

JUDGING THE AMERICAN STAFFORDSHIRE TERRIER

By Sara Nugent

To properly judge a dog breed, the judge first needs to understand their history and then become familiar with their standard, and why it was written as it was, and to read it in the context of the dog it was written to describe. The American Staffordshire Terrier is a breed that many judges have been given along with “the rest of the terrier group”.

When I started showing Am Staffs, in 1970, we still often exhibited under judges who were long experienced with the breed. At that time, many of the active Am Staff breeders had been some of the earliest members of our parent club and some founding members. However, both those experienced judges and breeders were elderly and disappearing—while at the same time we had a large influx of new breeders coming into the breed throughout the 1980s. Somehow, there was a disconnect during this transition, and the dogs changed greatly. Although the standard has remained unchanged since its acceptance by AKC in 1936, the dogs winning in the ring today are quite different from the dogs of the 1930s.

Unfortunately, our parent club, The Staffordshire Terrier Club of America, did not have any judge’s education material to offer until 1998. By then wide spread drift in breed type had occurred. We find that today there are many misconceptions about correct breed type. The Staffordshire Terrier Club of America has a very good visual standard booklet for judge’s education that we are happy to share with interested judges for more detailed information.

A Very Brief History

Early in the 19th century, the English and Irish immigrants to America brought with them their bulldog and terrier cross dogs. These were dogs developed from various crosses of the earlier English bulldog and the English black and tan and white terriers. The bulldog of that time was nothing similar to our present day version. These were taller, leggy, sturdy, undershot farm dogs who actually were used to catch and hold cattle for the farmers to butcher. Bull baiting became a sport in England using these dogs, but as it became more popular to bait (fight) dogs instead, the bulldogs were bred to terriers in order to create a more agile and faster dog. Similar crosses developed into the dogs who became today’s Bull Terriers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers.

In America, the bull and terriers became both working farm dogs, and fighting dogs, as the immigrants brought their sporting events too. Eventually a registry for the dogs was established in 1898 (The United Kennel Club) where they were called American Pit Bull Terriers. By the early 1920s, some of the owners began to petition the AKC for registration, as they wanted to separate themselves from the dog fighting element. After years of negotiation, a standard was approved and the AKC accepted the breed in 1936 as Staffordshire Terriers, named after the similarly developed English bull and terrier breed—the Staffordshire Bull Terrier—who achieved acceptance in the English Kennel Club the same year. To try to prevent confusion, our breed’s name was later changed to the American Staffordshire Terrier in 1972 when the AKC accepted registration of the Staffordshire Bull Terrier.



Top to bottom: 1939 American Staffordshire; 1946 Specialty Winner; 1957 Specialty Winner

Notes on Judging

When judging the breed, it is first important to look at the entire dog, and to get an impression of not only the dog's physical form, but it's demeanor and carriage. The Am Staff is a medium-sized, well-built dog, that should appear to have great strength for his size, with well-defined muscles, but who is always agile and graceful. He should appear, as our standard so well puts it, "keenly alive to his surroundings". He is the picture of courage. He should appear confident, but lively and ready for anything, and very interested in his surroundings. A fearful Am Staff should never be rewarded. Courage is one of their most important characteristics. He should also be very light on his feet and agile. There should be nothing clumsy about this dog. He should be up on his toes and very alive.

The Am Staff outline should appear "stocky" as the standard states. This does not mean short-legged. It means that the dog's chest is broader and ribs more well sprung as compared to a hound body type. His body length should be slightly longer than his height, and his leg length should be approximately equal to his body depth at the shoulder. The ideal dog is not exaggerated in any of these characteristics. He is balanced between strength and graceful agile movement.

He should be shown in hard, muscular condition. He should show a tuck up at the end of his ribs and should never appear fat or particularly thick. He should be tight skinned like a terrier. Today we see too many dogs who are fat and whose loose skin wobbles as they gait.

His outline should also display good moderate angulation front and rear that is ideally equal in its angles—enabling the dog to move efficiently. Today, there is a tendency to see dogs in the ring with over angulated rears and straight shoulders, longer backs and shorter on leg. His head should be set on a medium length slightly arched strong neck that flows smoothly into a sloping shoulder. His topline should be slightly sloped from shoulder to croup, with another gentle slope from croup to low set tail. His tail should be carried below the level of his back, with a curve that resembles an old fashioned pump handle. The tail should fall to the hock. The entire picture should be of a well-balanced



capable dog who could perform well at many tasks and who stands ready to do so. He is a dog who appears to have great strength, but never at the loss of grace and agility. This is a strong, but moderate dog, who should show no exaggerations.

The Am Staff has a very distinctive head. It should be of medium length with a broad skull, a strong muzzle, expressive eyes and no loose skin. The most outstanding feature is their very pronounced cheek muscles. As a breed whose purpose was to use its mouth to bite, the jaw should be very well defined, with a strong and even lower jaw. Lips should be close and even, with no looseness. A scissors bite is correct. Ears are set high. The muzzle is approximately one half the length of the head. It is rounded and broad across the top, falling away abruptly below the eyes. It is narrower than the back skull, and wedges toward the nose, finishing bluntly. Planes of the forehead and muzzle should be fairly parallel, without dish or down face. The stop is distinct, but not too deep.

Unfortunately, the head is one of the least understood parts of the breed today. Instead of the more terrier head called for in the standard, the tendency today is for a more massive, wide and meaty head, with more emphasis on back skull and less on muzzle. Instead of the strong upper and lower jaw, we see more lippy, but shorter muzzles, covering weak lower jaws. Instead of the lovely bony structure, we have an overly padded head, with a very deep stop, steeply rising plane

of forehead and too often, loose or wrinkled skin around the muzzle and throat. This head shape is not to standard and should not be rewarded in judging. It would have been a distinct disadvantage and made the dog less fit for its original purpose.

Our standard calls for ears either cropped, or uncropped, with uncropped preferred. In judging the dogs, it should not matter whether the ears are cropped or not. However, it is so difficult to finish a dog with natural ears that most owners give up and crop their dog's ears. The only ear penalty mentioned in our standard is for full drop ears. It is highly

Above: Early show dogs; Below: Am Staffs should tend to converge





Am Staff Side

doubtful that you will ever see an Am Staff with full drop ears. Uncropped ears are to be carried either half prick or rose, and should preferably be short. No Am Staff should be penalized for having natural ears. This is very clear in the standard.

Am Staffs come in all colors and can be solid, parti or brindle. But all should have very dark pigment and dark eyes. There are colors mentioned in the standard that are less desirable, but all colors are permissible and there is no color disqualification. There is no "best" coat color, but good dark pigment, especially at eyes and nose contribute to the typical expression and are highly desirable. Coat color is merely cosmetic and much less important than mental and physical attributes.

Preferred size of the male Am Staff is 18" to 19" and female is 17" to 18". Weights are not given in the standard, but the correct ratio for these heights would be 48 to 60 lbs. for males, and 42 to 55 lbs. for bitches at the standard heights. There will always be variations, but over the years the size has crept up until today's dogs are averaging 19" to 22" or more, and weighing upwards of 70 lbs. A

similar increase in bitch sizes has occurred. Along with the height, the weights and bone size have changed until the breed has little resemblance to the proportions of the original dog. This increase is wrongly encouraged by judges who reward the larger, heavier dogs, thinking they are more impressive. The more moderate size of dog or bitch should always be preferred to maintain the proper balance between power and agility. To increase the size and weight decreases agility and ability. The dog must always be a balance between the bulldog and terrier ancestry. The situation has become so bad in the show ring that it has become almost impossible to finish a championship on a correctly sized dog or bitch. They are totally overlooked, or thought to not carry enough bone. Exaggerations are not desirable and larger does not mean better in this breed.

A correctly constructed dog should prove itself in movement. The Am Staff is a moderately angled dog whose movement is also moderate. He should move with a springy gait, but without roll or pace. His movement should show his power and grace and vitality. He is springy and light on his feet. He should tend to converge toward a center line under his body as his speed increases. His front and rear feet should track cleanly in two equal lines when coming and going. From the side, his front should show good moderate reach with the rear legs driving to match. His rear feet should fall just where his front feet lifted, without overreach or interference. A dog who moves heavily or listlessly is totally incorrect.

The problems in the breed today are mostly related to the drift in size and weight ratio from the original dog. This has caused a

change in the dog's overall look and ability to work. The heavier body and heavier head are impressive to many judges and owners, but incorrect for the breed. A judge must always remember that this is a working terrier and resist the urge to be impressed by the more exaggerated bully type. Please keep in mind the dog is always balanced between strength and agility. A more moderate dog is always the most desirable, with no exaggerations. ■

BIO

Sara Nugent has owned American Staffordshire Terriers for 45 years and has shown her dogs in conformation, obedience and agility for most of those years, earning championships and advanced training titles. For the last 16 years she has been the Judge's Education Committee Chairman for the Staffordshire Terrier Club of America and is a past President and member of the Board of Directors of the club. She bred Am Staffs under the kennel name of Our Gang Kennel. She owned the #1 Conformation Am Staff of 1974 and won the STCA National Specialty twice with the same dog. Although no longer actively breeding or showing in conformation, she still exhibits her dogs in agility and trains in other working venues. Her Am Staffs have also been ranked #1 in Obedience and #1 in Agility for the breed in various years. Her interest has always been in the proper structure, temperament and working abilities of the breed, and bringing the dogs to their full potential through training. She is a long time professional dog show photographer and student of the Am Staff breed.



Male Head



Natural Ears



Natural Ears



Am Staff Front

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH AN AMERICAN STAFFORDSHIRE TERRIER?

By Sara Nugent

The answer seems to be pretty much anything. These medium sized strong and agile dogs are well suited for most dog sports. Their love of life, intelligence and ability to work with their owners translates well into various competitions and pursuits.

Historically, the breed's ancestors were developed first in England from old style working farm bulldogs crossed with working terrier breeds. They inherited the strength and tenacity of both and the agility and intelligence of the terriers. Brought to America in the early 1900s, they were further developed as both farm and homestead dogs and as fighting dogs used in the "sport" of dog fighting. Most have kept their working abilities as farm dogs, and the courage, vitality and tenacity that they inherited from the fighting pit.

Today, they are most often beloved pets and great companions. They are highly intelligent, and quite responsive to training. Their short coats require little grooming and they have very little "doggy odor". They adjust well to indoor living in the home. They are closely bonded with their families and usually good with children. They can be very quiet house dogs who love to cuddle, but they are always up for a good game. They thrive on attention, and generally are not happy without it. They are intelligent enough to get into trouble without an outlet for their energy and prefer a job of some sort that challenges their abilities.

Although there are general breed characteristics, I have always found them to have more strongly distinct personalities than most other breeds. Although I have owned and trained many, no two were ever alike. I find this a big attraction to the breed. They are playful dogs with a sense of humor and even the eldest dogs are always eager to play.



Above: Agility; Below: Am Staff Service Dog

Personally, I can't imagine my life without these dogs. And I don't seem to be alone. Many of our active breeders have been in the breed for many years and also can't imagine life without them. I have noticed over the years that some professional handlers choose Am Staffs for their personal breed after showing them for other owners. There is just something special about the breed that endears them. One of my favorite traits is that they will comfortably look you right in the eye for long periods of time without feeling uncomfortable doing so. They seem to be trying to read your brain. They are very direct with humans and always want to be close to their owner. They seem to have a real sense of empathy for humans. Many make good therapy and assistance dogs because of this. They seem to understand when someone is in need of help or comfort.



There is a large variance in their acceptance of other dogs. I have owned some that were very intolerant and some that got along fine with all other dogs. Because of their early fighting background, some have to be managed around other dogs. They are not all naturally aggressive, but some have a low threshold of tolerance around other dogs. Socialization and training can make a big difference here. But care should always be taken until you understand your dog's personal level. With training, even intolerant dogs can work safely around other dogs.

Training is a must for this breed, as it keeps them out of trouble and gives them something to apply their intelligence to.

They love to test their strength against hard tasks and love solving a problem. Training works best when it is presented as a game. Am Staffs love a game. Force training can make them quietly resist, but fun is always fun. Competitive sports are right up their alley. Many Am Staffs train in several venues and compete successfully in all. My own dogs have titled in AKC obedience competitions through Utility titles, AKC agility competitions through Masters titles, and even Canine Freestyle. Once, on a dare I successfully earned a Schutzhund BH title on one of my obedience dogs, although he had no prior training in that sport. Am Staffs also successfully compete in dock diving,

tracking, Schutzhund, carting/drafting, weight pull, Earthdog trials, sprint racing, lure coursing, frisbee and flyball. Many still have the instinct to herd and are great with farm animals. They are also excellent varmit hunters.

Some years ago my obedience trained dogs and I belonged to a square dance dog group that performed at events and dog shows and even on TV occasionally. We also started a therapy dog performing group that visited hospitals and nursing homes locally. There are many Am Staffs who regularly visit nursing homes and participate in pet therapy. There are also Am Staffs working as seeing eye dogs and service dogs for people with disabilities. Am Staffs also serve in search and rescue and as drug detection dogs for police.

There just doesn't seem a lot that they can't do. Although they are not usually very good watch dogs. In general, they trust humans and are friendly and don't feel very threatened by strangers. They are certainly not a dog for everyone. They are strong and can be active and demand a lot of time and attention from their owners. But if you want to invest that time and attention, and love to play with your dog, there are many rewards to living with an Am Staff. ■



Left: Dock Diving; Below: Heeling; Agility

