

American Chesapeake Club Breed Information

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Size and the Working Chesapeake

There's an old axiom that goes something along the lines of "To know what direction to go in, you have to know where you started from." However it goes, it gives sound advice for anyone seriously interested in judging or breeding Chesapeakes or any other breed. You need to know that what and the why of the breed before you breed or judge it.

Historical data on the Chesapeake is not easy to come by. Relatively few breed-exclusive books have ever been written. The earliest such book is from 1933 and is actually more like a pamphlet. There are earlier references in multiple-breed books, of course; however, some of the most informative articles appeared in sporting periodicals and books of the mid-1800s and 1900s. Since space does not permit a discussion of all points of Chesapeake, I will address only size.

In the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th, ducks were shot by the thousands along the rivers that empty into the Chesapeake Bay. A dog was needed to retrieve this harvest of mallards, black ducks, red-heads and most particularly, canvasbacks. And the Chesapeake was the breed developed for this: "Give me a dog for ducks that (has) been bred, born and raised to fetch the royal bloods, canvasbacks and their first cousins, the red-heads."

These early sportsman needed a dog with the ability to endure the cold; a love of water; a dense, thick coat; and stamina with natural athletic ability. It seems that many have the false impression that these waterfowl require a dog of massive size to handle them. Actually, these ducks range in weight from two to four pounds, which a 55-80 pound dog can easily handle. Even when swan hunting was allowed, the dogs were quite capable of handling these large birds.

Earle Swepson described the following incident in his book, *The Chesapeake Bay Country*. "Their strength of limb, power of endurance, dense coat and general intelligence fit them especially for winter work in the waters of the Chesapeake. The late Julian F. Baily told me that he once saw a dog swim over a mile toward the middle of the Chester River after a swan that had been killed with a rifle shot. The bird was too large and heavy to be brought ashore in the mouth, as ducks are, but the intelligent animal seized the swan by the neck, swung the body over (its) shoulder and (then) came ashore."

The first formal standard for the breed recommended a 65-pound dog, since too large of a dog was considered unwieldy and lacking in quickness of movement. Jay Towner, a distinguished early breeder who shipped his stock to sportsmen all over the country, wrote in his brochure; "I do not like a large dog for retrieving, as I can see no advantage in having a large, clumsy dog to carry around in boat or buggy when a smaller dog will do the work equally as well, if not better. I have seen many dogs bring in a crippled goose or swan without trouble. So (try not to breed) them too large."

B. Alton Smith, another breeder of Jay Towner's era, advised, "A Chesapeake should measure about 23 inches, not more, over the shoulders and weigh about 65 pounds. A weighty dog is suggestive of clumsiness."

The current breed standard calls for dogs to run from 23 to 26 inches, weighing 65-80 pounds; bitches range 21-24 inches, weighing 55-70 pounds. The standard also instructs judges to severely penalize oversized and undersized dogs. Though the Chesapeake size range allows for variation due to the different shooting conditions throughout the country, and dogs at the 26 -inch height generally weigh more than 80 pounds, it does not mean that these dogs represent the ideal. Logically, the ideal is represented by a specimen that is well coated, with good, balanced angulation, sound movement and disposition, correct head type and falls within both the height and weight range given in the standard.

On too many occasions, points and breed wins seem to be awarded mainly on the basis of height and substance, while entries with better coats and conformation are passed over because the judge perceived them as not being large enough to do work. Believe me, a 21 inch, 55-pound bitch in good condition can easily handle a duck or a goose.

Judges also seem unsure of how to handle the “severely penalize” portion of the standard. Breeder-Judge Nat Horn offers the following advice: “I consider the term ‘severely penalize’ comparable to ‘serious fault,’ and judge should act accordingly. When an overdone, oversized, underdone or undersized dog comes into the ring, (that dog) has a serious fault. I still look at what is good about the dog and weigh that against its problem(s). In a big entry, these dogs should seldom win. In a small entry, (its) merits may outweigh the competitions.”

While undersized dogs do turn up in the ring, the more current problem has more to do with oversized animals. Judges need to work at their perception of size in this breed and not be misled into thinking a dog is too small simply because others in the ring are considerably bigger. They may very well be too large!

Bone mass also plays a role in the perception of size and substance. The standard asks for “good bone,” but that does not mean “massively boned.” The Chesapeake is an athletic dog, not one overloaded with muscle or weight. One should try to think in terms of a competition swimmer, not a weight lifter. Bone should be in proportion to the height and weight of the dog. Comparisons should be made between dogs on the basis of their overall proportions and the individual qualities of each dog.

The first Field Champion Chesapeake stood 23 inches and weighed 65 pound, and he was one of the outstanding retrievers of his day. He was also hunted on the great bays off Long Island, and his size never presented a handicap.

Actually, Chesapeake field stock more closely conforms to the standard in both the height and weight ranges. A big, heavy dog is general not fast or agile enough and does not stand up well physically to constant training.

Consistent selection over the suggested height and weight ranges creates an upward drift in the breed’s size and substance. Not on are those dogs that fit the height requirements than perceived as too small, but also a gulf is created between the show and field stock – a gap that is totally undesirable in any sporting breed, and one, which until recently, the Chesapeake breed has been able to resist. If the fate of separate show and field stock is to be avoided, then both judges and breeders must pay stricter attention to size.

--Dyane Baldwin