Standard. The reasons for a separate Yellow standard were explained by Helen Warwick in her book 'The Complete Labrador Retriever'. I quote:

A Yellow Standard was drawn up to list the correct points and draw attention to the undesirable features prevalent at the time of drawing up the Standard. There was such a diversion of type, make and shape in those days that it became imperative to establish it for the sake of the colour's future; for uniformity of type and the elimination of as many structural evils as possible.'

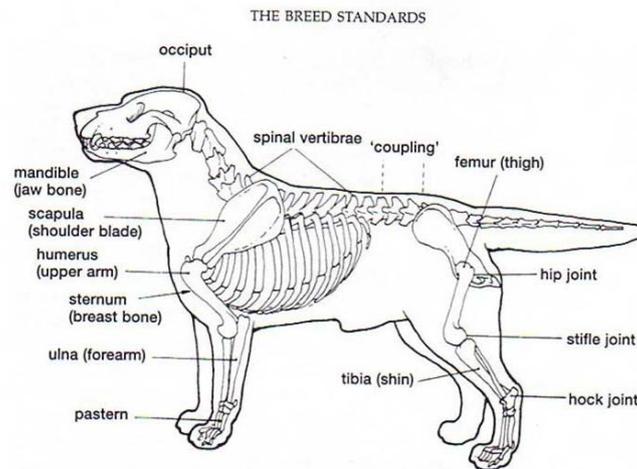
Fortunately the colours were not divided but the 1925 unofficial Yellow Standard was not declared obsolete by the Yellow Club until 1959. After this time the Yellow Labrador Club adopted the official Standard.

The 1916 Standard was written with the working ability of the Labrador in mind and remained in place until its revision in 1950. While still essentially a version of the original standard the new version gave a fuller description of the breed points. Among the additions were references to all three colours, and the undercoat was acknowledged as being weather resistant. Minor changes were made in 1982 when the height measurements were converted to centimetres to comply with metrification. Further alterations were made in 1986, when The Kennel Club requested that all breed standards conform to a set layout and to use uniform terminology.

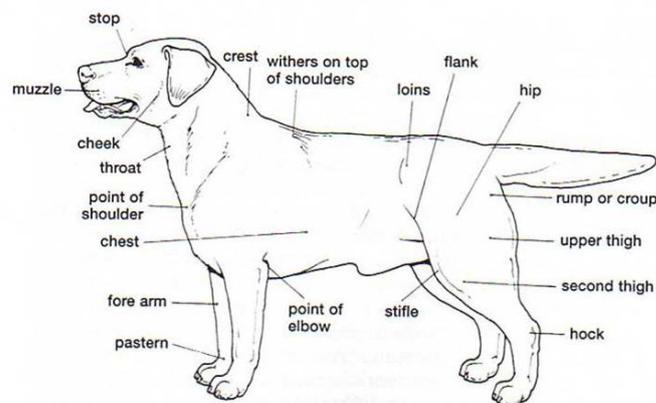
The 1986 Labrador Standard remains the Standard in use today.

The Labrador Breed Standard

General Appearance



Bone structure of the Labrador.



Parts of the Labrador.

Strongly built, short coupled, very active, broad in skull, broad and deep through chest and ribs, broad and strong over loins and hindquarters.

This description depicts a well balanced athletic dog whose conformation enables him to function as a retrieving gun dog, allowing him to stand four square and move freely over ground and through water. To do this he must be free from exaggeration and without any structural weaknesses. He should be substantial without being coarse, cloddy, or lumbering. Likewise he should not lack bone or be of whippet appearance. It must be remembered that he is an active working dog capable of carrying a heavy object gently while hurdling a fence, or retrieving a fallen bird from water. His broad skull indicates that he has good brain room and the intelligence to carry out his tasks.

Characteristics

Good tempered, very agile. Excellent nose, soft mouth keen love of water. Adaptable, devoted companion.

The true Labrador temperament is perhaps the Labrador's greatest asset, and is as important as his three most distinguishing physical features. His disposition is friendly to man and dog, kindly, outgoing, biddable and intelligent, and with an exceptional willingness to please and a highly developed retrieving instinct. When judging it must always be remembered that any aggressive behaviour towards humans or animals, or shyness in adult dogs should be severely penalised as this behaviour is not typical of the breed.

His 'excellent nose' refers to his highly developed sense of smell, invaluable in seeking fallen game. His mouth should be soft so that he will not injure the game he retrieves. However, neither of these characteristics or his love of water can be assessed while judging.

As time has passed the Labrador has evolved into a versatile dog of many talents. While still a brilliant retriever he has adapted himself to take on the roles of Companion dog, Guide dog for the blind, Police and Customs dog, Army dog and much loved family pet. All these roles while still retaining and using the essential characteristics and physical features he was originally bred for.

Temperament

Intelligent, keen and biddable, with a strong will to please. Kindly nature, with no trace of aggression or undue shyness.

This is largely dealt with in the previous paragraph, and while the Standard covers the pertinent points it must always be remembered that the Labrador's temperament is paramount.

The Head and Skull

Broad with a defined stop. Clean cut without fleshy cheeks. Jaws of medium length, powerful, not snipy. Nose wide, nostrils well developed

In analysing the head it should be remembered that the Standard was drawn up by people who used the Labrador as a working dog. They required a head that could retrieve game without damage both on land and from water, and an expressive head with eyes that could depict the good nature and willingness of the dog.

The head is one of the three defining features of the breed and a good head completes the picture of a typical Labrador. The head should be in balance with the overall dog, never gross and over done, or fine and snipy. On looking directly at the head one should get an impression of kindness, gentleness, intelligence and quality, while the gender of the dog should be immediately recognisable. A bitch's head should be feminine but never weak, while dog's head should be distinctly masculine but not coarse or out of balance with the body.

The Skull should be broad but without exaggeration, allowing for ample brain room. There should be a distinct stop, and the cheeks should be clean cut, flat and never fleshy. The medium length powerful muzzle, which is the dog's retrieving instrument, should be neither long and narrow, or short and stubby, but have a square appearance. The straight nose bone finishes in a wide nose with well developed nostrils designed for excellent scenting capacity. Regarding the colour of the nose it is usually black in blacks and yellows, and brown/liver in chocolates. While it may fade during winter this is not serious. However a pink nose devoid of pigment (known as Dudley's Pink) and poor pigment around the eyes, detracts from the overall expression of the head and should be penalised. A liver nose and liver pigment is sometimes present on Yellows. This merely indicates that the yellow dog in question carries the chocolate/liver gene and is a natural phenomenon. The planes of the skull and nose bone should be parallel.

The Lips are well padded over the canine teeth and curve away gently towards the throat. They should not be squared off or pendulous.



Above and below: classic Labrador heads



The Eyes

Medium size, expressing intelligence and good temper, brown or hazel.

The Eyes should emit the kind, good natured friendly and alert expression which is so much a hallmark of the breed. They should be set straight and fairly wide apart, and be almost diamond shaped. The eyes should not be protruding or be deeply set as they may be damaged while working in cover. The colour is brown or hazel. Eyes that are too dark or too light are not desirable as they give a harsh expression which is not typical.

The Ears

Not too large or heavy, hanging close to the head and set rather far back.

A medium sized ear correctly set with a flap of medium thickness gives protection to the ear and balance to the head. The ear should hang moderately close to the head, be set rather far back, and somewhat low on the skull. The shape is triangular. Heavy ears set too low give a houndy look, while small high set ears give a terrier look. Both these types of ears are undesirable and give a foreign expression to the head.

The Mouth

Jaws and teeth strong with a perfect regular and complete scissor bite, ie, Upper teeth closely overlapping lower teeth and set square to the jaws.

The strong jaws with strong regular teeth and scissor bite, enable the Labrador to hold retrieved objects safely, easily, and without damage. Full dentition is desirable.

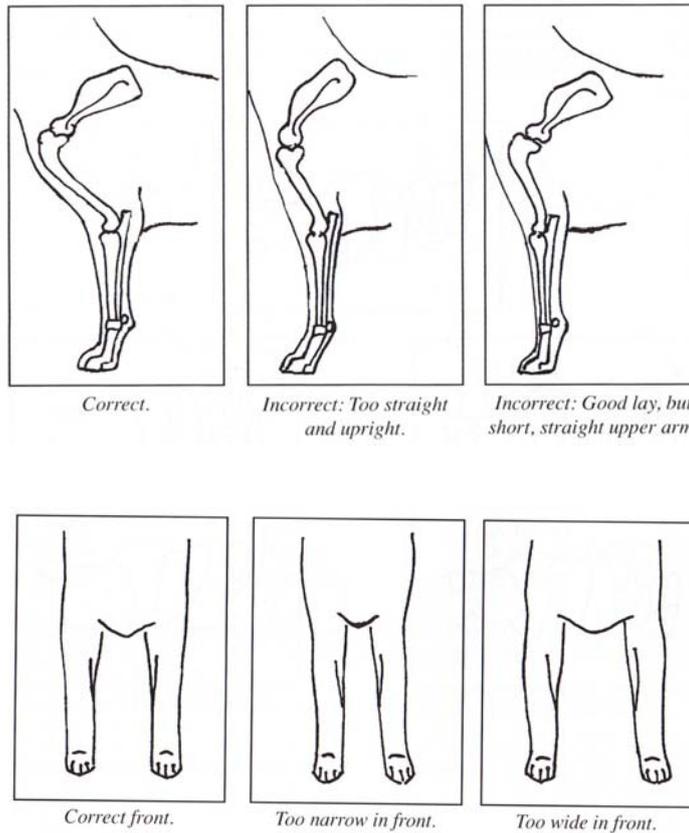
The Neck

Clean, strong, powerful, set well into the shoulders.

The neck should be of a proper length to allow the dog to retrieve easily. It should be muscular, free from throatiness and should have a moderate arch. It should flow freely into a long sloping well laid shoulder. Both a 'ewe' neck and a short thick neck are incorrect.



The Forequarters



Shoulders long and sloping. Forelegs well boned and straight from the elbow to the ground when viewed from either the front or the side.

The set of neck into long sloping shoulders is extremely important for the dog's ability to lift and carry. The upper arm should not be too short, while the angle formed between the scapular and upper arm should be about 90 degrees. The correct angulation gives the dog the right balance to carry game easily. Straight shoulder blades, short upper arms, heavily muscled or loaded shoulders, restrict free movement and are undesirable.

Front legs - This quote from the American Standard gives a very accurate picture of the front legs: 'When viewed from the front, the legs should be straight with good strong bone. Too much bone is as undesirable as too little bone, and short legged heavy boned individuals are not typical of the breed. Viewed from the side, the elbows should be directly under the withers, and the front legs should be perpendicular to the ground and well under the body. The elbows should be close to the ribs without looseness. Tied in elbows or being "out at elbow" interfere with free movement and are serious faults. Pasterns should be strong and short and should slope slightly from the perpendicular line of the leg.'

The Body



Chest of good width and depth, with well sprung barrel ribs. Level top line. Loins wide, short coupled and strong.

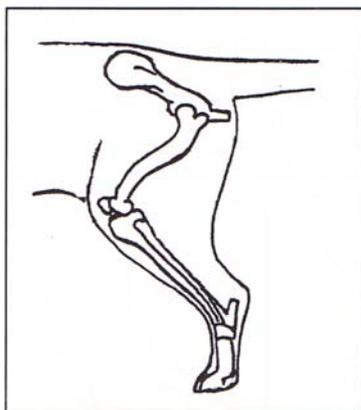
The chest and well sprung ribs provide heart and lung room to support the dogs active work. The chest should be of good width, not too wide and not too narrow. If the shoulders are loaded and the chest too wide, the dog will have difficulty swimming and galloping. Regarding depth of chest, the sternum, or keel, should reach to the level of the elbow. There should be a visible but not over developed fore chest, or prosternum. The point of the keel should be able to be felt on examination A correct prosternum usually indicates the correct lay of shoulder, upper arm, and spring of rib. The legs from the elbow to the ground should not be less than the height of the withers to the elbow.

The barrel shaped ribs should be well sprung, wide and deep with little space between the last rib and the loin. Viewed from the front the ribs curve out from the spine before extending down to meet the sternum. Slab sided dogs with long flat rib cages are not typical of the breed. The withers should show some slight slope but from that point the back should be level with the tail preferably coming straight off the back.

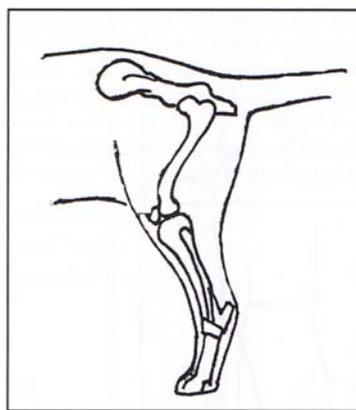
The wide loins are short coupled and strongly muscled. They should be slightly waisted. A simple guide to the length of the loin is roughly the width of three to four fingers.

The underline should be without exaggerated tuck-up.

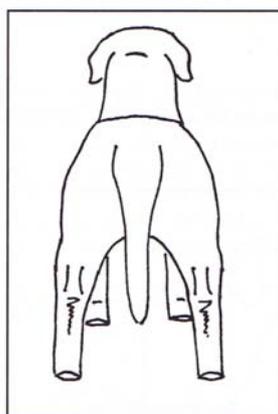
Hindquarters



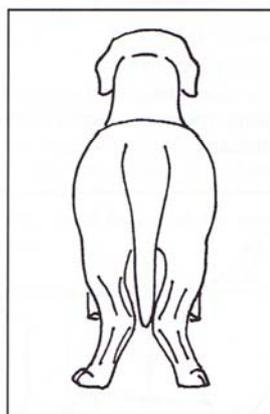
Correct: well-bent stifles, and well let down hocks.



Incorrect: Rather straight in stifle and hock.



Correct rear.



Incorrect: Cow-hocked.

Well developed, not sloping to the tail, well turned stifles. Hocks well let down, cow hocks highly undesirable.

Hind quarters are of the greatest importance as strong well angulated quarters give the Labrador his driving action, while his well boned, well let down, short hocks help power the dog forward and on the turn. His powerful hind limbs should look as if they are pushing the ground away behind them.

The hind quarters should be broad, strong, and generous with strong muscles, thighs and hams. The second thighs should be well developed, the hams of good width, and the stifles well bent but not exaggerated. When viewed from the rear the hind legs should be straight and parallel. When viewed from the side the angulation of the rear legs should be in balance with the front.

The croup should not slope down to the tail, but should continue the level back-line right into the tail set. A sloping top line is not typical of the breed.

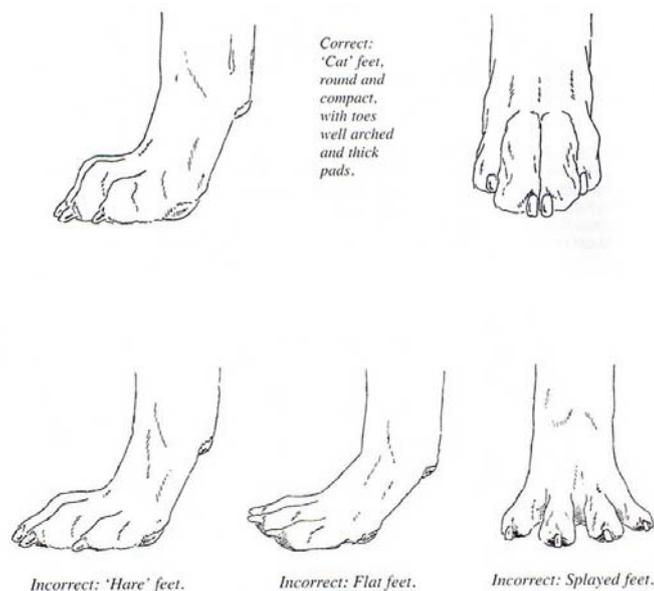
Cow hocks along with straight hocks (straight hocks usually accompany straight stifles) reduce the dogs forward thrust and should be penalised when judging.



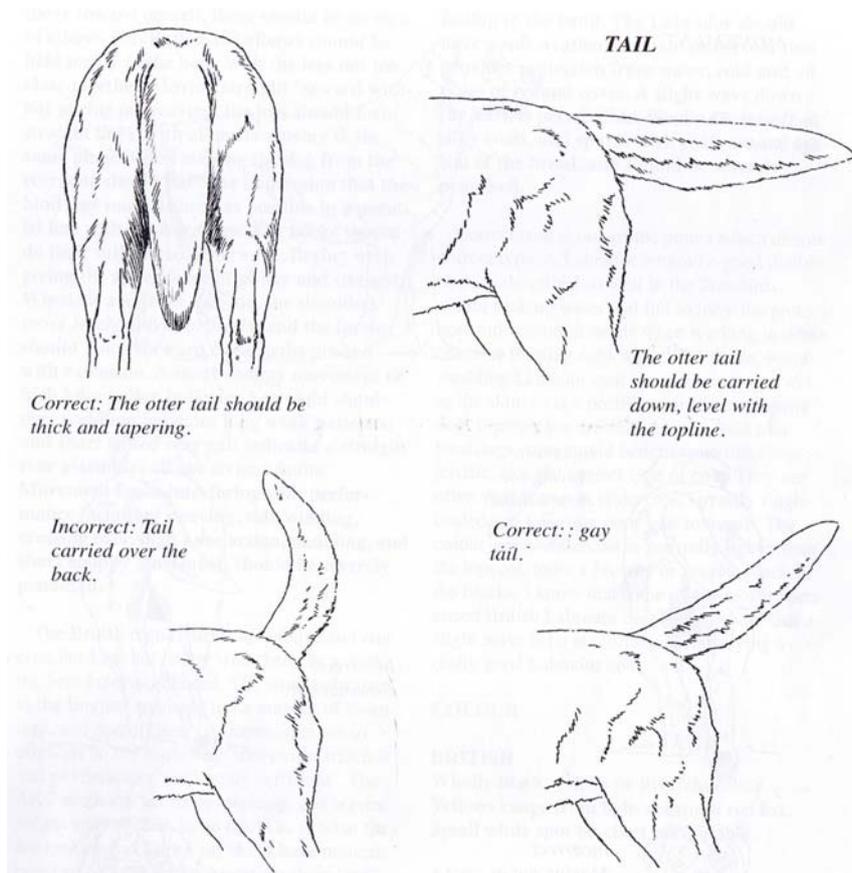
Feet

Round, compact, well arched toes and well developed pads.

The feet described in the Standard are designed not to be easily damaged and therefore suit a working dog. The feet should be round and compact with neatly fitting well arched toes, short nails, and generous leather like pads, coming off slightly sloping pasterns. Long thin hare feet are incorrect, as are very tight cat feet with the bone going right down to the foot. The size of the feet should be in balance with the dog, neither too large and clumsy, nor too small and neat.



Tail



Distinctive feature, very thick towards the base, gradually tapering towards the tip. Medium length, free of feathering, but clothed thickly all round with short, thick dense coat, thus giving rounded appearance described as an 'Otter Tail'. May be carried gaily, but should not curl over the back.

The Labrador's distinctive 'Otter' tail is unique to the breed and is there for a purpose, to act as a rudder while swimming and to help balance the dog when standing or moving. As the Standard states it should be very thick towards the base, gradually tapering to the tip, and be free of feathering. The short thick dense Labrador coat gives the tail a rounded appearance and gives it the thick 'Otter like' look that is so typical of the breed. When viewed from beneath the dense hair on the tail should come together to form a herring bone pattern.

The set of the tail is most important with the tail continuing the line of the back bone. Ideally the tail should follow the top line in motion or in repose, however the standard permits the tail to be carried above the level of the top line but never curled over the back. If the dog raises or lowers his tail, the set should remain the same. The set should never be low coming off a sloping croup. The tail should complete the balance of the Labrador by giving the dog a flowing line from the top of the head to the tip of the tail. It also helps indicate his happy outgoing nature. A medium length tail reaching to the hock gives a balanced look, while tails that are too long, too thin or too short are not typical and are undesirable. Likewise a tail resembling a thick fox's brush lacks typicality. To sum up the 'Otter Tail', I quote the late Mary Roslin- Williams: 'A dog with a really typical tail is nearly always a really typical Labrador right through, and oddly enough, usually has the right character.'

Gait and Movement

Free, covering adequate ground, straight and true front and rear.

The movement of the Labrador is most important. It should be free and effortless, and if the dog is constructed correctly he will move correctly. He is a working dog and as such should gait at a pace which will enable him to work all day. When assessing Labrador movement in the show ring he should trot at a STEADY pace, not fly around the ring.

The dog should move truly both coming and going. When coming towards you only the front legs reaching well out and moving parallel with the sides should be visible. You should not see a dog that is out at elbow or one that is toeing in, neither should you see a paddling or weaving action.

When viewed from the side the shoulders should move freely and easily, with the fore legs reaching forward close to the ground with good extension. A short choppy action here would indicate a straight shoulder, while a paddling action would indicate long weak pasterns. These two actions should be penalised.



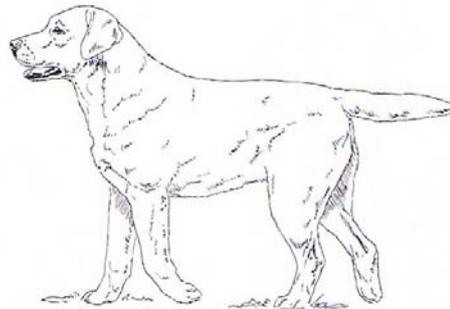
Observing the movement from the rear you should see a dog driving strongly and powerfully away propelled by well muscled hind quarters, with hocks flexing well and pushing the dog forward. Turned in or 'cow hocks' will cause serious loss of propulsion, as will turned out or 'Sickle Hocks'. These faults should be penalised.

To sum up, the Labrador should move steadily, covering the ground with minium effort. Driving from behind with front legs reaching well out.

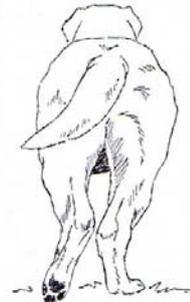
He should have a good reach of stride and be straight and true front and rear.

MOVEMENT

Incorrect: The stride is too short.



Incorrect: Moving too close behind and brushing.



Incorrect: Cow-hocked.



Incorrect: Moving out at elbows.



Incorrect: Toeing out at front.

Coat

Distinctive feature, short dense without wave or feathering. Giving a fairly hard feel to touch, weather resistant undercoat.

Great stress is to be laid on the correct coat as it is one of the three features that denote true Labrador type. The short, straight, dense double coat gives a weather resistant waterproof jacket, and is a necessity of life for dogs working in dense cover or freezing cold water. It should give a fairly hard feel to the hand and have a water and weatherproof undercoat. When correct the coat will give a nice rounded appearance that is so typical of the Labrador.

The under coat is generally lighter than the top coat and can vary in colour from dull charcoal through to all shades of mouse, to grey in liver coloured dogs, and pale yellow or cream in yellows. It does not show through the top coat but usually gives a matt finish.

While the Standard states the coat should be without wave or feathering a slight wave down the back is permissible, and often accompanies a really good coat. This wave should not be penalised. A dog in full coat will carry a moderate amount of breeching [not feathering] which will nicely round off his rear.

A coat that is open and soft to the touch will lack the necessary waterproof qualities required for warmth and protection, as will single coats which are shiny, thin, open, and lack the required dense undercoat. Both these types of coat should be penalized as they lack one of the breed's foremost features. When judging, dogs out of coat should incur a penalty for the above reason.

In assessing the coat the correct way to check for undercoat on a Labrador is to run the fingers against the lay of the hair high up on the side of the rib cage and along the loin. If the dog has the correct undercoat this will leave a trace or line. It is important to remember that the undercoat is NOT FOUND along the spine or at the base of the tail.

Colour

Wholly black, yellow or liver/chocolate. Yellows range from light cream to red fox. Small white spot on the chest permissible.

Note that only solid colours are permitted though a small white spot on the chest is allowed.

Blacks when in full coat must be really black though when changing coat some may go rather rusty. Some blacks and chocolates will have white hairs on pads and heels. These are referred to as 'Bolo Pads' as they were present on the famous Dual Ch. Banchory Bolo, and should not be penalised.

Yellows can vary from pale yellow to fox red with any of these shades being officially referred to as yellow. Most yellows are shaded in colour on the ears and coat.

Chocolates can vary in shade from milk chocolate to dark chocolate, both shades are acceptable.



Size

Ideal height at withers: Dogs 56-57cm (22-22.5in); Bitches 54-56cm (21-21.5in).

While the word ideal in the English Standard gives room for common sense when judging the whole Labrador, the Standard is obviously aiming for a fairly defined uniformity of size, and is a good guide to work with.

The height of the dog is measured from the withers.

Conclusion

The Breed Standard of today was written by people who sincerely believed in the working function of the breed, and though a long time has passed since its inception, we should remember when assessing the Labrador that we must never lose sight of the breed's working potential, even if we know that our dogs may never have the opportunity of fulfilling their function in the field.

The Labrador is not an easy dog to judge. While you have read the Breed Standard which lays down the exact requirements of a good Labrador, your main task is to learn to correctly identify Type, and know that Type and Soundness go hand in hand. An unsound dog is not typical of the breed.

Look at the dog as a balanced whole, not as a collection of separate pieces, and remember the three unique features that make him what he is - Head, Coat and Tail.

Remember, too, his exceptional temperament, his willingness to please, his strength without coarseness, and his ability to adapt to countless different circumstances. These are the things that make him what he is today, the All Purpose Labrador Retriever, admired and loved by so many people around the world.

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The previous extensions of the Standard:

1. M.R. Le Cussan
2. A committee of the NSW Labrador Club, revised 1992
3. Mrs P Dunstan (Strangways) 2008