



Evolution of The Staffordshire Bull Terrier Breed Standard

by Jason Nicolai (Homebrewed)

Crufts 1939. Notice the moderate substance and variation in size up to 18 inches which was called for in the original standard.

Photo ~ J. Gordon



The Staffordshire Bull Terrier was accepted by the AKC for registration in 1974 with show status granted the following year.

However, the breed standard was not rooted the US disco era. In the UK there existed 40 years of evolution to the standard prior to AKC acceptance. It is important to consider this

history not only to have a better understanding of today's standard, but ultimately to provide important context that will assist in our interpretation of the modern breed and our evaluation thereof.

The first standard was written in the UK in 1935. It began by describing the ideal Stafford as 15 to 18 inches tall. Dogs were to weigh 28-38 pounds with bitches 24-34 pounds. Compare this to our current standard which brings the heights down to 14-16 inches, yet leaves the weights exactly the same. This is by far the most significant

change to the breed standard throughout its evolution in terms of how it impacts our interpretation of the balance between bull and terrier as well as the subjective descriptors found throughout the rest of the standard. These early show dogs came directly from fighting stock, hence the wider variation in size and rather efficient proportions compared to our modern show dogs. At the same time the language under "General Appearance" in today's standard was taken directly from the original in 1935: "...great strength for his (its) size, and although muscular should be active and agile." The interpretation of "active and agile" went from a mid-standard dog who carried approximately 2 pounds of weight per inch of height to one that now carries nearly 2.4 pounds per inch; a 20% increase in overall mass. It's important to note that this evolution is very often misquoted and misunderstood. You may hear some incorrectly state that the current heights and weights that define proper substance were derived by the fighting fancy, so allowances should be made for



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our modern show dogs to carry more mass or to be conditioned to a weight considerably more than the breed standard call for. As a result you may see exhibits that are shown with an overall substance or a simple lack of conditioning resulting a weight that is well above today's standard for their height. In reality, the modern standard already takes into consideration the breed's transformation from a fighting dog to a show dog. The argument that it's acceptable for our modern show dogs to carry more mass than the current standard calls for is an unfounded and unfortunate misinterpretation of the breed's history. Some tolerance for variation should certainly be given.



1938 Crufts winner. Ideal for his time.

Photo ~ B. Boylan

However, remember that the current standard explicitly states under "Size, Proportion, Substance" that "non-conformity with these limits is a fault." Be careful not to consciously select for a fault just because it looks "impressive." From 1935 through today the Stafford is still described as active and agile dog.

In the 1949 revision a "Characteristics" section was added. Today it appears verbatim in the AKC standard under "Temperament" which is still the only standard to mention a breed's affection for children. In 1935 there was no description for movement in the standard. In 1949 the "Parent club" intended on adding movement as a portion of the old 100 point judging system, but the Kennel Club changed its policies and would not allow this scoring system to be published. No description was added at that time. The original AKC standard for the breed was taken directly from the 1949 UK standard, and thus also had no mention of gait. Essentially Movement slipped through the cracks for the first 50 years of breed standard history. The first description did not appear until 1987 (UK) and consequently 1989 (US) where it remains; "Free, powerful and agile with economy of effort. Legs moving parallel when viewed from front or rear. Discernible drive from hind legs."

The language for Head, Body, Forequarters and Hindquarters have also changed a bit over time with the addition of greater details, but many of the primary descriptors have remained the same throughout every revision of the standard for nearly 70 years.



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Head: “Short, deep through, broad skull, very pronounced cheek muscles, distinct stop, short foreface...” This particular language is unchanged from the 1935 standard.

Modern additions to this section include details of the correct scissor bite, tight, clean lips and dark eye rims with an allowance for pink on a dog with white around the eye.

Body: Originally a separate section; now combined with Neck, Top line and Tail descriptors. “deep brisket”, “level top line”, and “[rather] light in loins” are all carried through from 1935 to today. “Short back” evolved into “close coupled” and “forelegs set rather wide apart” was simplified to “wide front.”

Even though many of the adjectives that describe the Staffordshire Bull Terrier have remained the same throughout the evolution of the standard; e.g. “deep”, “wide” and “broad”, the interpretations have changed. How we visualize subjective words like these is mandated by the above referenced changes that were made to increase the overall substance of the dog. How wide is “wide?” In 1935 the same word was used, but as predicated by their original function the dogs from 70 years ago were more moderate compared to what today’s standard call for. If you compare the 1935 standard to modern standards for other breeds you will find that the substance of the original Staffordshire Bull Terrier was something



Modern performance Stafford conditioned with substance somewhere between the original standard and today’s standard.

Photo ~ L. Luksa

akin to today’s American Water Spaniel or in taller examples, the Wheaten. This shift in how we translate the descriptors found within the standard does not suggest free, subjective interpretation today. The guidelines for substance are still given, and they are in fact referenced in today’s standard as “limits.” Non-conformity outside these limits is not a disqualification, but it is to be faulted. The modern show Stafford should be exhibited in the condition outlined in the breed standard: “although muscular, should be active and agile.” The standard call for him to be “rather light in the loins.” A Stafford in proper show condition exhibits what is often referred to as “tuck up” at the loin. The relatively short history of the Staffordshire Bull Terrier in the US is that of a family companion, show dog, and performance sport animal. Fortunately he has never been a known as a fighting dog in this country, but he should never lose the strength, athleticism, and agility that is a reminder of that original purpose.



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Modern Stafford bitch with correct balance and feminine head. Photo ~ J. Windrow

One other significant change that occurred in the breed standard prior to the Stafford ever making its way to the US was alluded to previously. This was the elimination of a 100 point judging system that weighted the importance of the various elements of the standard. This is of considerable interest in understanding what the original architects of the breed found to be most important. Originally adopted in 1935, below is the last proposed version that was to be submitted for approval in 1949, but by that time the Kennel Club (UK) had eliminated the 100pt scoring system from all breed standards.

General Appearance and Coat Condition	10
Head	25
Neck	10
Body	25
Legs and Feet	15
Tail	5
General Movement and Balance	10

Today, when people ask if the Stafford is a “head breed” we can look back and see that even though it’s certainly not everything it was in fact quite important to those who originally decided how to prioritize the foundations of breed type. The original, 1935 version of this scale actually had the head as 30 points before the revision was made attempting to address “movement.” The head was of particular importance to a group of people trying to standardize and obtain consistency with a new breed. Over the years breed type has tightened up as the standard has evolved. The purpose of the standard is, after all to describe the ideal specimen of the breed. The more strictly we adhere to it, the more consistency we will see as the breed continues to improve alongside the words that are used to outline its makeup.



Modern show Stafford (dog) exhibiting correct blend of Bull and Terrier for today’s standard. Photo ~ C. Dillon