

Is the Puli Short Stepping or Far Reaching?

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Seems to me it was only yesterday, 1982 or 1983, that I tried to correct the misconceptions about Puli movement. That was roughly 21 years ago. (21 equals approximately three times seven years. See the last paragraph of this article about the significance of the seven years!) If I recall it right, I expressed in my article then that, as far as I was concerned, life is too short to try to right every wrong that is being circulated by word of mouth or in print about the Puli. I understand that today the need is greater than ever to clear the fog that surrounds the theories on the movement of the Puli. So here I am, happily retired, asking Sancho to hand me my old sword again, so I can fight my Don Quixote (Man of La Mancha) style windmill fight one more time.

First let us try to analyse how the various views could have come about.

Detailed descriptions of the breed can be found from the late 1800's. The first "standards" came into existence in the 1920's. The real details of the Puli Standard have hardly changed at all since then. However, words in the standard changed several times. Dog show vocabulary or canine terminology is constantly changing, being updated, modernised, just like most languages. One can not and should not do a strictly "dictionary translation" of any standard and especially not an almost 100 year old text, with a 2005 mentality! That could lead to major misunderstandings. We should not even do a dictionary translation of the 1960's standards. Just one example, the dictionary translation of one of the early German Shepherd standards claims that the German Shepherd is short stepping! That would be hard to imagine with 2005 knowledge and mentality.

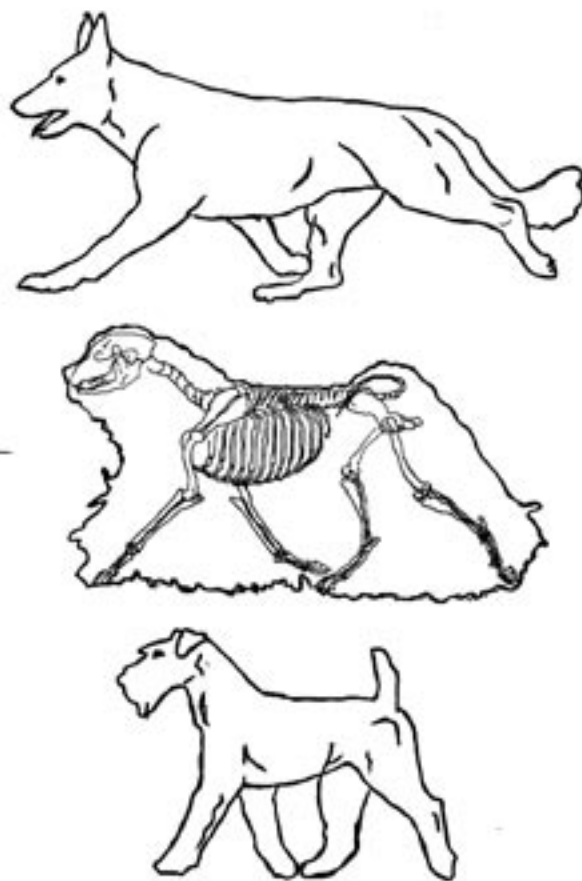
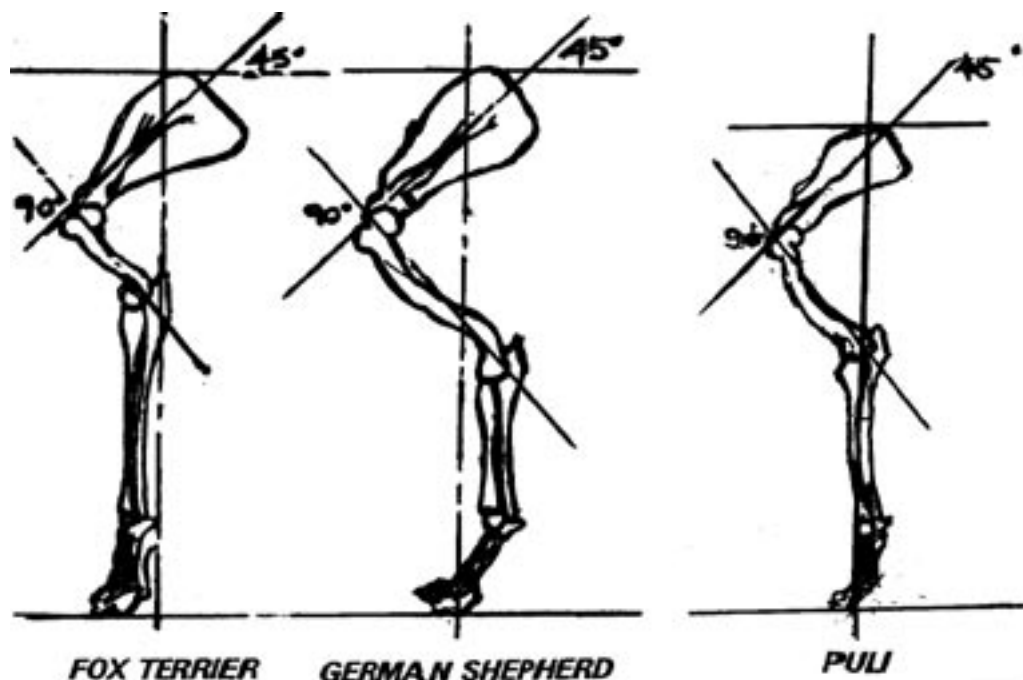
The method of exhibiting and judging of dogs differs much from country to country. In certain countries, to this day, they hardly move the dogs in the ring. If they move them at all, it is at a slow walk. Therefore the standard of these countries, in most cases, describes the movement of various breeds at a slow walk. In the USA (and Australia) we gait our dogs in the ring quite a bit and we move them at a very brisk walk, trot or flying trot. When the Puli is doing his ancient duty of herding, he practically never walks. He might trot if he is not in a big hurry to get somewhere. More often he will use suspension or flying trot. However, he will go after the runaway sheep by using the gallop only. Just like humans. We take short strides when we stroll around on a Sunday afternoon. We take longer strides when we are crossing the street in heavy traffic and use even longer strides when we rush to the bank Friday night to beat closing time. If the Puli is properly built he has a choice of what kind of a stride to use. Walk, trot or flying trot? Let us be specific! It is confusing, to say the least, when people freely interchange expressions that describe distinctly different gaits, like they were synonyms.

The most dangerous and damaging for the breed is when the misinterpretation of movement is premeditated and wilful. Often some desperate exhibitors (or unsuccessful breeders) will try to justify the straight shoulder caused restricted front movement of their dog. They like to quote from the standard, usually completely out of context, that the Puli is not "far reaching!"

Straight shoulders are straight shoulders and they are a serious fault in any breed, regardless of what kind of reach is required for that breed. I would like to call attention to the fact that, not counting the purposefully dwarfed breeds such as Corgies, Bulldogs, Dachshunds, etc, one of the shortest stepping basic dog is the Fox Terrier. In spite of their required short steps, the ideal shoulder blade angulation for this marvellous little breed is approximately 45 degrees. The short steps or limited reach is the result; first, of the short upper arm and second, an almost straight pastern. The short upper arm is a functional requirement of the Fox Terrier for better and easier underground digging into a fox hole. This is what the breed was bred for! The Puli is not an underground digging breed, therefore breeders should not neglect the importance of the angle and length of the upper arm! Since the late nineteenth century, in the knowledgeable dog breeders' vocabulary, the front with short upper arm is called "a straight front" or "a terrier front". Unfortunately, contemporary novice dog people use this terminology incorrectly but, almost exclusively, to describe straight shoulders.

Herding breeds in general are smoother movers than breeds of any other group. At a trot or flying trot they float around the ring without much up and down movement of their top line. This can not be achieved without well laid back shoulder blades. Straighter shoulders cause mincing, choppy movement (too much up and down bouncing of the entire body). Any movement, of any parts of the dog's body that is not in the line of travel, is wasting energy big time! Herding breeds that should be on their feet all day long can not afford to waste energy with mincing, choppy gait. Examining the American Kennel Club standards of herding breeds, it is easy to see that they all require well laid back, obliquely set or outright 45 degree shoulder angulation. Most of them spell out 90 degree angle between the shoulder blade and the upper arm. In spite of all the standards requiring approximately 45 degree shoulder laybacks the German Shepherd standard is the only one that describes...."outreaching long strides".....in walking and .."even longer strides" or far reach "in trotting"...

In order to better understand "far reaching" gait, let us analyse the German Shepherd which is an exaggerated case and therefore the easiest to understand. For an even easier visualisation, for the purpose of this article, we totally disregard the powerful push coming from an equally exaggerated rear movement that makes the front travel even farther at each step. As indicated above, the required shoulder blade angulation is approximately 45 degrees to the horizontal, the angle between the shoulder blade (or scapula) and the upper arm is approximately 90 degrees. The first major deviation from the average herding dog front assembly is the extra long upper arm which extends beyond the line of the imaginary rotating point of the shoulder blade. Therefore, the centreline of the lower leg bone assembly is beyond the vertical which represents the imaginary rotating point and it is parallel with it. In order to make this a balanced front, the feet have to fall under the imaginary rotating point. To achieve this, nature created the second major difference, a pastern sloping forward about 25°.



"The German Shepherd Dog shown at the top shows the extreme reach and drive typical of this breed.

The Puli, in contrast, does not over-reach, but rather should exhibit an efficient ground-covering trot at full extension (middle figure).

The trot of the Puli can be further contrasted with the pendulum trot of the Fox Terrier shown at the bottom."

From: "The Illustrated Guide to the Puli" produced by the Puli Club of America.

Many of today's show German Shepherds display a faulty pastern of about 45°.

On the other hand, the Terrier front is an exaggeration towards the shortening of the reach of the front assembly. The shoulder blade, ideally, here again, is approximately 45 degrees and the angle between the shoulder blade and the upper arm is about 90 degrees. However, the upper arm is so short that the centreline of the lower arm falls in front of the theoretical rotating point of the shoulder blade. In order to act as a better shock absorber it would be ideal to have a slight slope of the pastern, but as it is, this type of front is not in static balance. The more the pastern would slope forward the further the pads would fall in front of the imaginary rotating point of the shoulder blade and the more out of balance the front would be.

Assuming that during a trot, in both of these fronts, the shoulder blades rotate about the same amount and the upper arm rotates forward about the same degree, it is easy to see how much further a German Shepherd type front would reach than a Terrier type front. The Puli's front, like most other breeds' fronts, falls somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. It is extremely important that in the ring the judge examine the Puli's front under the coat while on the table. In case the Puli can not move out due to limited ring size, or is unwilling to trot briskly due to an unusual surface (crushed gravel or rubber mat for example) the judge should still have an idea whether the front assembly is correct or faulty.

From the above it should be easy to see that we do not want

Pulis with exaggerated long upper arms, with too much pastern slope (far reach), nor do we want steep shoulders, too short and/or too steep upper arms (short steps, mincing gait). Therefore the answer to the title of this article is that Pulis are not "short stepping" and are not "far reaching" at a normal gaiting speed! Hopefully all readers are convinced by now that steep shoulder blades are a very serious hindrance in movement and the introduction or perpetuating of this fault is sacrilegious (if not an outright crime) in any herding or working breed!

The reach of the front legs is only one aspect of the movement of the Puli. In the above we only analysed the virtues and faults of the Puli's front that can be best evaluated from a side view. Faults of the elbow and pastern area, the width of the Puli, can influence front movement almost as much as straight shoulders and can only be analysed from frontal or plan view. The energy for the forward motion is coming from the hind quarters. The correct rear assembly with its associated angles are as important as the correct front assembly. Within the limits of this article I could not deal with those details.

I have to mention here that I would defy any dog show judge or dog fancier to accurately estimate or even measure relative bone angulation on a live dog. Plus or minus two or three degrees are unnoticeable and can not be measured in most cases. More extreme variations in angulation should be important to the breeder. Five or six degree variations are very much evident, even to the inexperienced eye.

We have to realise that most dog books and articles, and this one is no exception, are oversimplifications of the actual anatomical happenings. Shoulder blades are not attached to the ribcage with a bolt and nut connection. They are not rotating around a pinpointable fixed mechanical axle. With the help of the muscle, cartilage and tendon connections the shoulder blades also shift, slide, twist in addition to the obvious rotary motion. Those who have had the opportunity to study a dog movement in front of an X-ray machine, or have had the fortune to see Mrs Rachel Page Elliot's movie/video where a dog is running on a treadmill in front of a fluoroscope, have to realise that not even sophisticated anatomical text books describe completely the complexity of movement.

The age when we based the terminology and knowledge of dog movement entirely on the knowledge of horse people is rapidly coming to an end with the advancement of modern technology. For some reason this modern technology is advancing much slower in the field of dogs than on any other. High-speed still photography was used to analyse the movement of humans and horses since the beginning of the 20th century. High-speed cinematography is a more recent development. Rachel Page Elliot was the pioneer who started the use of this technique in analysing and interpreting dogs' movement. Ultra high speed Biomechanical Cinematography is widely used in analysing and projecting athletes' capabilities. However, to the best of my knowledge, to date no canine researcher had a chance to use one of these sophisticated, expensive cameras on dogs. I certainly hope it will happen sometime in the near future.

Statistics show the average dog show exhibitor or dog club member stays active in a breed for about seven years. Not counting those very few who get hooked on dogs for a lifetime, dog clubs have an almost complete turnover in membership approximately every seven years. Naïve breeding theories, insupportable ideas of canine anatomy, etc, propagated by some of the novice dog owners resurface in this same seven year time period accordingly. Therefore I would like to recommend that this and/or similar articles on the subject of movement be published and re-published at least every seven years, for the sake of the uninitiated!

Mr Les Benis, who is Hungarian born, was an eminent Puli breeder in Hungary before he settled in the United States of America. He is one of the foremost Puli experts at the present time and is the owner of the famous U.S. Puli prefix "Hunnia" and "Sasvölgyi".

Mr Benis is one of the top Puli judges (and also other Hungarian breeds) in the US. When one speaks of the Puli, the Benis name comes to mind. He is one of the most sought after authority on the Puli. He produced many, many champions, and he is also the author of the book "THIS IS THE PULI".