THE SBT STANDARD – A PERSONAL INTERPRETATION

by Mick Smith (Willowstaff)

The Standard would appear to be self explanatory and a blue print for the ideal specimen, however it is open to interpretation and as a result a variety of types according to people’s preferences occur. Variations are inevitable but exaggeration to the detriment of the breed must be avoided, particularly with respect to health and functionality.

Rather than go through the Standard in detail clause by clause – because these are in essence self explanatory – I will describe the features I look for in a Stafford in accordance with my interpretation of the Standard. Misinterpretation of the Standard and the emphasis on a number of features have over time produced a caricature of the original animal on which the Standard was based (i.e. Jim the Dandy).

“Great Strength for Size” has been taken too literally and although a Stafford should be robust, they should not be ‘heavy/cloddy’. In essence, a Stafford should be balanced with an athletic outline. The old timers I am sure were referring to the physical capability rather than physical size, and this together with the height to weight ratios should point to a less bulky animal than we tend to see in the show ring.

The temperament and characteristics are clearly described and we look for a confident dog with a friendly disposition that easily adapts to a variety of situations and does not exhibit nervous aggression. Staffords that are well socialised can mix with other dogs but caution should be exercised at all times.

The head and skull on examination should be more oval in shape than round with clean lines and no surplus flesh and no excess of flews (i.e. clean lipped). The skull should be proportionately deep through and the muzzle should be broad with no evidence of ‘snipeyness’ with a strong under jaw. The ‘stop’ should be distinct but not vertical and the eyes, preferably dark, should be round, not overly large, and set wide apart, thus avoiding an untypical expression. Although dark eyes are preferable purely for cosmetic reasons, the colour has no effect on functionality and should be judged accordingly. Too deep a stop results in overly large and prominent eyes susceptible to damage, whereas too shallow a stop produces the almond shaped eye and a foreign expression. Over-round heads should be avoided for in order to maintain the desirable 2:1 ratio of length of skull (occiput to stop) to length of muzzle (stop to tip of nose), the muzzle invariably has to be over-short. Over round eyes giving the all too common ‘surprised’ look should be avoided, as they are not conducive to what was once a dog bred for combat.

It is of paramount importance that the head is in balance with the body, as an over-large head upsets the kinematic balance and has a detrimental effect on manoeuvrability and agility. One must remember that the first thing a dog moves to change direction is the head, and an imbalance would be analogous to a boxer carrying a heavy weight around his neck affecting speed and agility.

Ears – with adequate width between them – can be rose or half-pricked, as long as they are not overly large or thick. Ears that are too big are easily gripped and damaged and invariably bleed profusely as they contain an abundance of tiny blood vessels.

Teeth should be large and the bite should be correct, not only at the incisors (scissor bite), but the premolar and molars should interface correctly. Over-short muzzles often introduce misalignment of molars and premolars are often missing. The canines should be big and the points of the lower canines should be visible and not impede the upper gums or palate. Mouth faults should be judged on their severity and a dog should not be condemned if it has a minor dentition fault.

Neck and forequarter conformation are inherently connected as the muscles which move the front legs and scapula rely on the neck for support and anchorage.

Length and width of neck should be complimentary and too long and slender a neck is often weak and is invariably associated with excess layback of scapula (shoulder blade). Conversely, a too short and thick neck lacks flexibility and generally indicates an upright scapula. The neck should be strong and muscular and be of such a length to facilitate adequate reach and flexibility.   
The forequarters are very important as they support 60% of a dog’s weight and need to be anatomically sound to allow the dog to move with speed and agility, and historically to sustain the rigours of combat. When examining a dog from the front, look for a clean shoulder line and adequate width of chest. The front should be neither too narrow nor too wide, as these upset static and kinematic balance, agility and stability. A smooth contour around the shoulder indicates correct layback of scapula. Angulation of the scapula is very important as this acts as a shock absorber. For example: too steep an angle reduces the ability to absorb vertical forces and too laid back increases the resultant forces at the withers and point of shoulder. An overloaded shoulder is indicative of an upright shoulder blade, often accompanied with a short humorous (upper arm) and invariably the dog has restrictive movement at the front and exhibits the classical ‘paddling’ action. The elbow should be level with the brisket so as not to impede front action, remembering a good length of upper arm should not be accompanied by looseness at the elbow. Ample width of the chest also ensures the legs are not inset (i.e. pinched chest), and provides sufficient heart room. Finally the pasterns and feet, which are also integral and important features of the forequarters, need to be considered. The pasterns should be strong and correctly angled (15°-20° from the vertical) to ensure the weight of the dog is concentrated on the heel, rather than the toes of the foot. Feet should be well padded and strong, not thin and flat with long toes (i.e. hare footed), as these are susceptible to damage.

Overall balance will always be subjective, but generally the height (floor to withers) should be approximately equal to the length of the dog (forechest to croup). Front and rear angulation is well documented and should be equal to facilitate good movement. In general, upright shoulders accompanied by an over-angulated rear, or lack of stifle together with a well laid shoulder blade inevitably result in poor movement and the basic rule is comparable front and rear angulation. A well laid shoulder blade and good length of upper arm are conducive to correct front action. In general a short upper arm and too wide front indicates a low centre of gravity which although stable introduces lack of flexibility and agility. Adequate rear angulation and good bend of stifle are required for good rear movement. When the hind feet are positioned approximately in line with the rump, the topline/backline should be level. If the feet have to be placed too far back then the rear angulation/bend of stifle are excessive and the hip joint and patella are being subjected to adverse strain. Remember: bend of stifle is the bend at the “true knee”, i.e. the angle between the femur and tibia.

The topline should be level with a slight rise over the croup and a gentle slope towards the rump to facilitate extra drive from the rear. Front legs should be slightly behind the forechest and the dog should not appear “pigeon chested”.

Depth of brisket and length of sternum should provide ample room for the heart and lungs and benefit inhalation and exhalation. However the interpretation that a “barrel” rib is required is a fallacy. The “barrelled” rib is akin to an already expanded pair of bellows, whereas the requirement is for a good ‘spring’ of rib to facilitate efficient breathing. A discernible tuck-up is required, however a “herring gut” is highly undesirable as this restricts the diaphragm and reduces lung room.

A Stafford should look balanced even when viewed from above; the neck should not be too short or wide and the shoulders should not be much wider than the rib cage. The rib cage should not be ‘slab sided’ but well sprung. “Tuck in” or a definite waist should be apparent and the dog should be ‘light in the loins’ but not so much as to exhibit the “tadpole effect”. Hindquarters should be muscular and the first and second thigh muscles should be well developed.

The Stafford should move fluidly with economy of effort and with discernible drive from the rear. Movement should be a straight, parallel driving action and a level topline should be maintained. Single tracking, not to be confused with close movement (i.e. a product of misaligned limbs – for example: “pin toed” or “turned in” hocks) is acceptable, however plaiting/crossing of legs front and/or rear and the all too familiar “paddling” action should be penalised. Stilted, awkward movement indicates a structural fault. For example: over-angulated and sickle hocked animals exhibit a “bobbing up and down” rear action, and dogs with straight stifles roll about the hip and exhibit a stilted action. Lack of reach of fore and aft movement is a result of poor angulation, and in particular a lack of upper arm when considering the forehand. Restricted movement at the rear is again poor angulation and with excessive angulation more often than not the dog is too short in the back, causing the dog to take short steps in order to avoid contact with his front feet. There is no reason why a Stafford should not move well; all that is required is to avoid exaggeration and adhere to the Standard. A well balanced Stafford built along athletic lines will fulfil the active and agile requirement.

The cosmetic appearance of the Stafford, i.e. coat, colour, etc., is self explanatory. The main ingredients are balance and lack of exaggerations.

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