

The "Look" of a French Brittany by Kathleen Dillon

Perhaps some of you have heard the term "cobby" and not quite understood what it meant. The term "cobby" refers to the length of the back in conjunction with the height of the dog. The standard states that the length of the body should equal the height of the dog at the withers. Ideally, the dog should fit into a square.

However, the "look" of a French Brittany (Epagneul Breton) is an overall look that includes more than just the "cobiness" of the dog. Do not get the impression that how the dog looks is more important than the dog's temperament or how he works. It's a total package, no one thing more or less important than the other. Many breeds have lost their hunting ability and have evolved into a totally different looking dog because they were bred to emphasize certain traits, such as longer and longer ears or a certain shaped skull, all for the benefit of the show ring. Some breeds have lost their working ability because that aspect of the dog has been neglected. So it is with this in mind that we want to stress that we have to be careful not to get caught up in breeding for any one characteristic alone, or to the point of exaggerating a characteristic. Breeding practices should reflect an effort to produce progeny that fall within the standard for the Epagneul Breton, but they should also reflect an effort to produce puppies with the characteristics of the breed: gun dogs with natural hunting ability and calm, friendly temperaments. However, it is good to know how our dogs should look and what the standard expects. So with all that said, we will discuss here the breed standard for the French Brittany and how conformation needs to be a part of the total package.

Many of you may have noticed that the French Brittany's muzzle is shorter than most of those on an American Brittany. The muzzle should be in a 3/2 proportion with the skull. The nose should be black or to tone of the darkest color of the coat. The eyes should have a slightly oblique shape (not too round and not too almond-shaped) and be colored from dark amber to a tone in harmony with the nose and coat, with a lively, intelligent expression. The ears should be set high, not overly long, slightly rounded, and furnished with a fringe or wavy hair longer towards the tips of the ears. The lips should be fine, rather tight with the upper lip slightly overlapping the lower lip.

The back should be short and straight, presenting a firm, straight top line with just a slight slope - the rump should slightly slope with hips just slightly lower than the withers. The chest should be broad with ribs well-sprung, let down to the elbows and be well developed toward the rear. The tail should be held level or down and, unless bob-tailed, be no longer than four inches often ending in a tuft or twist of hair. Many pups are born bob-tailed, meaning they were born with a naturally short tail or even no tail at all. (Pups were at one time in Europe barred or put down unless they were born bob-tailed).

Forelegs should be slightly fringed and wavy, with hindquarters well fringed up to mid-thigh. Coat colors may be orange and white, liver and white, black and white, tri-color, or roan of any of these. Their movement should be easy and lively, denoting the little cob full of energy. The preferred gait when hunting is the gallop: quick strides with relatively short extension.

Height for males should be 18.5 inches minimum - maximum 20.5 inches. Ideal for a male is 19 - 19.5 inches. Height for females should be 18-20 inches with the ideal being 18.5-19 inches. Measurements should be taken from the ground to the withers (which is the ridge between the shoulder blades).

French Brittanys can be registered with the AKC but cannot be entered in the show ring. This is due to the fact that the AKC utilizes a standard for Brittanys that very much differs from the international standard. The international standard for the Epagneul Breton, which is utilized by all European countries, accepts black coloration in the coat and nose. The Epagneul Breton can be entered in UKC conformation events which registers French brittanys separate from American brittanys.

Many in the United States look down their noses at the show ring, with good reason, due to what's happened to many of the sporting breeds. France has embraced the "total dog" concept for the breed since its inception and that is what has kept the breed what it is today both in working style and ability and in looks. If field work plus conformation are not both a part of the total package, the breed will be at danger of diverging as so many other breeds have, with some of the breeding stock being "show dogs" and others suited only for the field. No one wants to see any part of the breed becoming what is commonly referred to as "show" dogs – the dangers are inherent when breeders start breeding simply for one aspect. But conformation events when utilized as a part of the "total dog" concept DO assist in seeing to it that breeders strive to produce pups that will remain within the standard for the breed as well as being the natural upland hunting dogs they are intended to be. You may wonder how the conformation of the dog could be important.

Conformation standards are written not for what makes the breed look pretty, but for what is required for that particular breed to work as it should in the field. This breed is first and foremost intended to be athletes and their conformation must reflect that of an athlete. A fine boned, whippet (too tucked up) specimen is not the athletic specimen that a Breton should be.

Hindquarters should be broad and well muscled. The upper thigh is broad and well let down. Lower thigh is very slightly longer than the upper thigh with clean, defined muscling. Broad in the upper part, the lower thigh diminishes gradually in size towards its junction with the hock. When the dog is standing, the strong rear pasterns are nearly perpendicular to the ground and, viewed from the rear, parallel to one another. All of this is important because the rear is what propels the dogs across terrain with strength and stamina. Correct leg and hock length and angulations all affect the run and the dog's stamina. A broad, deep chest provides ample room for lung expansion required for the dog to run without tiring. Good feet are essential for a working gun dog. Front feet are rather round, toes tight, pads firms, toenails short. The nose is large with wide and well-open nostrils for scenting, the coat must be functional for the field, etc. You get the idea.

When being judged on conformation there are faults and there are disqualifying faults. In general, a fault is any departure from the points of the standard and the seriousness with which the fault is regarded should be in exact proportion to its degree. Some of the disqualifying faults include: Overbite, underbite, unpigmented areas on the nose, eyelids, eyes very light or of different colors, white patch on the ear(s) or eyes situated in a white patch, a solid coat color, timid character, aggressiveness. Though some of these disqualifying faults will not effect the dog's ability to hunt, they are disqualifications for the show ring and reasons a dog should not be used in a breeding program so that these traits are not passed on to future generations.

The standard of a breed denotes the ideal or perfect specimen. A dog does not have to be totally perfect to be a good specimen of the breed. Though it is the rare dog that is the absolute perfect specimen of the breed they do exist, and breeders who have a true devotion to the breed strive continuously to produce just such specimens. In order to do so, attention must be paid to conformation, natural ability, temperament and health – it's all part of the total package.

In summary, the French Brittany (Epagneul Breton) is a small, elegant dog, very vigorous, having substance without heaviness, lively, with an intelligent expression, presenting the appearance of a small cob full of energy, with a frankness of behavior and gentleness of character, keen hunter and sociable with his like, and an ideal companion at home and afield.