



**“Perhaps I'm way off base, but I'm inclined to believe that's starting at the wrong end; few journeys I know of begin at the destination...”**

by Richard G. Beauchamp

This article was published in the February 2008 issue of Dogs in Review.

Just recently a friend of mine and I were sitting at ringside watching a breed we are both very interested in. After watching a bit I remarked (quietly, I thought) that the dogs in the breed we were watching were certainly uniform - if not quality, certainly in their faults. There wasn't a dog in the ring that had a decent front - all poker straight, and this was a Sporting breed!

The young lady sitting on my left leaned over and said, "I hope you don't mind me intruding but I've just started in this breed and I've heard other people make the same remark, about fronts that is, and I don't think I understand what they're talking about." I assured her I didn't mind at all and asked her just what it was that she wasn't clear on.

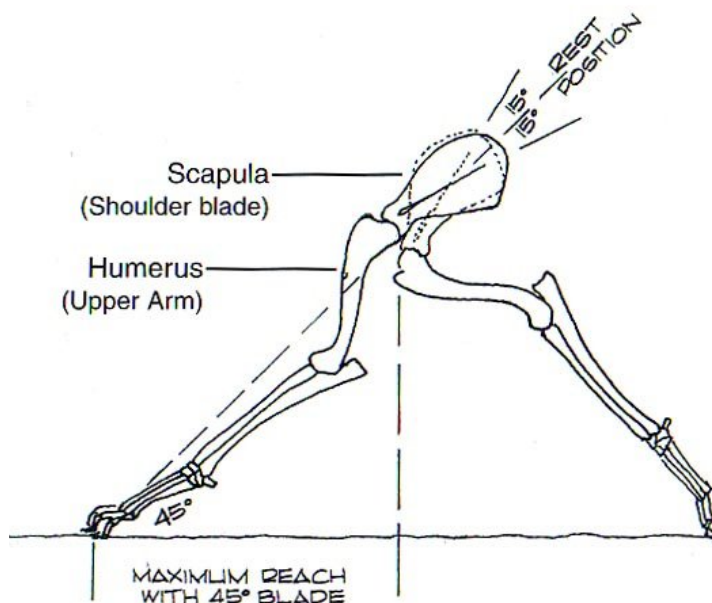
"Well," she went on, "I hear people say a dog is 'straight as a stick' in front and that seems to be a criticism. But other times someone will say the dog has a beautiful straight front. Obviously this is a compliment. And then it seems that a Terrier front can be both good and bad. I want to breed for the right thing, but I am not at all sure what the right thing is."

Her questions really made me stop and think. Quite frankly, she hit upon two universal problems we deal with in the dog game today. It is amazing how few people have bothered with that first important step in breeding, judging or just showing dogs. It's "Purebred Dogs 101 - Basic Canine Anatomy."

Her confusion also cast the light on just how ambiguous common dog terminology can be. What seems perfectly clear to some of us may well be an unfathomable mystery to others, particularly so when everything we talk about has two or three different names and several different meanings.

Perhaps our newer dog fanciers' reading habits have a bit to do with it. My contemporaries and I cut our teeth on McDowell Lyon's *The Dog in Action*, Burns and Fraser's *Genetics of the Dog* and Rachel Page Elliott's *Dogsteps*. I think we are more apt to find copies of "How to Win Westminster" or "how to

# Understanding Fronts



example of how the shoulder with a proper 45 degree angle will oper

Become an All-breed Judge: on the bookshelves of a good many of today's novices. Perhaps I'm way off base, but I'm inclined to believe that's starting at the wrong end; few journeys I know of begin at the destination. I guess that wouldn't be here or there except for the fact that there are probably more litters born in the homes of the new people than there are in homes of people we will politely refer to as "veterans" of the dog game. These new people shape the dog breeds of tomorrow.

But back to our lady at the dog show and her questions of fronts. My friend and I did our best to give her a quick primer on fronts and I told her not to feel alone in her confusion in this area, in that I find fronts to be the least understood and most underestimated portion of a dog's anatomy here in America. I promised the young lady I would put some constructive thoughts down on paper and mail them off to her. I dutifully jotted down her address on the back of my catalog and then promptly proceeded to lose my catalog!



Nevertheless, the whole thing got me thinking. Judging by the manner in which some breeders have neglected fronts in order to achieve some other characteristic makes it obvious they have no idea how important front construction is to correct conformation and proper movement.

I did put some of my ideas regarding fronts to paper in hopes that some kind soul would find my catalog and return it to me. At this point, however, I have lost all hope of ever finding Concerned Young Lady again. All the same, I thought perhaps there might be others who will read this (or someone you know who should) and my time would not be for naught.

## HOW IT'S MADE

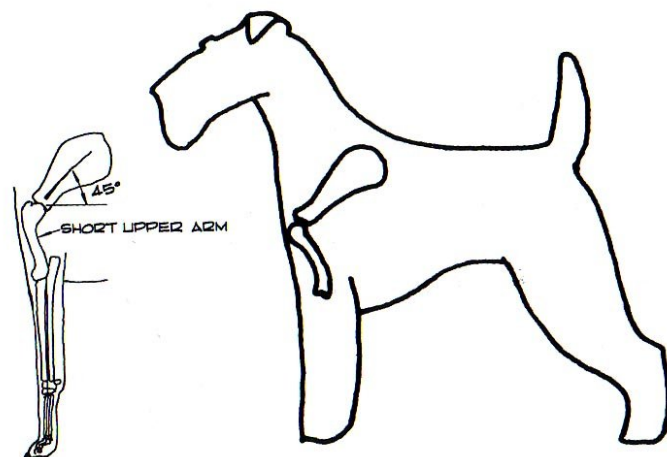
I am neither an engineer nor an anatomist. Most of what I know about anatomy I learned from laymen and in laymen's terms. I consider myself quite fortunate to have received my education in dogs from what was probably the last wave of the great dog men and women of the old school. Things were much simpler then. We had fewer technicians but there were more people who just imply knew dogs. A dog was either a good one or it was not and their judgment had little to do with much else.

But then as now, there were certain basics that had to be understood before one could ever hope to breed or recognize a well-made animal. This knowledge is also important so that we can all have a common point of reference from which to proceed.

Every breed of dog, whether it is a Bulldog, Fox Terrier or Great Dane, has two bones in its forehand assembly the size, shape and angulation of which determine not only how the dog looks but also how it moves. These two bones are the shoulder blade (scapula) and the upper arm (humerus).

## THE SCAPULA

Let's take a look at the shoulder blade (scapula) first. Most (but not all) breeds are in need of what we refer to as either "well laid back" or "well angulated" shoulders. The degree to which the shoulders are angulated depends upon the breed's purpose and function, but even at that the variance is not great. A well laid back shoulder that is attached to an upper arm of similar length permits a breed to move with easy, ground-covering reach. It is usually matched by a fairly well angulated rear. This is typically found in our Sporting dogs, among others. I've always thought the Sporting breeds were an ideal place to begin studying dogs in that the other breeds or Groups are simply more than or less than these dogs who work in the field.



An example of the "Terrier front;" a short upper arm results in a more upright front, but the 45-degree angle is retained.

At any rate, dogs who aren't required to traverse the woodlands all day long or whose duties revolve around hauling really don't need as much angulation. But only where a breed is required to have short, stilted movement would upright shoulders be desirable. A perfect example of this restricted gait can be seen in the properly moving Chow Chow.

One can only assume that if a breed standard calls for movement as far removed from the norm as the Chow Chow's, it is a critical point and should receive great consideration from the breeder, exhibitor and judge. As important as short, stilted movement is to a breed like the Chow Chow, or the rolling gait is to the Bulldog, so should we demand most other breeds to get about easily and naturally with a minimum of effort and little strain. For the purpose of this article, we will confine ourselves primarily to breeds in which ease of movement is both a natural entitlement and a requirement of the respective breed standard.

So then, how does the layman go about determining the degree of shoulder angulation? It can easily be determined by putting the thumb and index fingers of the right hand at the uppermost points of the shoulder blades and the same fingers of the left hand at the point of shoulder (where the shoulder blade joins the upper arm). The imaginary line that runs down the center of the blade between these two points, and how it deviates from the vertical determines the degree of angulation.



If you extend that line to the ground in front of the dog, it will, in most cases, mark the extent of the forward reach of that dog. We will look at how this forward reach can be restricted as we go along.

Anatomical perfection would have the shoulder blade slope back from the vertical at a 45-degree angle to allow maximum reach. Please note that I say "anatomical perfection" would have this be so. Nature, however, is not so compliant and if you speak to most judges and experienced breeders they will tell you one seldom if ever encounters true 45-degreed shoulder layback.

But please, because this degree of angulation is so seldom achieved, don't misconstrue the fact to mean should scrap the whole idea. Failing to reach the North Pole on our early explorers' first try didn't eliminate the North Pole! Perhaps all this yapping about how seldom you find the ideal shoulder angulation is responsible for so many exhibitors treating it with utter disregard. Something has set us off in the wrong directions and we have need to get back on track.

The result of being negligent in our demand for ideal shoulder angulation is not confined to movement alone. Upright shoulders make the neck shorted than it should be and the back longer, thus destroying the dog's correct balance. These badly articulated shoulders are often connected to short upper arms which are also poorly angulated, thus moving the entire front end assembly too far forward on the ribcage. This results in a lack of forechest and a nearly straight line from throat to fee. This construction is frequently accompanied by a hollowed out cavity in the chest area between the legs. Construction of this nature indicates lack of endurance due to restricted heart and lung room.

The correct front for most of the long-legged Terriers, much to the surprise of many Terrier breeders themselves, also requires a long, sloping shoulder blade. The straight front line of the "Terrier font" is actually created by a short, nearly upright humerus (upper are) - not by upright shoulders! Some authors believe that the short upper arm evolved because it was advantageous in "going to ground;" the dog could work on its keel (lower chest) with its legs free to dig. Here this straight line front is a virtue.

A long shoulder blade and a short upper arm is not as easy a combination to achieve as one might think in that the upper arm and shoulder blade, like all bones in the canine skeleton, seem to have a natural inclination to approximate the length of their adjacent neighbor. In other words, if the "the toe bone's connected to the foot bone," like the old song tells us, the bones in the toes will attempt to approximate the length of

the bones in the foot proper. Or another example: a man with a long forearm is invariably going to have long hands, etc.

Thus, what we are more apt to get in dogs (even in Terriers) is the unhappy combination of a short, upright shoulder and a similarly proportioned and placed upper arm. Therefore, in order to breed the well-angulated, ground covering front, one must pay attention to both the length and angulation of the shoulder blade and the upper arm.

