

DOBERMAN PINSCHER STRUCTURE

by Pat Hastings

One of the most emphatic recommendations I offer to novice dog people—no matter what their breed—is to spend time studying Doberman Pinschers in the ring. For one thing, the Doberman is a structurally “generic” breed. A Doberman should be so perfectly balanced that you are visually drawn to the dog as a whole. It is:

- A square breed from the forechest to the buttocks.
- A medium breed in every characteristic. No aspect should be overdone.
- A totally balanced breed. All parts are in balance with the whole.

The other reason I encourage novices to study Dobermans in conformation competition is because structural soundness is fundamental to the Doberman’s breed type. There is no other way for a Doberman to excel in conformation.

Since structural soundness is at the heart of our breed’s conformation, we cannot properly assess a Doberman by appearance only. We must feel for the tissue strength and muscle balance required to hold the structure in place, thus enabling the dog to move properly and efficiently.

As we go through our standard, the interrelationship between standard and structure becomes readily apparent:

Neck proudly carried – Without a proper shoulder assembly, a dog does not have the ability to carry the neck in a proud position.

Neck well arched – This requires proper ligamentation of the neck vertebrae. Therefore, a ewe neck, caused by poor ligamentation, is contrary to the standard. A dog with a ewe neck lacks the strength in its neck to be capable of holding onto a person. Anytime a dog is lacking a component that prevents it from accomplishing the purpose for which it was bred, it is lacking in breed type.

Nape of neck widening gradually toward body – This requirement prohibits a stovepipe neck, which is caused by poor musculature and again prevents the dog from doing the job for which it was bred.

Withers pronounced and forming the highest point of the body – The withers are the area between the set on of the neck to the back. It consists of extremely thick, strong muscles which also help protect the shoulder blades. The withers should be pronounced but shoulder blades should never be the highest point of the dog. The spine should always be higher. High shoulder blades can loosen the shoulders and cause an up-and-

down motion, like that seen in the shoulders of a cat. (This high-set, loose shoulder makes for a leaping motion instead of a strong trotting action.)

Back short, firm – The “short” aspect increases strength in the back and makes it less susceptible to injury. The “firm” aspect is created by a good front assembly. A soft or dipping topline is an indication of a structural weakness or imbalance in the front assembly. Along the same lines, a roach or rise in the topline is almost always caused by a structural weakness of the rear assembly.

Chest broad – A broad chest is the result of both proper ribs and a proper front assembly placement. A front assembly placed too far forward will not allow the appearance of a broad chest.

Forechest well defined – Because nothing on the Doberman should be exaggerated, a pigeon-breasted dog is as incorrect as one with an overdone forechest.

Ribs well sprung – This is crucial for lung and heart capacity. If lung and heart capacity is restricted by slab-sided ribs, the dog’s stamina and endurance can be impaired.

Brisket reaching deep to the elbow – This is also necessary for heart and lung capacity plus proper attachment of the upper arm and is also necessary for balance.

Belly well tucked up, extending in a curved line from the brisket – This excludes a herring gut, which is created when the length of the ribs ends too abruptly. The ribs behind the legs should all be approximately the same length to the ninth rib, and then gradually curve to the tuck-up. If the depth stops too abruptly, there is a much straighter or more extreme line to the loin. The more extreme the underline, the more restricted the heart and lung capacity. A dog with a herring gut will lack stamina and endurance.

Loins wide and muscled – There is no support for the topline past the attachment of the last rib, so a short (within reason) loin makes for a stronger back, which is less susceptible to injury. The muscling of the loin is crucial for proper flexibility.

Tail . . . appears to be a continuation of the spine, and is carried only slightly above the horizontal Hip Bone falls away from spinal column at an angle of about 30 degrees, producing a slightly rounded, well filled-out croup – The croup and tailset determine how the rear legs swing. The steeper the croup and the lower the tailset, the farther forward a dog will bring its rear legs, thus reducing its rear extension. This interferes with a smooth, efficient motion. The flatter the croup and the higher the tailset, the less forward motion and the more extreme the rear kick, which is wasted action and again interferes with a smooth, efficient motion. (There is one exception to this which I will discuss later.)

Shoulder Blade sloping forward and downward at a 45-degree angle to the ground meets the upper arm at an angle of 90 degrees – A dog cannot reach any farther forward than what the angle of the shoulder allows. Also, its reach cannot extend beyond the end

of its nose. So the shorter the neck, the shorter the dog's reach, no matter what its shoulder angle is. The straighter the upper arm the farther forward the front legs are positioned, which affects both the static (standing) and kinetic (moving) balance. The space between the shoulder blades must always fit the dog. If the blades are too close together, front motion is affected and the dog's ability to lower its head is inhibited. If the blades are too far apart, the front legs are set farther apart and roughen the shoulder lay into the body; both of these consequences prohibit smooth, efficient front assembly motion. Straight or wide shoulder blades are the main cause of wrinkles over the shoulders.

Length of the shoulder blade and upper arm are equal – If the shoulder is relatively the same length as the upper arm, front assembly muscles can work in unison. If the bones are out of proportion, it causes the muscle that is over the longer bone to be stretched farther than the other muscles, which in turn affects its strength. The standard calls for balanced, smooth motion, which is unattainable if the muscles themselves are out of balance. The upper arm provides the pendulum motion of the front leg and contributes to the center of balance in motion. A short upper arm is incapable of bringing the front far enough under the body to create speed and balance. Therefore, it impedes the dog's stride in a gallop. In a trot, it creates excess motion, usually in the pastern area, or prevents the dog from moving along a single line of support.

Height from elbow to withers approximately equals height from ground to elbow – This 50:50 ratio helps to create necessary overall balance. If the dog has more leg than depth of body, either from a chest that is too shallow or from legs that are too long, the dog becomes top-heavy, which means it must slow down to make quick turns. How efficient can a Doberman be that is unable to make quick turns at top speed?

Elbows lie close to the brisket – Always check for looseness in the elbows by rocking the dog to the side. Poor ligamentation usually causes the elbows to pop or move outward when in motion, which in turn can cause the dog to toe in its front feet. Loose elbows increase the risk of structural damage when landing from jumps; the impacts stretch the tissue. As the tissue wears out, there is greater wear on the bone, which increases the possibility of arthritis as the dog ages.

Pasterns firm and almost perpendicular to the ground – The pasterns are one of the areas most susceptible to injury. If they are too straight, they lose the ability to absorb shock. If they are too angled, they lose the strength necessary to provide support.

The angulation of the hindquarters balances that of the forequarters. . . . Upper Shanks at right angles to the hip bones, are long, wide, and well muscled on both sides of the thigh – This is crucial as this is the ham. It must have the same amount of meat on both sides of the bone. If muscles are imbalanced, there is no balance. This imbalance of the muscle mass is what causes a dog to be either cow hocked (where it is more heavily muscled on the inside of the legs) or barrel, spread or open hocked (where there is more muscle on the outside of the legs). A lack of muscle mass on either the inside or outside

of the rear legs destroys stability. The dog will have a limited ability to make fast or tight turns.

Upper and lower shanks are of equal length – The length from the point of the buttocks to the kneecap should be the same as the length from the kneecap to the point of the hock. Just as with the front assembly, equal lengths allow the muscles to work properly. If the lower thigh is longer than the upper thigh, the rear assembly is weakened.

Hock to heel is perpendicular to the ground – The stability of the hock is the cornerstone of the rear. There should never be any motion in the joint—not in, out or forward.

Gait – Free, balanced, and vigorous, with good reach in the forequarters and good driving power in the hindquarters. When trotting, there is a strong rear-action drive. . . When moving at a fast trot, a properly built dog will single-track – These only occur when the structure is proper, according to the standard.

All three directions of movement—coming, going, and side gait—are equally important. To judge on less than all three directions implies to exhibitors that they need not give full weight to the standard when breeding, thus increasing the risk that our breed will lose its overall quality.

For example, a square dog (as required by the standard) will have a proper side gait, if it is properly made. A longer dog may appear to have a proper side gait without having as good of structure. Therefore the standard of a square dog demands better structure.

By the same token, the straighter the angles, front and rear, the easier it is to create clean motion coming and going, but straight angles restrict movement as seen in the side gait. Also for a dog to be clean coming and going it must have a proper prosternum. There can only be as much muscle as surface to attach it to. The more shallow the prosternum, the less muscle there is attaching the upper arm to the rib cage. This is one of the major reasons for sloppy front action.

With specific regard to gaiting, the point of balance for almost all canines is to drop a plumb line from the point of the buttocks to the ground. The line should touch the tips of the toes. If the foot is forward of the line, the rear legs are too short and the dog will not have the required angles. It also will create a column of support under the hips, flattening the pelvis, which in turn causes the tail to be more upright or carried gaily.

If the foot is behind the point of balance, the rear legs are too long. This is the main cause of sickle hocks. The dog moves its foot forward for balance which creates the look of a sickle. There is not time in the sequence of motion for a leg that is too long to move both directions. The long rear leg moves forward but the sequence of motion is over before it can follow through behind. The hock returns to a perpendicular position instead of the required rear extension. If the leg is way too long, the dog must lead with a rear leg instead of a front, which is a waste of motion. Another way a dog may compensate

for this fault is to “bicycle” with the rear legs. This rotating motion destroys the action of the rear drive.

Rear legs that are too long is the exception to the croup controlling the rear motion (see *tail and croup*). If the dog’s rear legs are too long, it will be lacking in rear extension. On the other hand, too high of a tail set will cause too much rear kick. These two faults have the tendency to cancel each other and it will appear that the dog moves correctly, but it does not change the fact that the dog still has both faults.

For speed and endurance, a proper hock is crucial. A long hock is effective for an initial burst of speed. In order to have great endurance, speed and good driving power, however, the hock must be well let down (short). Although this is not specifically addressed in the standard, it is indirectly addressed in *General Appearance*, as well as in *Gait*.



The Doberman Pinscher standard is one of the very best standards out there. Dobermans bred to the standard are beautifully balanced and strongly built—a stunning mix of aesthetics and functionality. Better still, a Doberman bred to the standard enhances our understanding of and appreciation for structural excellence.