

Extended clarification of the

Flatcoated Retriever

breed standard

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History

The common retriever ancestry

The retriever was shaped in Britain in connection with the introduction of the modern shotgun in the early 1800: s. The new breech loading gun and the modern cartridge generated larger bags for the guns. Thus, a dog specialized in the search for and retrieving of dead and wounded game was needed at the big battue shots, becoming increasingly popular at that time at the British estates. The requirements for this type of gundog were high. They had to be rocksteady when confronted to live game and gunfire, be cooperative and easy to train, be social with other dogs and humans, be persevering and work with drive, be hardy when facing rough cover and heavy seas, have a good memory for fallen game as well as excellent game-finding capabilities, and last but not least, expose a strong will to retrieve and carry game, with speed and a soft mouth, to his handlers hand.

Retrieving dogs had most likely been around since the first wolflike animals were socialized by ancient humans. But the history and the naming of the specialized retriever begun around 1830. The available retrieving gundogs, setters and spaniels, sheepdogs as well as other breeds, were used to create a tailor-made retriever. But the Canadian water dog, being named Newfoundland dog, Labrador dog or St Johns dog due to its different origins, became the fundament of the new breed. The waterdog was originally a working dog that existed along the Mediterranean coast lines since the dawn of the modern history, today being named Poodle, Barbet, Lagotto Romagnolo, Perro De Agua Español, Cão de Agua/Portuguese Water Dog, or Irish Water Spaniel due to its different origins. When European fishermen established cod fishing at a large scale along the Canadian east coast, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they brought their water dogs as fishing aids. Over the years these waterdogs were transformed into a local variety. When the fish loads were sent to Europe these water dogs came along and British shooting men were probably the first to discover their unique capabilities. These Canadian waterdogs were mainly mixed with setters and pointers to produce the modern retriever.

Retriever varieties

When the first dog shows were organized around 1860 the retriever was gradually separated into different types due to its coat structures and color, thus black wavy coated, black smooth coated as well as black curly coated varieties were shown in different classes as well as liver or brown retrievers.

The wavy coated retriever was the forerunner of the Flatcoated as well as the Golden Retriever and shared its ancestry with the Labrador retriever, even if tradition mainly has linked it to the Flatcoat. It was no retriever breed standard at that time but most judges/breeders looked for a solidly built powerful dog, a rather wide head with a distinct stop, and a somewhat wavy coat, being not that far from the coat of a modern Flatcoat or a Golden. In parallel with these Labrador - like types there were setter-like and collie-like types. When the breeder and judge Reverend Thomas Pearce (writing dog-books under the famous "Idstone" pseudonym) advertised about retrievers, calling them flat-coated Labradors, it indicates what it was all about.

Mr. Sewallis Shirley took the lead when the dog show movement was organized as the initiator and the first head of the Kennel Club. Dog shows rapidly transformed all breeds into different show types and Shirley was the designer of numerous new breeds. He owned the Ettington Park estate, near Stratford-upon-Avon, where he used local gundogs to shape his retrievers. Shirley is given the main credit for transforming these dogs into a uniform Flatcoat with a straighter coat and the refined head that is the trademark of the modern Flatcoat.

The field trial movement

Shirley was one of the main initiators of the first field trials as well, organizing working competitions for sheepdogs as well as gundogs. Retriever field trials were organized, in connection with setter-pointer trials, at the time when the first dog shows were organized. For several reasons these retriever trials were not successful. These shooting men disliked battue shots, being the most favorable testing arena for a retriever, and it would take several decades before it started again. When retriever field trials were established around 1900, rapidly becoming a most popular and countrywide sport activity, several winning dogs came from Shirley's bloodlines.

The wavy coat and its cousin the Flatcoat were no doubt the leading gundogs during the early years and could hold its own when the field trial movement was established. But when the Labrador retriever entered the scene in 1904, the same year Shirley died, the Flatcoat and the wavy coat were gradually wiped out as just a few could match the

new specialized working retriever breed. Shirley was given the blame for producing oversized and heavy dogs unable to compete with the medium sized and easy-going Labradors. None of the few winning wavy coats and Flatcoats left any trace in the working Flatcoat lines, but some of the best were used to augment the working Labrador. One of the most winning Flatcoats, and the first retriever to gain the dual champion title, Grouse of Riverside, had just a few puppies, being invisible in the Flatcoat pedigrees of today. The great stars in the contemporary Labrador world had hundreds, building a solid base for the modern working Labrador. But it's an irony of faith that the Flatcoat was given credit for introducing a lower nose work and a softer mouth in the Labrador.



Reginald Cook and Dual Champion Grouse of Riverside (b. 1903).

The influencers

The dominant breeder at that time was *Harding Cox*, and his *Black Flatcoats* affected conformation ideals more than any others. He was the main advocate for a balanced, short coupled and racy workmanlike type of dog. But *Reginald Cooke*, and his *Riverside Flatcoats*, had a more long-time influence on the breed.

The number of Flatcoats gradually decreased to around 100 annual registrations during the interwar period. But a group of enthusiasts, being organized by Mr. Cook in the breed club, the Flatcoated Retriever association, solely accepting shooting men and women, maintained a competitive working Flatcoat

Cooke's dogs were continuously winning on the show- as well as the field trial scene. When the working Flatcoat was restored during the interwar period he was the main architect behind a smaller, more workmanlike type of dog. And he actively supported an introduction of Labrador/Interbred blood in the working Flatcoat, in fact entering a crossbred Flatcoat, Brag of Riverside (b. 1919), at field trials along with his other great worker, Dual Ch Toby of Riverside (b. 1919). He had a decisive influence on the breed's development for 75 years until 1951 when he left the scene.

Cooke's great show-dog, Jimmy of Riverside, was the most winning gundog before World War I, and most probably the main influencer behind the breed standard when defined in 1924. The Flatcoat would have been a very different breed without Cooke's dominating influence.



Jimmy of Riverside (b. 1906) – He won best of breed and the International Sporting Bowl at Crufts 1910, 1911, 1912 and 1913 for being the best gundog all these years. He was most probably the prototype when the breed standard was drawn, still standing as the ideal workmanlike Flatcoat type.

According to the Kennel Club librarian Ciara Farrell there was no Best in Show competition at Crufts before 1928. Group level and show level competitions were not really a major factor in showing at Championship shows at that earlier period. Cups for best gundog were awarded intermittently, but there were no structured judging criteria, and the decision was simply made on an ad-hoc basis by one or two Crufts committee members. Sometimes, these awards went to dogs that hadn't even won Best of Breed! It isn't the equivalent of the BOB to Group to BIS structured progression that we have now.

The modern Flatcoat

The Riverside dogs played vital roles when *Will Phizaklea*, *Atherbram*, and *Stanley O'Neill*, *Pewcroft*, built the foundation of the modern Flatcoat. To simplify a bit Phizaklea should be given credit for maintaining the broadest possible breeding base during WWII. But O'Neill must be praised for being the main influencer behind the breed we know today. His dogs were used as foundation stock by all the young enthusiasts who entered the breed during the nineteen forties and fifties. He used an interbred bitch, a Flatcoat/Labrador cross, to broaden the vulnerable and shrinking gene pool and he used his solid knowledge about the breed to teach the newcomers what an ideal Flatcoat should look and be like. The reconstruction of the breed after the Second World War was remarkable. The few but most ambitious Flatcoat breeders organized their efforts in the new breed club, The Flatcoated Retriever Society. All available dogs were used, to secure the broadest possible breeding base, but the Pewcroft dogs and later the Claverdon and the "W" dogs became the solid backbone of the new breed. It's no doubt that all the leading breeders had a strong focus on the working Flatcoat. But they favored the dual-purpose ideal meaning that a good show dog should look like a working gundog.



Mr and Mrs O'Neil along with their dogs. O'Neill's breeding stock built the base for the modern dual purpose Flatcoat. From left Pewcroft Pitch, Puffin, Picture, Peep and Plug.

The one who succeeded O'Neill's as the main influencer was *Nancy Laughton* (Claverdon). There is hardly any other breeder in the breed's long history able to match her fundamental role for the working Flatcoat and for the breed in general. The gamekeeper breeder, *Colin Wells*, ("W"/Woodland), was supporting, playing the leading role on the show scene, and jointly with *Amelia Jessel*, (Collyers), *Read Flowers*, (Fenrivers), *Joan Marsden*, (Tarncourt), *Peter and Shirley Johnson* (Downstream) and *Patience Lock* (Halstock) they built the wonderful, versatile breed we know today.

An immense career as a show dog

The Flatcoat has had an immense career as a show dog which is hard to match, when considering the significantly low registration figures compared with the other main retriever breeds. The three males; the British dogs *Shargleam Blackcap* (b. 1977), *Vbos the Kentuckian* (b. 2001), and the Swedish dog, *Almanza Backseat Driver* (b. 2015), all coming down from the "W"-male line, stand out for themselves winning Best in Show at Crufts in 1980, 2011 and 2022. However, although many Flatcoats are first-class Gundogs, they have not been able to excel on the field test scene, being the most significant display window for a working retriever.

	
<p><i>Woodlark (b. 1958) breeder, owner Colin Wells. Photographer unknown</i></p>	<p><i>Fenrivers Golden Rod (b. 1964). Breeder, owner Read Flowers. Photo from The World Encyclopedia of Dogs 1975.</i></p>
	
<p><i>Read Flowers Tonggreen Sparrow Boy (b. 1966). Breeder Joan Chester-Perks, owner Read Flowers. Photo Ann Strander</i></p>	<p><i>Shargleam Blackcap (b. 1977), breeder, owner Pat Chapman. Photo David Dalton</i></p>

Colin Wells dogs (always with an initial "W", later Woodland) affected the development of the show type more than any other dogs, but they were competitive working dogs as well. The four dogs above, all coming from the "W" male line, had a crucial impact on the show Flatcoat from the late 1950: s to the 1980: s. They were Woodlark, his son Fenrivers Golden Rod, grandson Tonggreen Sparrow Boy, and great-grandson Supreme champion Shargleam Blackcap. Notice that Golden Rod and Blackcap are standing in grass which makes them look somewhat heavier and their legs shorter than in reality.

Mental properties of a working Flatcoat

General appearance. *The breed standard says: A bright and active dog (...) with an intelligent expression. (...). Generously endowed with natural gundog ability, optimism and friendliness demonstrated by enthusiastic tail action. Confident and kindly.*

The Flatcoated Retriever is an active dog with many innate talents making it a versatile working dog. It is distinguished by its excellent retrieving capabilities, its ability to mark and remember fallen game, to search and retrieve with speed, its willingness to follow given directions as well as to work on its own. Its efficient nose makes it suitable as a Swiss dog and in “nose work” competitions. Its speedy action and strong will to cooperate with its handler make it a competitive agility dog. Its desire to please can be utilized in obedience competition.

Be aware that a Flatcoat is a lively dog, needing daily physical and mental activities to thrive. It is very inventive, curious, playful, and investigative and appreciates being with his family. It is an intelligent, loyal, active, happy dog, being expressed by its constantly waving tail and its friendliness exposed to anyone asking for its attention.

When the breed standard describes a Flatcoat that is bright, active, optimistic, it is important to balance eagerness with a capability to remain calm in stressful situations; in shooting situations, waiting in a car or being at home with the family being busy with other things.

When the standard emphasizes that the breed is *endowed with natural gundog ability*, these are qualities that also make a multitasking working dog and an active family member. These natural qualities can be summed up as: *a desire to work, a strong perseverance and determination, a willingness to cooperate with his handler, an ability to be calm, relaxed, and quiet when being passive, intelligence, good nose, and a good game treatment (soft mouth).*

Desire to work: A great desire to work is a defining characteristic of a Flatcoat. This means that it is always willing to take on different tasks with energy and determination.

Perseverance: This means that it can work persistently, with good speed during a long shooting day and deliver the last retrieve with the same speed and style as the first. It also makes a Flatcoat suitable for a variety of tasks: as an obedience dog, rescue dog or a drug dog.

Trainability: A good trainability (sensitivity to the handler) is an important trait and an absolute necessity in a Flatcoat. It must willingly allow itself to be directed in various working situations. In the search for game, it is constantly attentive to the

handler and follows instructions happily. **The balance between its sensitivity and its eagerness to perform is the basis for obedience.**

Steadiness: The ability to be steady, concentrated, attentive and quiet at the handler's side, standing or moving, during gunfire and when game is falling, is a fundamental capability requiring an inner peace in stressful situations. Whining at the handler's side is a serious fault.

Good nose: is a most important capability in a working gundog, searching for game. From an animal welfare point of view, injured game must be found in the shortest possible time.

Intelligence: without a distinct intelligence it would not have the capability to optimize its nose work. When following the line of a "strong runner", its intelligence comes to the fore, and enables it to adjust its search to prevailing conditions.

Delivery: The ability to pick up dead or wounded game, quickly and with no hesitation, deliver it with pleasure, speed and without hesitation to the handler's hand is a vital quality. The delivery can be fine-tuned during training, but poor pick up, change of grip or a slow delivery are faults.

Soft mouth: A dog with a soft mouth carries his game with a loose but firm grip from the pickup until it is delivered to his handler. This means that he can control his instinct to chew and consume the game even in stressful situations. Hard mouth is a serious fault.

Speed: A first class working gundog works at a fast gallop throughout a long shooting day. He adapts his pace to the conditions when facing rough cover, when using the wind to catch the scent or when getting closer to the fallen game. Speed is particularly high on a marked bird or when following directions to find a runner.

Style: This term summarizes how a retriever appears in different working situations, affecting the image of an efficient gundog. A dog with style will be steady and attentive at his handler's side, when standing and moving, will search the given area carefully and with speed, will follow up scent intelligently and efficiently, will obey given directions and pick up and deliver game with pleasure. To watch a stylish working Flatcoat is an exquisite pleasure allowing a shooting man to have trust in his dog.

The anatomy of a working Flatcoat

General appearance. *The standard says: A bright, active dog of medium size with an intelligent expression, showing power without lumber, and raciness without weediness.*

The body structure of a Flatcoat should give the impression of power and energy. It should radiate mobility with a well-balanced strong, but never bulky nor lanky body. The term raciness, as in a racehorse, applies to a dog showing a capacity to gallop at a high and persevering speed, to quarter the ground in a close and efficient pattern and jump over high fences with ease. At a show it should be presented with a loose lead, standing, or trotting with drive, but judged with an insight that a galloping gundog requires a rather short back. It should appear in a hard condition, free from excess weight.

Head and Skull. *The standard says: Head, long and nicely moulded. Skull, flat and moderately broad with a slight stop between eyes, in no way accentuated, avoiding a down or dish-faced appearance. Nose of good size, with open nostrils. Jaws long and strong, capable of carrying a hare or pheasant.*

The head is the hallmark of a typical Flatcoat. The muzzle runs smoothly into the skull giving a well-filled appearance under the eyes. The relatively flat skull and the straight nose-bridge are parallel in line. There is no sign of a "two-piece" conformation" of the head, it is casted in one-piece. It differs quite significantly from the Labrador and the Golden, showing a more distinct division between the skull and the jaw, seen from the side and from above.

The jaw should be of approximately the same length as the skull. The jaws should be strong with the capacity to carry a large pheasant or a hare.

Lips should be tight (free from lippiness) with the lower jaw clearly visible. Heavy lips will counteract a proper collection of game, and the feathers will tend to be retained to the dog's discomfort.

The nostrils should be large, with sufficient depth as well as width, to optimize the absorption of scent.

A too pronounced stop, a too marked division between nose and skull, a round skull are all faults. That is the case as well with a so called "roman" head, meaning a missing stop and a too narrow skull (recalling a greyhound's head) as it destroys the typical intelligent Flatcoat expression.

Eyes. *The standard says: medium size, dark brown or hazel, with a very intelligent expression (a round prominent eye highly undesirable). Not obliquely placed.*

The almond shaped eyes are quite widely set on the side of the head giving a friendly and intelligent expression. A large, round eye, eyes set too narrow, yellow, or too dark eyes spoils the typical expression. A liver colored Flatcoat has a somewhat lighter eye than a black, but it may not be yellow.

Ears. *The standard says: Small and well set on, close to side of head.*

Mouth. *The standard says: Jaws strong with a perfect, regular and complete scissor bite, i.e. upper teeth closely overlapping lower teeth and set square to the jaws. Teeth sound and strong.*

Neck. *The standard says: Head well set in neck, the latter reasonably long and free from throatiness, symmetrically set and obliquely placed in shoulders, running well into the back to allow for easy seeking of trail.*

The neck should be of medium length, a short neck with heavy shoulders being a fault, just as much as one that is too long and “weedy”. The neck is invisibly flowing into the back, with no sharp breaks between the neck and chest and with an unbroken smoothly curved line from the occiput to the tail set.

In a dog searching for scent, the moderately long neck is supporting a continuous hovering from side to side and up and down, to catch the scent, to avoid obstacles in the terrain and promote and balance a flowing action at different speeds.

The carriage of the neck in a working retriever, searching for ground scent, is low compared to that of a setter, carrying its head in a higher more upright position. A head that is carried high in fast action has a negative impact on the so-called arm/head muscle. It gives an unfavourable working angle with front movements tending to push upwards and downwards, giving it a tripping motion instead of a strong forward push.

The current fashion where necks tend to get longer, and some handlers, inspired by US show traditions, are trying to drag the dog’s head and neck, with a lead, in a sharp upright position is hiding what a working Flatcoated retriever is supposed to show according to the standard. A long and weak neck or a neck carried in an upright, angulated position with a sharp break between the neck and back, like a “chimney on a stove”, is a definite fault.

When the typical Flatcoat head is described as a “one-piece casting and not a two-brick formation” that phrase is valid for the neck and body profile as well.

Forequarters. *The Standard says: Chest deep and fairly broad, with well-defined brisket, on which elbows should move cleanly and evenly. Forelegs straight, with bone of good quality throughout.*

According to the US breed specialist Ed Atkins, “the forechest is only moderately broad but viewed from the side will show a distinct prow. This prow is a physical structure, not a fluff of hair. The shoulder blade (top point of withers to shoulder joint), upper arm (shoulder joint to the elbow), and forearm (elbow down to the pastern or wrist) are each of approximately equal length. With the shoulder blade and upper arm set at about a 90-degree angle. This structure with the round well-arched foot and strong but sloping pastern of moderate length provide the shock absorber system to protect the integrity of the skeletal system and the internal organs.”

“The importance of well-balanced forequarters without unnecessary weight on the shoulders is understood by the fact that 65% of the dog's weight is made up of the front part. In motion, over 90% of the concussion is absorbed by hitting the ground of the front, increasing the load on the front, in particular, when the dog jumps over obstacles. A correct front also provides a smooth reclining motion.”

Body. *The standard says: Foreribs fairly flat. Body well ribbed up showing a gradual spring and well arched in centre but rather lighter towards quarters. Loin short and square. Open couplings highly undesirable.*

To explain, the ideal ribcage of the Flatcoat is somewhat oval or elliptic seen from above as well as from the side. Ribs are moderately arched, and the main width and depth of the typical ribcage is just behind the elbows and not between them. The ribcage is long rather than deep and is well extended towards hindquarters. The flanks are well muscled. The slightly elliptic ribcage ends in a tapering waist that is moderately accentuated.

According to anatomical specialists a working gundog that is supposed to gallop for hours preferably has a long ribcage, being wide and well arched in the centre of the body. A short, deep and narrowing ribcage, being typical for a sighthound running extremely fast on shorter distances, is untypical in any retriever.

An unbalanced ribcage, with the main depth/weight between the elbows, giving a “bull-like” profile, generates an extra burden on the front when the dog is galloping or jumping, being a disadvantage for a working gundog, causing an untypical shape in a Flatcoat.

Furthermore, looking at the great Flatcoats of the past, relations between the depth of the chest and the length of the forelegs, from the elbow to the ground, is generally one

to one (1:1), giving the ideal working Flatcoat a significantly racier appearance than the show Golden or Labrador... and many modern "show Flatcoats".

The current standard says, "open couplings highly undesirable" and the original version that "open couplings should be ruthlessly condemned", as it was the worst possible fault in a retriever. The term is not that easily understood and it's a bit contradictory as it breaks the generic rule that a standard describes how things should be and not the opposite.

The British Kennel Club has tried to explain different anatomical terms from all the different breed standards, on its homepage, in a "Glossary of canine terms". As it shows this specific term is not used in any other breed standard, making it even more mysterious. "Coupling" is the part of the body between the last rib and the start of the hindquarter section, with the loin region being a vital part. Thus "open couplings" could be described as "long couplings" and if "open couplings" are undesired, "short couplings" is the ideal. When the breed standard describes the "body being well ribbed up" and the loin being short and square" it means that the ribcage should be well extended towards hindquarters, and in other words couplings should be short.

Hindquarters. *The standard says: Muscular. Moderate bend of stifle and hock, latter well let down. Should stand true all round. Cowhocks highly undesirable.*

The Swedish veterinary professor and specialist in anatomy, professor Gösta Winqvist, clarifies "that the hindquarters have the important role of maneuvering the forward shooting of the body of a galloping dog.

The loin is the bridge between the hindquarters and the back. That is why the shape of the croup is so important in a working Retriever. A slightly sloping croup allows the hind paws to touch the ground a little closer to the front part and the forward push can be done a little earlier compared to a dog with a flat croup. According to Winqvist, the gently sloping loin enables a power-saving and elastic gallop over a longer period of time compared to a longer loin. But it should not be too short limiting a fluid gallop. A steep croup is a fault, as it limits the backward pressure of a galloping dog.

Back. *For some unknown reason there is no definition of this vital body part stated in the breed standard.*

The back has an important supporting role for the locomotor system. A somewhat lowered back is inferior to a slightly curved back, from a mechanical point of view." A slightly s-shaped back profile (side view) is ideal for supporting the forward movement of a galloping dog.

There is a tendency in the show world to promote razor-sharp lines in a dog, but this has little to do with a body designed by nature. If we look at other fast runners in

nature, the silhouettes are smooth, fluid and slightly curved. Cats, horses, and many other gallopers usually display a slightly s-shaped topline with a slight lowering behind the withers and a smoothly rounded and somewhat raised loin. These anatomical prerequisites also apply to a working Flatcoat, and the spine should never become excessively straight. A straight back promotes a "rocking-chair-like" movement, where the moving power tend to make the dog tilt up and down.

Theo Marples states in his book "Show dogs" (1905), that "the back of a Flatcoat should be short, square, and well ribbed up!" Townend Barton declares the same in the Kennel Encyclopaedia, being published in 1920. So, when the breed standard was formally taken by the Flatcoated Retriever Association in 1924, the formula was well established stating that "the back should be short, square, and well ribbed up".

But how does this go with the flowing lines of a working Flatcoat? Harding Cox (Black) commenting the breed standard in Hutchinson's Encyclopaedia (1935), explains how with a description which is to the spot: **"A dog with liberty and length; though as regards the latter, it is more suggestive than actual. The measurement from the point of the withers to the set of the tail is the same as the former point to the ground."**

For some dubious reason, the description of the back was adjusted in the current version of the breed standard. "Back short and square" was changed to "Loin short and square" with no comments on the length of the back, in relation to the height at the withers. As stated by O'Neill: "the standard must be studied carefully, in the light of the trends and dogs of the times in which it was drawn up. And you should know that there were quite many cobby Flatcoats during the sixties and seventies, lacking the desired raciness, at the time when the standard was adjusted.

If we go to the authoritative breed description in the Crufts catalogue, a similar change is visible. The very first breed-description of the retriever, defined by the show breeders during the eighteen-nineties, said: "Body long with muscular loins". The description disappeared during the turbulent years when the retriever was transformed into four separate breeds. In 1924, when the Flatcoated Retriever Association was founded by the pro-work breeders, the new Crufts breed-description stated: "Body fairly short with plenty of liberty". That description remained unchanged until 1990, when this critical sentence was changed to the significantly diffuse compromise "The body is well made with good length of ribcage".

You would probably say: "So what, that is how the Flatcoat looks today?" You are right, but the standard should not describe the conformation of the average dog and not even the most outstanding show winners of today. It should describe the ideal conformation of a working retriever based on fact-based knowledge. So, to conclude: **Although a typical Flatcoat should give a lengthy impression the built of an ideal**

working Flatcoat is foursquare. The 1:1 formula, giving the proportions between the length of the back and the height at the withers, is valid once again.

***Feet.** The standard: round and strong with toes close and well arched. Soles thick and strong.*

Should be round and strong with toes tight and well curved. Thin loose pads are vulnerable to injury and cannot withstand hard work.

***Tail.** The standard says: Short, straight and well set on, gaily carried, but never much above level of back.*

The tail is a vital part of the Flatcoat conformation and Stanley O'Neill gave some relevant thoughts about it in his articles about type in Flatcoats. "The standard says the tail should be straight. By "straight" it means "not hooked or ringed". It does not mean a poker. If you think it does, just bind your dog's tail to a piece of wood or other narrow, straight object and put it at different angles down from the horizontal. It will look ridiculous. A certain amount of flexibility and a little curve is required below the horizontal and above. If a dog can float his tail straight out in a line from his back, keeping it horizontal and gently wagging it, then he is using it most effectively." But horizontal is an approximate value. O'Neill saw some challenges when talking about the straight topline. As "for one thing, it seems to me almost an impossible feat for a dog with a well built-up loin. It implies a slightly sloping croup and set-on of the tail. The almost horizontal set-on has been associated mostly with dogs that were very flat over the loin – one might even say weak, and some would say long."

The happily wagging tail is a hallmark for the breed. It plays a vital role to communicate its friendly and passionate nature and, in the field, when the dog catches scent of the game. A lifeless hanging tail is untypical for the breed.

***Gait/Movement.** The standard says: Free and flowing, straight and true as seen from front and rear.*

In the ideal world a galloper like the retriever should be judged when galloping. But that is probably impossible at a show. An experienced eye could probably assess the galloping capacity in a dog standing and trotting in the ring if the solid and fact-based arguments above are taken into consideration.

***Coat.** The standard says: Dense, of fine to medium texture and good quality, as flat as possible. Legs and tail well feathered. Full furnishings on maturity complete the elegance of a good dog.*

But what does that mean in practice? What makes a good coat in a working Flatcoat? The coat should primarily protect a dog working in rough cover, but it should by no means be so long that it easily collects brushwood and brambles on its brisket, legs, tail or underneath. It should keep the wet and cold out on an autumn shot. It should

dry quickly after a swim. Consequently, a coat that could be described as heavy or excessive is a fault. The ideal jacket of a Flatcoat is far from those seen in show spaniels or show setters with heavy feathering on the legs, tail and underneath. But the challenge for the current breeder or judge is to know what the coating behind a heavily trimmed or barbed dog is.

If the ideal coat of a Flatcoat could be described as moderately long, it goes with the feathering as well. The preferred feathering on the tail is kept rather short without clearly visible long hair and the ideal tail could be described as slightly bushy. A “setter-like” one with long hair is untypical. Looking at the images of historical Flatcoats, none of these had heavy coats or an extensive feathering.

If you look at the great British show winners from the end of the eighteen hundred until today, they are all trimmed on ears, brisket, tail, and feet and when needed as well on the legs and underneath. But it is sensibly done, with an ambition to make the dog look natural and workmanlike at a show and to make it more suitable for the field. And it is done with the thumb and a finger, maybe supported by the “penknife” that Colin Wells sometimes used, to give a natural look, and never with a scissor.

Colour. *The standard says: Black or liver only.*

The Flatcoat gene pool carries a yellow gene, being a reminiscence of the common gene pool that shaped all the different retriever breeds. The yellow long coated variety was defined as the Golden retriever, when the Retriever was separated into different breeds and, consequently, yellow Flatcoats are not accepted at shows. According to recommendations from the breed clubs they should not be bred from.

Size. *The standard says: Preferred height: dogs: 58-61 cms (23-24 ins); bitches: 56-58 cms (22-23 ins). Preferred weight in hard condition: dogs: 27-36 kgs (60-80 lbs); bitches: 25-32 kgs (55-70 lbs).*

The size of Flatcoats (height at the withers) has varied significantly over time and the Flatcoat gene pool has at times tended to produce larger dogs than the medium size asked for in the standard. It is probably also related to changing fashions in the show world, where there has been a tendency to award a larger dog from time to time.

The 1923 standard said 60 - 70 lbs., but no height was stated. There were many oversized Flatcoats, being one of the main reasons for the decline in popularity during the first half of the previous century.

The well-known breeder Reginald Cooke (Riverside) played a leading role in the strive for a reduced size between the wars, and when the modern Flatcoat was reestablished after WWII by Nancy Laughton (Claverdon), Colin Wells ("W" later "Woodland") and others, these two were strong advocates of a show type that should not deviate from

the image and size of a working retriever. The dual-purpose ideals have always been about keeping a show dog, shaped by the timeless demands of the shooting field and not by the fashion of the day, dictated by show judges looking for potential group or Best in Show winners. It is probably a fact today that a male being 58 cm at the withers will be looked upon as too small by many judges, which is not to be accepted by the breed clubs.

Laughton and Wells made a statement that the ideal size of a Flatcoat male is 58.5 cm (23 inches) and slightly smaller for a bitch, and shortly after, in 1977, a "Clarification of Standard" was made, initiating the "preferred height" being defined in the current standard. The preferred height must be a target level that the breeders resolutely strive for, accepting some variations if the average heights are on the preferred level. To maintain the breed's attraction among shooting men and women the average Flatcoat size should preferably be kept below 60 cm.

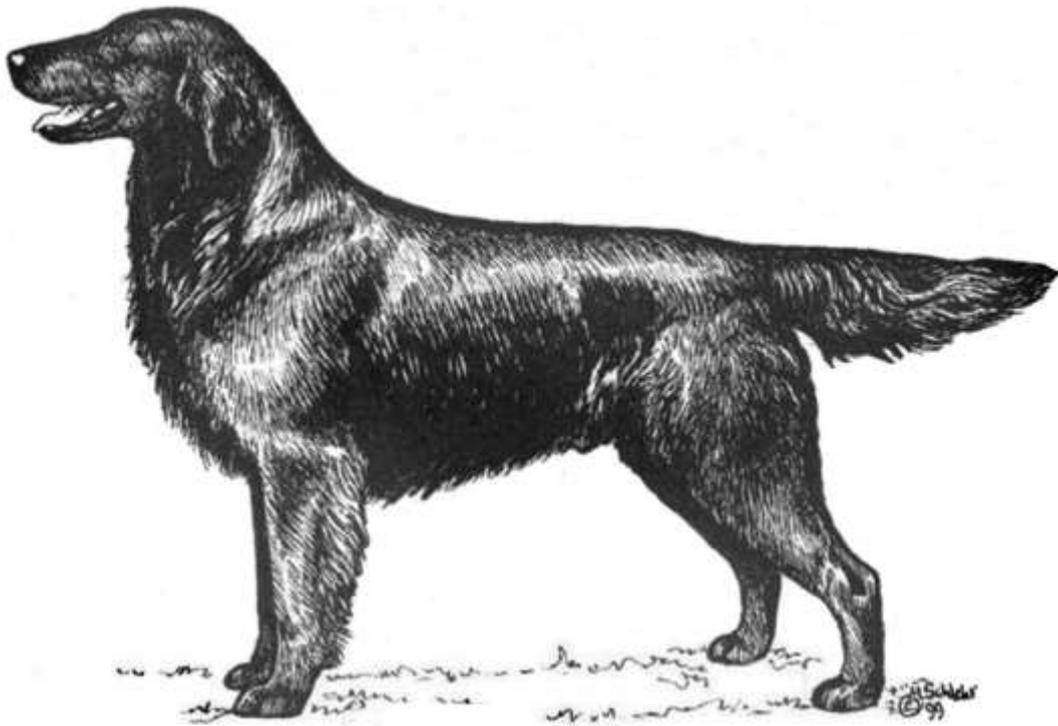
Summary – the dual purpose Flatcoat

The type of a show Flatcoat should not differ from the image of a working retriever. The proportions of a Flatcoat are relatively foursquare, giving a lengthy impression due to its fairly long neck, obliquely placed in well laid-back shoulders, and a rather long, but moderately arched and deep rib cage. A good guideline is that the depth of the chest and the length of the forelimbs, from the elbow to the paw, are in a ratio of 1:1.

The lumbar region is smoothly rounded with a short, square loin, moderately sloping down to the set of the tail, which "should be" carried gaily, but never much above the level of the back. A short loin allows a fast and power-saving gallop for a longer period of time, reducing the load on the back. Furthermore, a dog with a shorter back fall more easily into a gallop than one with a longer back that tends to trot at a higher speed. A trotting dog, a dog with a longer back, tends to work in wider circles than one with a shorter back, making it less efficient. The desired work pattern in a working Retriever, constantly hovering from side to side and searching in a dense pattern, is promoted by a shorter back and an elastic gallop, which makes it easier for the dog to move/jump from side to side and continuously change directions.

The idea of dual-purpose has always been about keeping a show dog shaped by the timeless demands of the field and not by the fashion of the day.

The ideal proportions of a Flatcoat



An excellent drawing of a typical Flatcoated Retriever made by Marcia R.Schlehr for the Flat-Coated Retriever Society of America (FCRSA) to illustrate the breed standard. By kind permission from the artist.

Note the 1:1 relations between the height at the withers and the length of the back as well as between the depth of the ribcage and the length of the frontlegs, from the elbow to the ground. Note as well the smoothly curved line from the occiput to the tail set and the elliptic ribcage well extended to a visible but moderately accentuated waist.