

Ten Things You Need To Know About Judging English Springer Spaniels

Submitted by the ESSFTA Judge's Education Committee
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1. Size DOES matter. Got your attention? Good. The breed standard uses words and phrases such as 'sturdy', 'muscular', 'strong', 'power' and 'every inch a sporting dog'. The standard sets specific height to weight parameters (i.e. a 20 inch tall dog, in good condition, will weigh approximately 50 pounds) and these parameters should be carefully considered when judging the breed. A 20 inch tall dog that weighs 50 pounds will 'pick up heavy'. (Think of picking up a 50 pound bag of dog food). In many instances today, the breed is losing its sturdiness. Strong, but not excessively heavy, bone, properly shaped, oval ribs that carry well down to the elbow, broad, deep, muscular loins and wide, strong, well muscled upper and lower thighs have given way to over refinement, lack of rib, and excessively narrow loins and thighs, creating dogs that completely lack the correct weight requirement for their height. While the breed should of course NEVER be coarse or cumbersome, it certainly is critical that it retain the characteristics that make it a strong, athletic, active and vigorous hunting dog that is able to 'go, and keep going, under difficult hunting conditions'.
2. Thanks to my buddy Elliott Weiss, for coining the phrase, 'they DO walk on their heads'. Just what does that phrase mean? It means that while our breed may not be a 'head breed' such as the Collie or the Bulldog, every requirement in the head section of the standard is there for a REASON, and that reason is to help the dog fulfill its original purpose, that of finding, flushing and retrieving game. They do walk on their heads when they hunt because they use their eyes, ears, nose, jaws, etc. to do their job, and the more correct the head construction, the better the dog will sight, scent and retrieve. Please read the extensive head section of our breed standard and make every effort to reward correct heads. Look for things such as deep set, forward placed eyes, well developed eyebrows that are the highest point of the skull (the standard says FLAT on top, remember?), long, deep broad forefaces with strong under jaws, and parallel planes of the skull and foreface, with a nasal bone that is straight.
3. A correct front assembly is everything. (Well ok, almost everything!) The ESS standard calls for a WELL ANGULATED front assembly. Long sloping shoulder blades that come fairly close together at the tips, coupled with a long upper arm that sets the elbows well back under the dog. Ideally, the elbow should be under the tip of the shoulder blades and the neck and head should be out in front of that point. Far too many dogs of this breed today stand with their elbows under their ears, totally lacking the length and angle of the bones of the front assembly that, when correct, give this breed its easy, free 'swing from the shoulder blade' gait. Think the word 'long' when judging this breed. No, not long cast, but LONG head, LONG neck, LONG sloping shoulder blades and upper arms.
4. And while we are on LONG, always remember that the English Springer Spaniel should be upstanding with a good amount of leg length. LONG legs. The breed should never be short legged or squatty. LONG ribcage and short loin are the correct combination of body properties for this breed, giving it the correct upstanding, short backed profile called for in the standard.
5. Color matters, markings don't. The standard is very brief on this subject. Black and white, white and black, liver and white, white and liver, with or without ticking and/or roaning, with or without

tan markings. That's it folks. There are NO preferred or required marking patterns in this breed. Simply paint them all black (or white!) in your head and judge the DOGS, not the external trappings. You can LOVE the way a particular dog is marked, but you cannot AWARD the dog on the basis of its markings. A few red or lemon dogs in this breed do exist, but I doubt you will ever see one in the ring. However if you do, please do not award it a ribbon.

6. Coat condition matters. Coat quantity really doesn't. Over the years, as in many other Sporting breeds, the ESS has been bred to grow more and more coat. It is not the amount of coat that is important, but the condition of the coat. Some undercoat should be apparent, regardless of season or climate. Outer coat on the body should be firm and resilient, with a live, healthy glossy appearance. The outer coat should lie flat to the ribcage, and it may be either straight or wavy. While the ESS should be 'nicely furnished' with feathering, an excessive amount is definitely not required. The standard is specific on this point. Coat quality and condition are to take precedence over quantity.
7. Trimming. Where to begin? Again, as in many other breeds of show dogs, grooming and trimming in this country have advanced to quite an art form. Yet our standard states some specific requirements about trimming that should not be ignored by judges. It is certainly legitimate to trim the breed in a manner that enhances a 'smart, functional appearance'. Above all, the final appearance should be NATURAL. Which means that the dog should look like its coat GREW that way, not like it was barbered into existence. Topcoats should have length to protect the dog from the elements when working; they should not be scissored off to an inch in length! Outlines should be trimmed to give the dog an attractive, but natural silhouette, not trimmed with straight scissors like a paper cut out. Quote from the standard-'Overtrimming, especially the body coat, or any chopped, barbered or artificial effect is to be penalized in the show ring, as is excessive feathering that destroys the clean outline desirable in a sporting dog.'
8. Croups, tail sets and tail carriage. Now there's a mouthful! The only flushing spaniel that should carry its tail directly off the back with no slope to the croup is the Cocker Spaniel. Maybe I should say that again. The only flushing spaniel that should carry its tail directly off the back with no slope to the croup is the Cocker Spaniel. The ESS croup should slope gently to the set on of the tail, and the tail should ideally be carried at 2-3 o'clock. Every other ESS breed standard in the world, except the North American ones, still calls for the tail to be 'set on low'. Tails in North America have gradually migrated upward in both set and carriage for many years, with the result that the pelvic slope has been drastically reduced, opening the angle of the pelvis and femur and creating structure that places the rear feet of the dog far out behind a line dropped from the point of the buttocks, instead of placing the rear toes just behind that line. The changes caused by this pelvic slope are not simply aesthetic; instead the results are rear legs that are not placed under the body at the correct point to support the dogs center of gravity and a change in movement from long steps on the ground to short steps on the ground with a lot of 'kick' in the air behind the dog.
9. The ESS is an efficient trotting dog, capable of utilizing its legs at a trot for long periods of time on often difficult terrain when hunting. An efficient trotting dog is one that keeps its legs on the ground for long periods of each stride. Feet only work when they are on the ground, propelling the body forward with power and ease. There is far too much lift and kick seen in the breed today. While it might LOOK fancy and long strided that sort of motion is totally incorrect because it expends far more energy than a stride that is long on the ground. The ESS should swing its front legs forward from the shoulder blade, not pop them forward from the elbow. The only way this can be achieved is for the dog to have the correct length and angle of the bones of the front assembly. The hindquarter provides the forward propulsion, and the longer that the rear foot stays on the

ground, accompanied by the forceful opening of the hip, stifle and hock joints, the easier and more efficient the gait will be. Correctly built and muscled English Springer Spaniels should move freely and easily in a gait that seems effortless. The fast, choppy, short stepping motion, or the high lifting and kicking motion also all too often seen, are both incorrect.

10. Numbers 1 through nine above all come together in number 10, which is Silhouette and Proportion. These two things are critical in the English Springer Spaniel. A well proportioned dog, correctly built, properly angulated, free from exaggeration, with the right amount of bone and substance and the correct shape and length of head and neck, will present a clean, smooth, upstanding silhouette, combining the essential elements of both beauty and utility. The correct silhouette and proportion are what express the proper breed type of the individual dog. Always look for the outline that is represented in Figure #1 below, and beware of the myriad of failings of the outline in Figure # 2, though the dog might at first strike you as eye catching or fancy. The breed should carry its correct, upstanding outline and proportion when it moves. The head will (and should be allowed to, by the handler) go somewhat forward to assist in balance, but the dog should never sink to the ground or appear low in action.

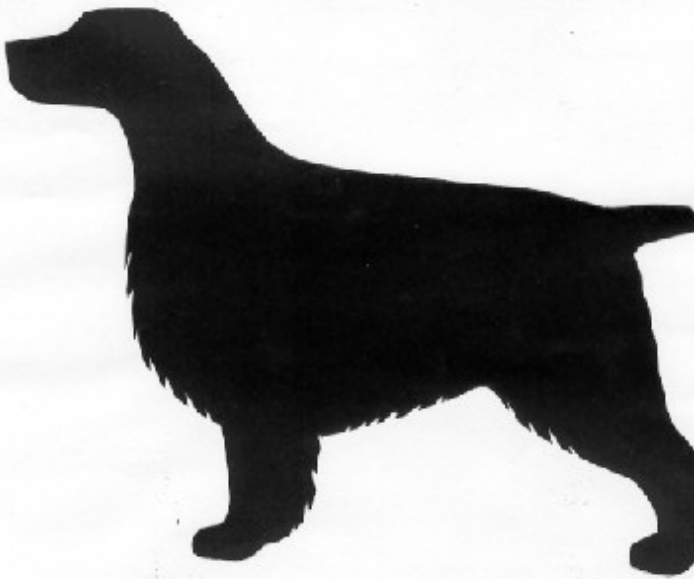


FIGURE 1 Correct Silhouette



FIGURE 2 Silhouette with many failings