The Terrier Front

By Dr. Dan Buchwald

Among the specific features of conformation that help shape and define each breed or group of breeds, one comes to mind as remarkably misunderstood, and that is the Terrier Front.

Often people will refer to a dog with steep shoulders as having a Terrier Front and many will just assume that the term refers to a front that lacks the proper amount of angulation. Also, many books about Terrier breeds will omit describing this very unique assembly of forequarters leaving even more room for confusion.

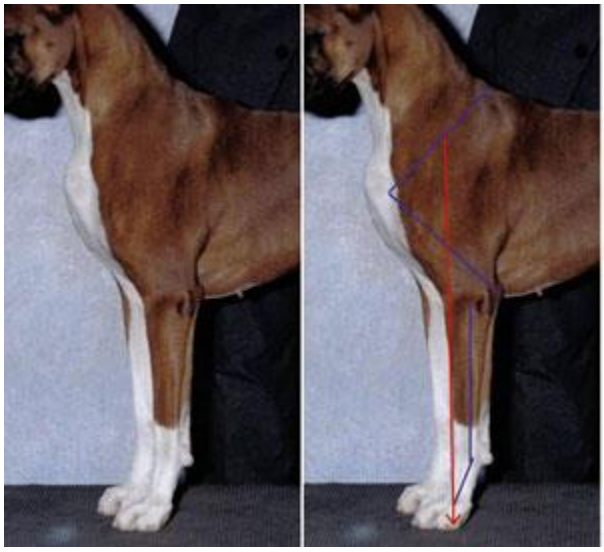
A typical Terrier front, as we observe on long-legged terriers, is far from lacking layback of shoulders and is in no way a faulty structure. In this article, I will try to highlight the basics that create the Terrier Front.

Terriers are typically hunters of vermin and often have to go into holes in the ground chasing these small animals. Along with a fearless temperament, they need a front assembly that is efficient for not only gaiting, but also for digging.

The front assembly that the majority of long-legged Terriers tend to possess is a direct consequence of the function described above. There is always a close correlation among form and function in dog conformation, we just have to keep our attention on why and where a breed was developed and quickly the pieces will fall into place and the whole picture will make sense.

The Terrier front starts with a long and strong shoulder. The layback is significant at a good 45 degrees with the horizontal. This allows for good reach and proper length of neck. Remember, if the shoulders are rotated forward, the withers become higher and the neck length is affected negatively.

The upper arm of the Terrier front is unique. Unlike other conventionally built dogs, the upper arm here is slightly shorter than the shoulder. It is also turned slightly forward which limits the amount of forechest that will be visible from the side. Please notice that we used the word 'slightly' referring both for length and slant forward of the upper arm. In the majority of cases, the forechest is leveled with the point of shoulder, with no significant forward projection past that. A front that is shallow and has no forechest at all is not correct. Neither is the one with exuberant projection of breastbone like seen on Weimaraners and Doberman Pinschers.



This is a proper assembly of a front of a conventionally built dog. A significant difference can be noticed in the length of upper arm, development of forechest and slant of pasterns. Notice that in order to maintain balance, the center of the shoulders still sit right above the heel pad.

The functional advantage of the shorter upper arm is the strength it provides for digging. The conventional front requires a conformation that will allow for an efficient trot. A good Terrier front will allow the efficient trot and on top of that will also provide power, at expense of speed, for the specific function these dogs have in life.

The concept of speed can be correlated to long bones as in the Greyhound. It comes with elasticity to absorb the shock from each step as the dog gallops. Please keep this in mind as we progress with this article.

The shorter upper arm will allow the muscles of the front assembly to vigorously dig the ground. Again, as in any system with levers, shorter bones are linked to power just as long bones are linked to speed.

The legs of these terriers are straight and have very little slant to their pasterns when seen from the side. Viewed from the front, they are straight columns and the toes do not turn in or out.

Let's focus on the pasterns a little more. The structure of the pasterns is such that allows flexibility and shock absorption in order to prevent stress on the bones and joints of the forequarters. Unlike the Greyhound who has huge pounding of the front legs as he gallops at high speeds, our terriers are more focused on digging the ground. Terriers don't need long pasterns and they don't need a great amount of slant in those pasterns either. Terrier pasterns are short, because like the upper arm, they allow leverage with strength for digging.

This is a very good sample of the correct TERRIER FRONT. Notice the long shoulders slanting at 45 degrees with the horizontal, the slightly shorter upper arm with a slight slant forward. Also notice the line from the center of the shoulder projecting downward and reaching the heel pad.

Terrier pasterns are upright or close to that because of a fundamental concept of balance: The paw of the front leg of the dog will tend to be positioned right under the center of the length of the shoulders. It may sound hard to follow but the illustration above will help make this concept clear. Dogs with shorter upper arms tend, as a rule, to have more upright pasterns. Dogs with extremely short upper arms will have a tendency to knuckle over. If you see a dog knuckling over, I suggest a closer examination of the length of upper arm to see the likely source of the problem.

A front that is so specialized and devoted to strength will also produce a form of movement that is equally unique. Don't expect extreme elasticity from a terrier gait (as opposed to a German Shepherd), instead expect a sense of power and determination. Also remember that the trot of a conventionally built dog, when seen coming and going, will show a clear tendency for the legs to converge towards the center as the speed increases. Terriers, because of their build and powerful muscle tone, will show a lesser degree of that and some, like the Fox Terrier, should not converge at all, resulting in a parallel gait with a clear double tracking stride. This is a feature that is proper and expected from these dogs and should in no way be penalized in that breed.

Finally, please remember that there are exceptions to the above parameters of Terrier fronts. Some Terrier breeds are very unique and don't quite fit in our discussion, like the Bedlington Terrier for example. The Bedlington normally has its elbows wider than its feet when seen from the front. Please take the time to study the Bedlington Terrier's front separately from the other Terriers as it is very unique to this breed only and should not be faulted for being different than what we discussed in this article. The Bull Terrier has far more developed spring of ribs and significantly more forechest than the other long-legged counterparts in the group. Also, short-legged Terriers tend to have proportionally more spring of ribs and therefore, a tendency for more forechest.

The Terrier group is a very unique one. To master its details and peculiarities one must devote plenty of careful objective observation and study. Combine with that the fact that many Terriers require a meticulous approach to coat care and presentation and it becomes rather easy to understand why some of the most knowledgeable dog people there are come from Terriers.