

MAKE NO

BONES ABOUT IT...



BY RANDOLPH "RANDY" DARNELL

"Remember that skeletal defects are the most difficult to change."

This is the first in a series of articles discussing subjects drawn from "*Oppenheimer's Breeding Principles*."

When discussing successful breeders, many come to mind but precious few whose theories provide significant results, span multiple breeds and stand the test of time.

Max Von Stephanitz and Lloyd C. Brackett are iconic names that undoubtedly rise to the top. Breeder/author Raymond Oppenheimer offers a unique perspective that is grounded in a highly successful breeding program, thought-provoking concepts and an insightful set of guiding principles.

Oppenheimer's "*Basic Breeding Principles*" are well noted and have been widely discussed throughout the purebred dog fancy for years. Some of his 50-plus principles caution about the pitfalls of breeding; others convey sage advice. As developed, Oppenheimer's principles were breed specific (*English Bull Terriers*), but many are generic enough in nature to be applicable to countless breeds. When considering each principle, it's important to fully understand the subject matter when attempting to apply them to the German Shepherd Dog.

In my experience as a breeder, exhibitor, judge and long-time student of the breed, one of Oppenheimer's principles is particularly relevant:

"Remember that skeletal defects are the most difficult to change."

By way of history and directly to his point, one of the most obvious examples of a profound skeletal defect that has been difficult to change is clearly the hindquarter assembly of the German Shepherd Dog. The preoccupation of breeding dogs with extreme rear angulation and exaggerated toplines during the 1970s and 1980s had a largely negative and debilitating effect on the breed for decades. Faulty or "crippled rears" became ubiquitous with the GSD and sparked considerable negative public perception and concern. Only recently are there signs that this unfortunate and misguided fad is reversing, yet 50 years later, the spoils still plague the breed today.

The lessons learned from this costly setback are numerous and place significant responsibility on breeders to guard against further deviation from the intent, purpose and utilitarian nature of the breed. For many, the evaluation of breeding stock and identifying suitable mates can be a difficult, multi-faceted process involving several factors (*breed knowledge, structure, genetics, pedigree, etc.*) taking years of study and experience.

Additionally, resisting fad or regional breeding trends and predicting the consequences can be equally prudent. This ability to recognize and avoid significant structural issues is essential to the continued advancement and positive direction of the GSD.

In 1961 Lloyd C. Brackett published “Planned Breeding” in Dog World magazine. This was an accumulation of many Brackett articles based upon the years of breeding GSD’s and the creation of his own exclusive strain. This bloodline ultimately became the highly successful and legendary Longworth Kennel. Almost immediately after his article hit the press, the Brackett Theory of breeding “*Let the sire of the sire be the grandsire on the dam’s side*” was quickly adopted into many breeding programs including some of the most influential kennels and stud dogs in the history of the breed. When used correctly, it can be a very powerful breeders tool. More importantly, this breeding method can be highly effective but as a result of its widespread use, also greatly intensified and condensed the breeding gene pool. Being mindful of Oppenheimer’s principle in this regard, the importance of the evaluation and selection process is key and can surely cast the die (*both good and bad*) for generations to come. For both Brackett and Oppenheimer, the selection process was paramount and a guiding principle they both shared in their breeding programs.

To facilitate this goal, a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the GSD Breed Standard, together with the skeletal anatomy, is vital to a working knowledge of correct structure, size and proportions. However, comprehending some aspects of the standard in its original written text can be complicated and difficult to follow—especially where the standard contains conflicting information and geometric or mathematical statements that must be solved and applied to many essential structural features.

Of these calculations, the most basic is the length-to-height ratio. As one of the key elements of the GSD’s structure, many understand that it is longer than tall but fail to fully grasp the importance of this relationship, much less how to visually apply the ratio. To complicate matters, there are multiple ratios to consider—10:8.5 per the American Standard, 10:9 per the German Standard and 10:8.8 per Von Stephanitz’s ideal. The difference in ratios alone (approximately 2”) is significant when applied to the overall length.

Adding to the complexity, Latin scientific terms (*i.e. Proster-num, metacarpus, metatarsus, pubis, ilium, ischial tuberosity*) identify the key skeletal features to such an extent as to almost require a graduate degree in Canine Osteology, Kinesiology and Engineering!

Von Stephanitz, during the early development of the GSD and preceding Oppenheimer’s writings, keenly understood that breeding dogs that lacked the ideals and proper build (*i.e. skeletal defects, incorrect structure*) would be detrimental and counterintuitive to his goal. He stated: “*Dogs with such a build in any case are valueless and may never be used for breeding. They transmit their physical defects very stubbornly; the most that can be expected of them is to turn into goods for export.*”

In support of his assertion, Von Stephanitz carefully recorded the size and proportions of all breeding stock and spoke/wrote extensively on its importance. As accurate dimensions can be difficult to obtain, he also cleverly crafted custom measuring devices/tools and described specific methods for accurately taking measurements.

Given the breed founders’ emphasis on correct structural uniformity, it would be interesting to know if contemporary GSD breeders place this same importance on size/proportions and accurately measure their dogs—not just a general idea of height at the wither but also the length and applied length/height ratio to determine if the overall proportion is ideal or otherwise.

Many notable breeders have opined the GSD has become too large, less agile and somewhat one-dimensional, which might explain the rise of the Belgian Malinois becoming the service dog of choice for police and military. Moreover, over-sized dogs are not penalized accordingly in the conformation ring. Of course, size is not addressed as a fault nor an undesirable trait in the American GSD Breed Standard, which only notes “*the desired height*” as a range.

The lack of emphasis and regulation in this area is likely why we commonly see dogs that exceed the maximum desired height and beyond, with many receiving top show and stud dog honors. Von Stephanitz, on the other hand, was quite specific in this area and notes 24” is the average height and should be the **AIM** for the desired medium-sized service dog, with a 2” allowance either way for both dogs and bitches. “*Further, he must be mobile, capable of turning easily and skillful in overcoming obstacles, whether by jumping or climbing. For this, it is necessary to possess a certain size combined with strength.*” Is this recent lack of uniformity and deviation in size an unintended consequence that has gradually

morphed into an imbedded skeletal defect? Or just deficient language and/or administration of the American GSD Breed Standard—or possibly both?

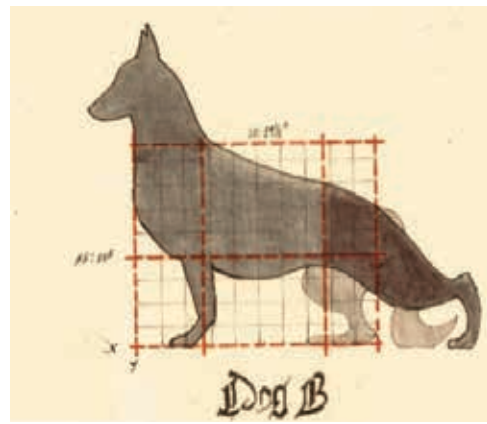
Regardless of whether it's viewed as insignificant, problematic, fixable, or yet another breeding trend, the road to change will be long as *“skeletal defects are the most difficult to change.”*

Many of us recall Ed Barritt and “Rocky & Ricky,” the whimsical names he gave to his model of the ideal GSD and his faulty counterpart. This life-sized wooden model, complete with adjustable skeletal features, was created by Ed and used at many GSD seminars to educate the fancy on correct size, angulation, movement and proportions. As an iconic GSD judge, Ed understood the importance geometry plays in evaluating the breed and possessed an excellent eye for proportions. When Ed and I discussed structure, he often commented: *“I don't like ‘em long and don't like ‘em low.”* By that Ed meant overly long length as a ratio to height and an overly deep in body with the appearance of being low on leg. *“But what the hell do I know!”*

For those who are visual learners and do not wish to solve ratio equivalents nor have an anatomically correct Rocky, I would offer you my very simple visual approach to correctly evaluate GSD proportion. You can effectively employ the 3-Over-3 Grid Method if you have strong visual comprehension and can quickly reveal the strengths and weaknesses in the GSD structure while standing. My method is illustrated below and involves a quick visual evaluation of the following study dogs:



Dog A depicts a dog of correct size, 25" at the withers and 29 1/2" in length, thereby possessing ideal (10:8.5 ratio) proportions per the American GSD Breed Standard. Visually placing vertical and horizontal gridlines at the appropriate structural intersections (i.e. Shoulder Assembly, Back, just forward of the Croup and at the average midpoint between the body and elbow) reveals a symmetrical image of balance and correct GSD geometry. **Note that all boxes created are of equal size!**



Dog B depicts a dog also of correct size, 25" at the withers and 29 1/2" in length and also possessing ideal (10:8.5) proportions per the American GSD Breed Standard. However, when overlaying the gridlines at the appropriate structural intersections, reveals a much different asymmetrical and incorrect GSD geometry. **Note that all boxes created are of varying sizes!**

Summary: While both Dogs A and B possess the desired length-to-height ratio per the American Standard, the “3-Over-3-Grid Method” quickly reveals the correct geometry and balanced symmetry of Dog A and conversely the faulty geometry and incorrect asymmetry of Dog B. The undesirable three-piece faulty nature of Dog B is easily recognized by overlaying the grid. The incorrect shoulder placement and angulation combined with a short, steeply angled croup adds perceptible length to the middle section of the back and loin, thus giving the appearance of an overly long dog despite its correct 29 1/2" length. Equally problematic, the additional and incorrect depth of chest and forechest gives the appearance of a dog that is too deep in body and too low on leg. The flawed geometry, excessive rear angulation and multitude of other erroneous GSD features of Dog B exemplifies the unfortunate and cartoonish image of a mistakenly promoted and neglectfully proliferated dog that has contributed to many disastrous setbacks and skeletal defects of the GSD. Moreover, given Dog B's faulty structure, the resulting movement is equally faulty despite its flashy nature.

For some, the “3-Over-3-Method” can be a very helpful visual tool that allows you to quickly obtain a great amount of information and draw several conclusions regarding structure including; overall proportions, length-to-height ratios, how the overall length is divided throughout the topline, shoulder blade lay-back and angulation, croup length and placement. (Note: The exact placement/location of the grid lines are not random and will be further explained in a more detailed article to follow). This visual grid method, combined with accurate size measurements and motion (at a walk, at a trot and at a full trot), will provide a complete structural analysis/opinion with helpful data to the conscientious breeder.

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Development of the critical eye needed to visualize and evaluate the entire dog in this manner is required to **correctly** judge the GSD. In support of a visual approach, Von Stephanitz noted: “*The experienced judge of the dog knows that nearly all the faults of standing can be seen in one and the same dog, when looked at in a cursory manner only. The sure eye alone can recognize whether the individual parts stand in correct relationship to the whole.*”

Many believe “form follows function” in the design of any efficient working machine or great works of engineering, and the GSD is no exception. When correctly built, the GSD embodies a unique structural geometry and superior engineering that is evident in its highly efficient gait. This gait can be a thing of beauty—poetry in motion—and intoxicating to breeders, judges and GSD enthusiasts. Many superlatives have been used to describe this highly sought-after flying trot. “Like a well-oiled machine” is surely accurate. Make no mistake: Correct proportions, exacting geometry and purity of structure are at the core of the GSD gait.

Going forward, as you view the breed through this prism, a greater awareness should now be visible of how the pieces are intended to correctly fit together and form a clear picture of symmetry and balance. This goal and vision of uniformity is achieved by following the ideals established within the blueprint of the Breed Standard, not an individualized interpretation or wide-ranging personal and/or regional preferences.

Most importantly, failure to follow the Breed Standard only serves to hinder progress and perpetuate considerable lack of uniformity within the breed. Over the past century, the GSD has undergone a significant evolution; however, maintaining a strong connection to the breed’s roots is essential in preserving its look of nobility and rare versatility. History tells us, the service our breed provides to mankind will ultimately decide how the GSD is perceived and accepted by the public. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Randolph Lee Darnell is an Architect that specialized in campus masterplanning and historic restoration. As a Director at two major universities, many of Mr. Darnell’s projects received national recognition and awards. Mr. Darnell began his interest in German Shepherds in 1978 while attending the Topline Specialty Show in Rockford, Illinois, his hometown. After which began his interest and studies of the GSD with the help and friendship of many notable mentors. Mr. Darnell finished his first AKC Champion GSD (CH Proven Hill’s Dano of Kemarok) in 1985 and thereafter, several others to follow. Together with his wife Cathy (a retired professional GSD handler) and under the Acara kennel name, have bred, owned and exhibited multiple Futurity/Maturity, Group, Select CH, ROM, BISS and BIS winners. Mr. Darnell is a licensed AKC Judge since 2003 and has judged many Specialty, All Breed, Futurity/Maturity and the 2010 Canadian National Specialty Show and continues to enjoy judging as a student of the breed. Mr. Darnell has coached Baseball and women’s/girls Fast Pitch Softball at the High School & College level for 26 years and remains active as a High School Head Softball Coach. Mr. Darnell has resided in BonAir, Virginia with his wife and family since 1995...

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