



*Bearstream Am Bernard (Viggo). Photo Karen Booth*

# **Type, conformation and style in a (working) Flatcoat**

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- by Ingemar Borelius





*Bearstream Am Bernard (Viggo). Photo Karen Booth*

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## **Type, conformation and style**

You might ask yourself what type and conformation issues have to do with a working Flatcoat. Does head shape, expression, top line, legs and bone, body shape, carriage of the tail and coat texture really matter in a working Retriever? And what has style in a gundog to do with conformation and type? I strongly believe it all relates but depending on your personal preferences or your breeding targets you would probably look at these issues from different angles.

I could rephrase the headline and ask what's the preferred type, conformation and style in a working Retriever?

You should of course, as always, use a critical eye when you read these lines. It's to some extent about my opinions! But it's fact based as well and I can tell you I spent a lot of interest in Flatcoat conformation issues over all these years. I did translate the current, now slightly revised, version of the Flatcoat standard for the Swedish Kennel club around the seventies. I corresponded quite actively with Nancy Laughton at that time, being the major British expert on this. I wrote the first version of an extended standard for the local Swedish Flatcoat club during the eighties and I've studied working Retrievers over all these years.

I'm sure that the headline might sound contradictory to you knowing that the term Dual Purpose has been carved into the fundament of the breed since the days it was born. Dual Purpose is a bit of a trademark for the breed and isn't it just one Flatcoat bred for shows or work? But if so why does conformation and type differ that much between the average show and working Flatcoat today?

No matter what the (Flatcoated) Retriever was originally designed to be a working dog and it's no doubt that the current and original Flatcoated Retriever breed standards, being more or less the same for more than 100 years, describes a working dog.

For a reader not being familiar with the headline terms: "Type" is about those features in a dog's appearance that make a Flatcoat look like a typical Flatcoat and not just a black long-haired dog. "Conformation" is about the construction of the dog, in relation to the breed standard that is defining the outline of a typical Flatcoat, and how well it matches the essence of the breed standard and its ambition to define a working Retriever fit for purpose. "Style" is about how it moves and behaves in different (working) situations which is due to its inherited capabilities (its brain) as well as its conformation.

I have used a number of photos of more or less well-known Flatcoats to illustrate my words. They are all good-looking dogs and most of them with excellent merits. But I've used them to illustrate specific features in a Flatcoat that I believe is an advantage in a working Retriever and sometimes a disadvantage. When there is a known photographer behind I've noted her name and if I've missed the name of any photographer being unknown to me I would be pleased to add that afterwards.

### **The shape of a working dog**

I believe everyone could agree that there is an obvious connection between the shape of a working dog and the purpose for which it's bred. A Dachshund has got its short legs because it's bred to follow a Roe or a Red Deer at a low pace and move it slowly towards the gun, without getting too close, or to allow it to follow the Badger into its hole. A sighthound (a greyhound or a whippet) is a working dog bred with a light body, long and light legs, a deep, quite narrow and short chest and a back of medium length, to optimize its speed on short distances when hunting for a visible fast running hare or a rabbit on a rather straight line.

A Setter or a Pointer is built with long legs, a light body and a back of long to medium length to quarter the ground at a high speed, but in quite wide circles, with a head held high scanning for air scent to find the game, in an open landscape with a limited amount of game. The Spaniel on the other hand is a small dog, with shorter legs, built to quest in rather narrow circles, following ground scent where there is a plenty of game but where the cover is rich and rough, requiring a dog being able to force itself through brambles and brushwood.

When the Canadian water dog was converted into the Retriever during the first half of the eighteen hundred, numerous considerations were made, more or less consciously. It was no doubt



shaped to gallop at a high speed to optimize efficiency and to catch up with a fast runner, a slightly winged pheasant cock running fast. It should be able to run and swim with speed and perseverance throughout a full working day. It should have a strong but in no way heavy body to easily break itself through brushwood, brambles and heavy reeds or to break the thin ice when the last autumn ducks are shot. It should easily jump over one-meter fences, with little or no run, when searching for the game.

The conformation of a Retriever should promote a working pattern where the dog is constantly quartering on a medium distance, in closer and closer circles when scent is getting stronger, dragging the dog to the shot game.

A Retriever, like most other shooting/working dogs, should be handy sized to make it easy for anyone to lift from the sea into a boat or up to a landing stage and limit the needed space when several gundogs are being transported to the shooting grounds in a car or a trolley.

The (working) Flatcoat is supposed to provide the same kind of work on the same grounds, handling the same pieces of game and being measured against the same working standards as other working Retrievers. It is tested on the shooting fields by the same judges following the same rule book as for the other Retriever breeds. Looking at the overall conformation it should resemble those working Retrievers more than any other breeds or types of dogs. There are no logical reasons why a Flatcoat should deviate from the average working Labrador or Golden when it comes to size, height, length of back or body weight.

The different Retriever breeds are cousins or varieties of the same original breed and the historical awareness of this relationship is most obvious when looking at a British list of breeds showing Retriever (Golden), Retriever (Flat Coated), Retriever (Labrador) etc. In the early days it was named flat coated, wavy coated, smooth coated, rough coated, black coloured, chocolate coloured, liver coloured, yellow or golden coloured (with small letters) Retriever, telling that they are just varieties of the breed called Retriever.

Gordon Stables, in a book about Retrievers 1895, told that "there are four different varieties usually exhibited, namely, the flat-coated and the curly-coated blacks, and reds or livers of the same styles of coat. There are sandy-coloured Retrievers, and I have seen pure white Retrievers; I have also seen pure white blackbirds and starlings, and that is all I have to say about either". Saying the latter, he stated what most breeders seemed to think at that time, a Retriever should be black.

### **Does type and conformation matter in a modern working Retriever?**

I remember a dialogue I had with the working Labrador man John Drury, winner of the IGL Retriever Championship in 2004, at a training course in Sweden. I asked him if conformation matters when it comes to working Labrador breeding and he referred to his friend, the great John Halstead of the Drakeshead Labradors saying; "a dog that isn't good looking won't be attractive as at stud dog". Looking at the working Labrador strains in Britain it's quite obvious that type and conformation is surprisingly even although they haven't been taken to shows for one hundred years. Beauty in the sense that it reflects a sound and suitable outline and a classical type is of importance even for a shooting man. If you are doubtful just look at the numerous Labrador training videos being available on YouTube and other places. Most dogs, mainly male Labradors, are surprisingly even in type and no doubt beautifully conformed Retrievers.

But the utility aspect is far more important when we talk about conformation. When the first Retriever standards were defined at the end of the nineteenth century they were drawn by men



keeping/breeding working Retrievers and looking at working Retrievers throughout a life time. They saw dogs being hindered by their oversized bodies and bones getting tired long before the shooting day was ended. They saw unathletic dogs that couldn't easily force the numerous high fences that are there on every British shooting ground. They saw oversized and overcoated dogs being a nuisance when retrieving at the seaside and taken into canoes and small boats. They saw badly conformed dogs with poor angulation, in front and rear, getting injured from daily jumps and lacking the needed drive and speed to reach a fast runner. They saw dogs with weak, flat feet being unable to stand long working days, five days a week. It was no doubt that conformation strongly mattered but it was seen with a shooting man's eyes.

The Canadian water dogs - called the St Johns dogs, the Labrador dogs or the Newfoundland dogs, due to their birthplaces, the origin and main component in all Retrievers - had excellent mental powers to become the ideal Retriever. But the shooting men, gradually transforming it into the different Retriever breeds, soon realised that it's conformation and drive could be improved via mixes with setters and pointers and to some extent with other breeds like the shepherd's dogs, i.e. border collies, mainly to improve biddability.

Every detail in the breed standard was written to define a suitable working Retriever. But as stated below it was a mix of statements based on the conformation of the best dogs of the day and ideals to strive for to improve weak points.

### **What's a breed standard?**

It must be of interest to reconsider a bit what a breed standard is. The great Stanley O'Neill (Pewcroft), whose breeding efforts, writings and wisdom played a greater role than most others to shape the Flatcoat we know today, wrote a few authoritative letters on Flatcoat type for the FCRS Year book many years ago. He wrote:

"The Standard itself could be more informative and does not always conform to the rules accepted up to the time of its publication in 1924. It must be remembered that the Standards were not then the universally authoritative documents that they seem to be considered today and the authors of ours certainly never considered it in that light. Many of the great all-rounders who had so long been the great repositories and arbiters of type were still on the scene. Theo Marples incorporated the Standard in his handbook, "Show Dogs", but when he asked if any statements in his article contravened it in any respect, he was given to understand that the Standard was meant as a guide to the important features of a working dog. For detail and fancy points people must refer to Marples and his show colleagues..."

"Ten years after the Standard was published, Harding Cox, a very old man, still stood alone as an entry-puller. In that year, 1934, he did the article on Flatcoats for Hutchinson's Encyclopaedia, giving his own description and standard of points, without reference to the Association's Standard. Cox, who owned the "Black" prefix, probably did more to produce the Flatcoat as we know it than anyone else, Shirley not excepted. In the eighteen nineties he was the architect and the builder of the flat coat which had its golden age on the bench and in the field, from 1900 to 1910. It seems a great pity that this distinguished writer, critic, judge and breeder was not consulted in the drafting of our Standard."

O'Neill further declares: "There seems to be a quaint conception abroad that a standard is devised by a divinely inspired body of highly qualified technicians as a guide and compendium to a breed both for the present and for all posterity. Such a thing may be possible, and I have thought the sponsors of some continental breeds could have had this high intention. But many of our



breed standards are just rough agreements or contracts drawn up between themselves by practical breeders owning no great skill as draughtsmen nor overmuch bothered with visions of the future. Often one sees in the same standard one feature described obviously as it was displayed by some pillar of the breed, who excelled in this point whilst another is described in terms of a hackneyed counsel of perfection, an ideal displayed by no member of the breed, quite regardless of whether it is possible to breed it in, what I call a pious hope. This latter treatment has consequences, perhaps not foreseen and, as I have had frequently to point out the dangers underlying certain interpretations of our own standard, it may not be out of place to give an actual instance here."

"It has long been recognised by the leading minds in every breed that no amount of reading and learning by heart will give a mastery of the standard; it must be studied carefully in the light of the trends and dogs of the times in which it was drawn up. One must try to discover something of the men who wrote it and what was in their minds at the time if there is to be any success in arriving at the connotation they meant their words to carry."



*Black Quilt*



*Jimmy of Riverside*



*Wimpole Peter*



*Black Queen*

*These are some of the great show winners from the days when the current breed standard was defined. It's most probable that the writers had some of these dogs in mind and it's an obvious fact that they are lighter in build and more short coupled than the modern show Flatcoat. A true racy working Retriever type with no obvious Setter influences*



Talking about standards it's a fact that the US Kennel Club have set their own general rules when it comes to breed standards that are dramatically unlike those set by the British Kennel Club and FCI. FCI has taken the British version more or less as is but with a few logical editorial adjustments. In general, they are very sketchy, giving few details about the expected proportions of body and head. The US version is dramatically different being a sort of manual giving a very detailed description of the ideal dog. It's mainly an excellent description, done by the breed specialist in the local breed club, Flatcoated Retriever Society of America, and based on solid knowledge about the breed. But it differs from the original being defined by the British "mother club", Flatcoated Retriever Society, on a few quite vital points, which might be a bit confusing. I will try to explain how it's probably meant to be later on in this article.

### **One standard changing fashions**

The design of a working Retriever is explicitly described in the Flatcoated Retriever breed standard giving the typical characteristics telling about: "A bright, active dog of medium size with an intelligent expression, showing power without lumber, and raciness without weediness."

In other words, an alert dog with an intelligent expression, being truly medium sized (in my mind rather below than above 60 cm) and with an athletic, strong body constitution being built for fast and easy action. A Flatcoat that could be described as heavy, cobby, big, showing substance, being overloaded in the front, resembling a show Labrador or a show Golden, being too short on the legs or a lanky, skinny Flatcoat, with too long legs or a setter-like appearance is untypical and is physically less fit for the job it is supposed to provide.

I won't go into every detail when it comes to the ideal conformation of a Flatcoat. It's beautifully and wisely described in the breed standard. But knowing the obvious fact that conformation differs today between a show and a working Flatcoat I will comment on a few issues. I do it because I believe that conformation strongly matters even in a working dog. I do it because I believe that conformation in a show dog should be designed based on the true needs of the shooting field. And I do it because I believe that the Flatcoat would benefit if we limit the differences when it comes to conformation between a show and a working bred Flatcoat. The more easily we could mix a show bred, a working bred, or a dual purpose bred Flatcoat with other types the more beneficial it would be for the diversity of the Flatcoat gene set up and counteract the gradually narrowing gene pool, to promote longevity and good health.

It's obvious for anyone with an interest in Flatcoat history, comparing photos of show winners over time, that dogs have changed continuously although the standard is the same. Which one represents the ideal Flatcoat the best? Is it the great winner during the fifties, the seventies or the nineties? Is Vbos The Kentuckian a better Flatcoat than Shargleam Blackcap or Sparrow Boy, or Golden Rod, or Woodlark or Workman? I talk about the direct male line that has subscribed to the top honours at the world's most prestigious dog show, Crufts. No one could deny that the conformation of these beautiful dogs has changed over time. But what do we want them to look like 10 – 20 – 30 years from now?





## The anatomy of a working gundog

In a series of articles written by the Swedish Veterinary Professor and specialist in the anatomy of dogs, Gösta Winqvist, he describes the anatomy and movements of a working gundog/hunting dog. These are holistic definitions that are relevant for all gundogs and easily connected to the descriptions in the Flatcoated breed standard. Many knowledgeable writers over the years have defined the important anatomical features in a working Flatcoat.

### Head

When it comes to the head Mr Winqvist states among other things that there is of importance that "the nose is long and fairly broad with open nostrils and sufficient place for the nasal membranes to optimize scenting powers". This is what's stated in the FCR standard with the sentence: "Nose of good size with open nostrils".

Theo Maples, famous show judge and the founder of the magazine Our Dogs, wrote in his book "Show Dogs - Their Points and Characteristics" a most authoritative description of the breed. He states in 1920 the Flatcoat should be free from lippiness that was something that everyone knew at that time but for some reason it was not clearly stated in the standard. When Stanley

O'Neill wrote his informative letters in his Our Dogs column and for the Flat Coated Retriever Society Yearbook he explained why:

"Everyone used to know that a Flatcoat should be clean in lip. It is axiomatic: Marples emphasises it; Cox is definite. It is not a fancy point. In the days when the retriever was being made it was held that a dog hated feathers because he couldn't get rid of them. His method of freeing himself is to rub his mouth and lips on the ground. A clean short lip would allow feathers to be brushed out much more easily than a long heavy flew. Right or wrong - and I believe our grandfathers had the last word in wisdom on the subject - it was the theory in vogue at the time the breed was being formed and was one of the specifications to which it was built. And yet I saw, at one of the more recent annual festivals in the Olympian Hall itself, the judge makes three determined efforts to tug the flews of a particularly clean-lipped bitch well below her lower jaw. His grip slipped twice but at the third attempt, flew gripped between thumb and forefingers and knuckles getting leverage under the lower jaw, he succeeded, to the dog's great discomfort, in doing... I hope he knew what?"



*The classical picture of Claverdon Rhapsody is one of the best examples of the desired Flatcoat head profile. Jaws are strong, long and square with a very slight tapering down to the muzzle. There is a stop but in no way accentuated. The upper side of the skull and jaw is flat, straight and parallel in line. Lips are perfectly clean with a fully visible underjaw.*



*Her daughter Claverdon Fantasia expose a beautiful intelligent expression with lovely dark eyes. A too light eye, a round eye, eyes that are placed "front-on" or eyes being placed on a too narrow skull spoils the intelligent expression.*



Furthermore, O'Neill stated that "there is nothing of the two-brick formation about the head" meaning that it differs quite strongly from the Labrador and Golden with a more definite borderline between the skull and the jaw. "It is a one-piece casting. The foreface runs at the sides gradually into the skull, giving a well-filled-up appearance under the eyes. The amount of moulding varies in individuals but Cox's observation that the eyes are placed rather wide is very significant. They are set in the side of the head: definitely not "front-on"." In this he states very clearly that the typical and very intelligent expression in a Flatcoat is requiring quite widely placed and almond shaped eyes.

Amelia Jessel told about the decline of the Flatcoat from the beginning of the nineteen hundred, many years ago in a letter to the FCRS yearbook: "They also met a serious setback when the Show Fancy tried to introduce longer heads into the breed. These heads were described as "fiddle heads" for their resemblance to that instrument, or "borzoi heads". It was even said that Borzois were used to put length into the head, but I think this is unlikely. Some people forsook the Flatcoat at this time in protest."

The Borzoi cross was mentioned in an article by Harding Cox (Black) as well around 1932, telling about the very best dog he ever owned named Black Charm, having "what hitherto had been considered the ideal head of his breed, i.e. it was flat and moderately broad. But he arrived during an unfortunate era, when certain judges were enamoured of the "coffin-head," narrow skull, and "roman nose", which undoubtedly had been arrived at by surreptitious crossings with the Borzoi. The sinister introduction of Borzoi blood at one time threatened to ruin the breed altogether; but, happily, the more knowledgeable and experienced judges awakened to the peril which threatened and set about eliminating from the prize lists all dogs and bitches shewing the bar sinister; so that to-day the objectionable cross is not strongly in evidence".

I share Amelia Jessel's doubts about the Borzoi crosses as no breeder with a normal mind would induce sighthound blood in a working Retriever, supposed to work with his nose. It was most probably a result of selective breeding just as the narrow and "roman" heads that appear today now and then. It ruins no doubt the typical "Retriever profile" as well as the intelligent expression so vital in a stylish working Retriever. A narrow head, with no stop and a roman profile, and eyes located very close couldn't look intelligent.

## **The neck**

Frank Townend Barton (in his book Gundogs 1913) stated that "the neck should be of medium length, a short neck with heavy shoulders being faulty, just as much as one that is too long and "weedy." The upper line of the neck is continued into the withers, and the latter to the back, which extends into the loins and the croup."

According to Winqvist, telling about a working gundog/hunting dog in general, "the neck should be fairly long to support 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 fairly low compared to that of a Setter, carrying its head in a higher more upright position. According to Winqvist "a head that is carried high in fast action has a negative impact on the so-called arm/head muscle giving it an unfavourable working angle with front movements tending to push upwards and downwards (like a Lipizzaner horse, IB note), giving it a tripping motion or a "rocking horse like" movement instead of a strong forward push. In other words, the neck

shouldn't be set into the neck like a "chimney on a stove" but being obliquely set into well laid-back shoulders.

This is clearly explained in the breed standard with the words "The neck is reasonably long and ... obliquely placed in shoulders, running well into the back to allow for easy seeking of trail."

Comment: The current fashion where necks tends to get longer and longer, and many 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 position with a sharp break between the neck and back is a fault.

When O'Neill is stating that the Flatcoat head is a "one-piece casting and not a two brick formation" that is definitely valid for the body/neck profile as well. The neck is invisibly flowing into the back with no sharp breaks between the neck and the chest and with an unbroken smoothly curved line from the occiput to the tail set. A neck that is set like a "chimney on a stove" is untypical.



*Almanza Dusty Gunfire, to the left (from one of the very first Almanza litters, where eight out of nine got certificates), is an excellent role model for a racy, powerful working Flatcoat with flowing lines, yet with a shortish back, a neck of medium length obliquely set into well laid back shoulders, a beautifully moulded slightly s-shaped topline, a short perfectly set tail and a 1 : 1 relationship between the depth of the body and the length of the front legs. Gunhills Ear of Esophagus, to the right, was a bit too long cast for an ideal working Retriever, with a badly set neck kept in an upright position. Photo: Ragnhild Ulin.*

In his articles about type in Flatcoats, type O'Neill clarified the importance of a well-laid back upper arm in a working retriever writing: "It has always been my impression that the importance of a long, well-raked upper-arm to a clean, straight elbow action was first recognised after the First World War and the theory had percolated through a considerable body of opinion by the time the standard was drawn up. It must be recorded, though, that another explanation of the well-laid-back upper-arm was current; it was contended that it was to prevent the legs catching awkward or badly carried game."

### **The chest**

The body shape is differing the current Flatcoat quite significantly from a modern show Labrador or Golden. A good-looking show Labrador is supposed to have a more barrel like and



somewhat heavy ribcage being defined in the standard as a "chest of good width and depth, with well sprung barrel ribs". A "Labrador-like" or "barrel-like" chest is definitely a fault in a Flatcoat. The Golden Retriever breed standard talks (more vaguely for sure) about a body that is "Balanced, short-coupled, deep through heart. Ribs deep, well sprung", being not that far from the description of the Flatcoat chest. However, since the beginning of the fifties (when the last two Labrador and Golden dual champions were rewarded), show breeders/judges have favoured Labradors and Goldens with a more massive body constitution being significantly shorter on the legs than the working types. It's no doubt as well that the muscular constitution of a Flatcoat should be firmer compared with that of the modern show Labradors and Goldens.

The original Flatcoated breed standard told that *"the chest should be deep and fairly broad with a well-defined brisket, on which the elbows should work cleanly and evenly. The fore ribs should be fairly flat, showing a gradual spring, and well arched in the centre of the body, but rather lighter towards the quarters. Open couplings are to be ruthlessly condemned."*

The current one gives the following description where a part of the chest is described as *"Forequarters - 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.)"* The other part as *"Body - 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 this in other words the ideal ribcage of the Flatcoat is somewhat oval or elliptic seen from above as well as from the side. The main width and depth of the typical ribcage is behind the elbows and not between them. The ribcage is long rather than deep and is well extended towards the hindquarters. The two dogs above A. Dusty Gunfire and G. Ear of Esophagus, expose ribcages that are excellent examples.

This is furthermore explained in the standard telling: "open couplings highly undesirable", a term that isn't that easily understood. When the Flatcoat standard, quite mysteriously talks about that, or in the early version about "open couplings should be ruthlessly condemned", as if it was the worst possible fault in a Flatcoat, it's about the same as "short coupled" in the Golden Retriever breed standard. And that is what it's all about even for the Flatcoat.

The British Kennel club has tried to explain these different anatomical terms from all the different breed standards, on it's homepage, in a "Glossary of canine terms":

*Coupling* - The part of the body between the last rib and the start of the hindquarter section; the loin region.

*Short-Coupled/Close-Coupled* - The situation when this distance is short and relatively strong.

*Long-Coupled* - The converse to short-coupled.

*Open Couplings* - Long loins and flanks insufficiently well-muscled (e.g. listed as undesirable in the Retriever (Flat Coated)).

*Ribbed Up* - Ribs extended well back.

These varying terms are obviously not that easily understood even by the specialists having tried to explain. To make it understandable it could be stated that the Flatcoat shouldn't show a well-defined and slim waist with a particularly high tuck up. The loin region should be short and square, the ribcage is long, and the flanks should be well muscled.

According to Gösta Winqvist a working gundog/hunting dog 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

and deep ribcage, narrowing towards the centre of the body, being typical for a sighthound, running very fast on short distances, is untypical in any Retriever.

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



*Comparing Downstream Fiddler (left) and his father Kenstaff Whipster. The former being far too heavy in his front, the latter has a balanced body with a long ribcage, being wider and more well arched in the centre of the body. (Knowing that the Downstream Flatcoats built the base for the Swedish Flatcoat stock and the first successful Almanza Flatcoats I want to state that Fiddler wasn't a typical Downstream Flatcoat)*

*Photo: of Kenstaff Whipster Ingemar Borelius*

Furthermore, looking at the great Flatcoats of the past relations between the depth of the chest and the length of the legs, from the elbow to the ground, is generally one to one (1:1), giving the Flatcoat a significantly racier appearance than the show Golden or Labrador. But looking at the different working Retriever breeds it could be considered to be a common standard.

### **The back**

Theo Marples states in his *Show dogs* (1905), that “the back should be short, square, and well ribbed up!” Townend Barton declares the same in the *Kennel Encyclopedia*, being published in 1920. So, when the 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 the *Hutchinsons Encyclopedia*, being published at first in 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, for the measurement from the point of the withers to the set of the tail is the same as the former point to the ground.*” So, although giving a lengthy impression the built of an ideal working Flatcoat is more or less foursquare.

For some dubious reason this was adjusted in the current version of the Breed standard stating: “Loin short and square” with no comments on the length of back in relation to the dog's height at the withers. But once again, according to Stanley 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. You should



know that there were quite many cobby Flatcoats, with barrel like ribcages during the sixties and seventies, lacking the desired raciness, at the time when the standard was adjusted. This quite significantly changed wording could probably be explained by an ambition to slightly redefine a racy Flatcoat and the fact that the show Flatcoat gradually became lengthier.

The veterinary and writer Karen Hedberg gives an initiated description of the anatomy of different breeds in her book, "Dog owner's manual – on Selecting, Raising and Breeding Dogs". When it comes to the loin. – she tells that "this refers to the section from the end of the rib cage to the wing of the pelvis and consists of the lumbar vertebrae. Most standards call for well-developed muscling in this area, which generally should translate in movement to firm ligaments over this section of the backline."

"There is considerable variation between breeds as to what is considered ideal length. The length of loin or "the coupling" is what creates most of the impression of length of body when considering the height to length proportions of a dog. Forward placed or steep shoulders can also give an impression of greater length of body. "In this case she refers to "coupling" as being the equivalent of the "loin" and when the Flatcoat breed standard talks about the "loin short and square" and "open couplings highly undesirable" it all calls for a rather short back. The opposite is quite unlikely.

From a working Retriever point of view a shorter back is to be preferred and the statement made by Harding Cox (text in italics above) during the nineteen thirties is a perfect definition of the ideal proportions in a working Flatcoat.

In other words, the ideal (working) Flatcoat conformation is foursquare giving a lengthy impression due to its long neck, obliquely and smoothly placed in well laid-back shoulders and a longish but moderately arched and deep ribcage compared with a show Labrador or Golden.

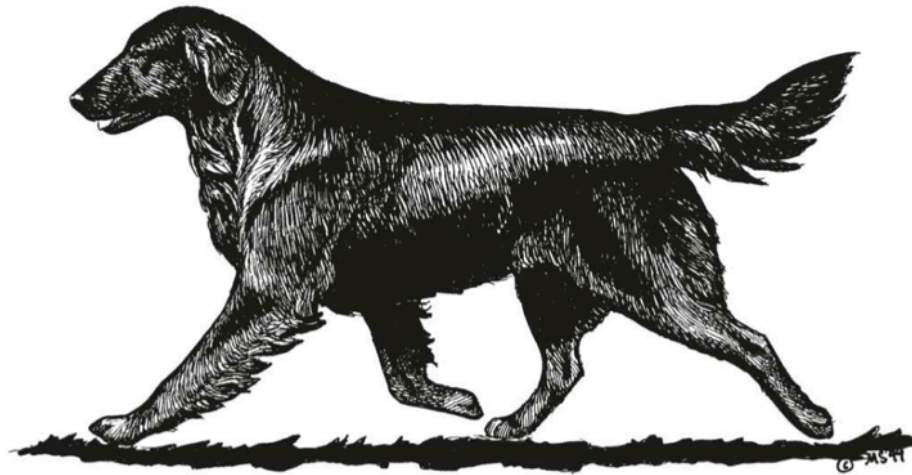
The lengthy backs in many modern show Flatcoats did appear at first during the seventies and for me they mainly came via the enormous influence of Tonggreen Sparrow Boy, being one of the main influencers behind the modern Flatcoat. Our own dog Woodlands Wanderer, born 1973 being the grandson of Sparrow Boy, had a significantly lengthy back. He quested in wide circles being more typical for a Setter than a Retriever.



*Woodlands Wanderer*

The fact that the lengthy backs have become a bit of a vogue in the show world today is easily understood knowing that it promotes a beautiful stride when trotting in the ring. But a

beautiful trotting stride adds little value in the field. A long cast Flatcoat is inclined to trot in the field as well. A trotting dog, a dog with a longer back, tend to work in wider circles than one with a shorter back, making it less efficient.



*A beautiful drawing of a trotting Flatcoat being used by FCRSA in the Illustrated breed standard. The extended back, that has crept into the modern show Flatcoat, creates a beautiful stride in the ring for sure. But it makes a working Flatcoat inclined to trot in the field as well, making it less stylish and less efficient, and it's not what the breed standard was meant to describe.*



*Swedish top worker Zebulons Karakatta  
- on the run*



*Gallopings homewards (Photo  
Markku Kastepohja)*

According to Professor Winqvist a shorter lumbar region (the loin) enables a fast and power saving gallop during a longer period of time reducing the load on the back.

Furthermore, a dog with a shorter back fall into gallop more easily than one with a longer one, that tends to trot at a higher speed. The desired working pattern in a working Retriever, continuously hovering from side to side with his nose and questing in a close hunting pattern, is promoted by a shorter back and a resilient gallop, making it easier for the dog to move/jump from side to side and continuously change directions.

Nancy Laughton and Colin Wells argued for a truly racy, athletic Flatcoat, but the gamekeeper breeder Colin was the one who argued most strongly for an ideal type with "a short



body and a short wagging tail". According to him, the working dog was favoured by a comparatively short body, contributing to a tight and efficient search pattern providing a good style in the field. The long back that has become fashionable at today's shows generates a wider hunting pattern. It's a disadvantage for a working retriever supposed to quest very closely, when needed, and it's probably the reason for the persistent myth about the Flatcoat being a bit of a setter hybrid. When appearing it's a result of a targeted breeding towards a more setter like type and there is no evidence indicating that the original Flatcoat had a higher portion of Setter blood than the other Retrievers.

### **Watch the horses**

Looking outside the dog world for guidance when it comes to length of body and the shaping of the back it's relevant to look at different horse types where the Standardbred, being a Trotter or Pacer, supposed to trot at a high speed, is longer cast than the shorter Thoroughbred or the Quarter Horse, supposed to gallop when managing its task. The Quarter horse or more exactly the classical version being a "cow horse", is the one resembling a working Retriever the most, with its ability to gallop continuously and fast in close circles, frequently changing directions, when herding or cutting a singly cow out of the herd. If we look at the breed characteristics below given by the American Quarter Horse Association in UK, it's quite easy to find the similarities with a racy, galloping working Flatcoat although we talk about the horse:

"Breed Characteristics – The American Quarter Horse is best described as an athletic power house with a "sanity" button, with looks that make it very pretty on the eye and a sympathetic and accommodating nature.

Physical Appearance - Though compact with a short body and head, American Quarter Horses are defined by their heavily muscled body, powerful shoulders and hindquarters, and strong, sturdy legs. Their heads are finely chiselled and of a flat profile with a wide forehead."

Temperament - American Quarter Horses are generally calm and docile. They are also highly intelligent; however, most are easily trained, handled, and kept. Because of their gentle and steady demeanour, the breed is an ideal family horse and well suited for the beginning rider."



*I don't have a clue if this is a perfect Quarter Horse role model but if you look for images of typical Quarter horses you don't get that far from this one. Look at the neck of medium length, obliquely placed in well laid-back shoulders running well into the back, the smoothly s-shaped, short back, the loin short, smoothly rounded and square and a the slightly sloping croup.*

## The topline

There's a tendency in the show world overall to emphasize and reward the razor sharp lines in a dog that has little to do with a conformation that is designed by nature. If we look at other fast movers in nature silhouettes are smooth, flowing and slightly curved. Wildcats, horses and many other fast runners normally expose a slightly s-shaped topline (backbone), with a slight dip behind the withers and a smoothly rounded and somewhat raised loin.

Professor Winqvist clarifies that the hindquarters have the major role to manage the forward push of the body in a galloping dog. The back has an important supporting role. A somewhat lowered back is inferior to a slightly arched back, from a mechanical viewpoint. The croup is the bridge between hindquarters and the back. That's why the shape of the croup is so vital in a working Retriever. A slightly sloping croup enables the backfeet to touch the ground slightly closer to the forequarters and the forward push to be done a bit earlier compared to a dog with a flat croup. According to Winqvist the slightly sloping croup enables a power saving and resilient gallop over a longer period of time, compared to a longer loin. But it shouldn't be so short that it limits a flowing action during gallop. A steep croup is a definite fault as it limits the backward push in a galloping dog.

Thus, if you look at the ideal anatomy of a working gundog the lumbar region is smoothly arched and slightly raised, short, square and with a slight but in no way accentuated or sharp slope down to the tail which "should be "gaily carried, but never much above the level of back" according to the standard.



*The Swedish show winners, Lustans Active Runner and Engelen She Sells Sea Shells, were no doubt built to be active runners. These are excellent role models showing the preferred relations between body length and height at the withers as well as between the depth of body and length of legs. Necks are obliquely placed in well laid-back shoulders. Watch the unbroken but smoothly curved top lines from the nicely moulded occiput to the tip of the tail being ideal for a galloping Retriever. Photo: of the bitch Lillemor Böös*

The tail is a vital part of the topline and 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, in my view, also above. If a dog can float his tail straight out in line from his back, keeping it horizontal and gently wagging it, then he is using it most effectively." But horizontal is an approximate value and O'Neill at that time (the fifties or sixties) 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, which implies a slightly downward trend to croup and set-on (or start-off) of tail, and this 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."

When it comes to the length of the tail O'Neill wrote "in applying the term "short" to the tail, they were writing in the same vein. We each will have our own ideas on shortness and I myself believe that what suits one dog best may not be the same as another, but this is carrying things to a very fine issue. Many have said the tail should fall exactly to the hook and I have even heard it categorically stated that a tail cannot be too short. Taken literally, of course, this latter could quickly be reduced to absurdity but few of us will be lucky enough to meet a tail that does not want to be trimmed, it does happen, however. Mrs. Barwise once showed me a dog by the end of whose tail she had to leave three inches of hair. It was at a big show and the dog, if I remember right, was a good winner. That must have been the shortest I ever saw but I used to leave about an inch on my dog Claverdon Pegasus and he was a very small dog."

## **Limbs**

The writing below on limbs is the one being presented by the FCRSA being a bit more detailed than the British one but with no relevant differences when it comes to requirements compared to the British/FCI version.

Forequarters: Shoulders long, well laid-back shoulder blade with upper arm of approximately equal length to allow for efficient reach.

(According to Winqvist a well laid-back shoulder has a 45-degree angulation, towards the vertical line, giving the shoulder a good angulation, promoting resilient and soft front movements and a good shock absorption in a galloping and jumping dog.)

Musculature wiry rather than bulky.

Elbows clean, close to the body and set well back under the withers.

Forelegs straight and strong with medium bone of good quality.

Pasterns slightly sloping and strong.

Dewclaws-Removal of dewclaws is optional.

Feet oval or round. Medium sized and tight with well arched toes and thick pads. (According to Winqvist an extremely short foot (catfoot) shouldn't be promoted giving too little support to a bigger working dog.)

Hindquarters: Powerful with angulation in balance with the front assembly. Upper thighs powerful and well-muscled.

Stifle - Good turn of stifle with sound, strong joint.

Second thighs (Stifle to hock joint) - Second or lower thigh as long as or only slightly longer than upper thigh.

Hock - Hock joint strong, well let down. Dewclaws - There are no hind dewclaws.

Feet oval or round. Medium sized and tight with well arched toes and thick pads.

These requirements are quite generic being valid for many working dogs and not the least for the Retrievers. When it comes to the functionality of the limbs as “movement tools” for the dog the surrounding parts of the body are as important as the limbs themselves. The forequarters are carrying two thirds of the body weight in a standing dog, even more in a moving dog and significantly more in a jumping dog. It’s quite obvious that an overloaded front will generate extra stress on the forequarters in a Retriever and, keeping that in mind, a balanced body with the main depth and width behind the shoulders instead of between them is vital in a working Flatcoat.



Taka-Tapiolan Manta. Photo Markku Kastepohja

When the dog is galloping the limbs are supported by a dynamic back being strongly arched when the hindlegs meet the front legs. The back being stretched out when the hindlegs are finishing the backward push and the front legs are reaching out forward to the next point. A smoothly rounded loin and a slightly sloping croup is giving an optimal support to a galloping Retriever.

### **The coat**

The breed standard states that the coat should be “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 and it should dry quickly after a swim. Saying this it’s no doubt that a coat that could be described as heavy or excessive is a fault. The ideal coat of a Flatcoat is far from those seen in show spaniels or show setters but the challenge for the current breeder or judge is to know what’s the coating behind a heavily trimmed or barbed dog. Saying this the ideal coat of a Flatcoat could be described as moderately long which goes with the feathering as well and it should never be as rich as that of a show Spaniel or Setter. The preferred feathering on the tail is usually kept rather short, somewhat bushy without clearly visible long hair. A setterish tail with long hair is considered to be untypical.



Looking at the images of the historical Flatcoats being presented in this article none of these had a heavy coat. It's no doubt that a massive coat has been seen as an unwanted feature in a working retriever. 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's 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's done with the thumb and a finger, maybe supported by the "knife" that Colin Wells sometimes used, to give a natural look, and never with a scissor.

O'Neill writes about coat in his article about "Type in Flatcoats" saying: "Another militating factor is the distinct suggestion of mane which should be apparent, more markedly perhaps in the male than the female. From the top of the neck to an inch or two behind the withers, the hair is longer than it is in the flat and small of the back. It varies with the individual, but show-goers know how the coat can curve obstinately round the lower part of the shoulder blades to give a coarse and thick look to these important parts and add to the length and generally spoil the outline of the body."

"Since the removal of the restrictions on trimming and stripping, the temptation to "clean out" neck and shoulders must have grown enormously. Too many judges today have Kennel Club approval but no other qualification for sorting out Flatcoats, and with one thing and another it would not be surprising if we ended up by clipping our dogs like the exhibits in an American Setter Ring. There may, of course, be nothing wrong in all this in these days of atomic progress but I'm one of those breeders with a perpetually uncomfortable feeling that things are best left where nature put them. The plain fact remains that some of us used no other tools for trimming than finger and thumb with a bit of resin to rub them in. Dogs looked more like dogs and judges looked more and harder at them."

"My line of argument is that if we allow judges to stress this "neck should be long" phrase, we are inevitably bound to encourage excessive trimming and shaping of necks and throats into something like what they aren't - and were never meant to be. And when I say if we allow, I mean exactly us - the members of the Society. We made the Standard, and we are responsible for its maintenance. Nothing can sap the foundations of the Club and bring it into decay so much as the conception that we and our dogs are just marionettes jiggling to the touch of an all-seeing, all-knowing, all-doing Kennel Club. The K.C. is interested in neither the shape nor the colour of our dogs - that is our business."

"Coat is a very tricky matter. Like size, each wants that which suits his own work and his own country best. I personally like a dog that likes the water and am inclined to grade coats according to how quickly they will dry. I must admit that I was always at variance with Mr. Cooke about this. I always thought the coats that were so dense as to be somewhat open, dried much more quickly than the very flat ones and those with a little wave were of stronger texture. I have dogs which have a nice, flattish coat in winter that go very curly in summer with continual swimming. Other people don't worry so much about water because their dogs seldom have it to contend with and they rate most highly the coat which doesn't pick up burrs or any of the inconveniences which they may contact in cover or other ground they are working. Some like a shorter coat and some a longer one. To a certain extent; we may think extremes are held in check by the over-riding condition that the limbs must be feathered. Let's hope so. In the ring at least, a bright coat of good length and feather should score but I am not so sure that denseness gets its due reward or full consideration."

I believe that O'Neill touched upon something very vital but there is another very vital angle to it as well when it comes to the image given by the dog being shown in the ring. If we transform the Flatcoat into a dog that looks more suited for the salons than the field it will for sure affect the potential Flatcoat owners. The show ground is a shopping window for many dog owners and the image given by a large, heavy, brutally barbed or maybe overcoated Flatcoat, will for sure affect the potential puppy buyer's perception of the breed, when searching for a working gundog. The Flatcoat hasn't got the strongest position as a working Retriever compared with the working Labrador and working Golden. We have the ambition to keep it as a dual-purpose Retriever, built for work as well as for shows, which makes it even more important that the show Flatcoat at least looks like a working Retriever.

Read the words given by the six very senior British Flatcoat breeders/judges in the next chapter pleading for a more natural workmanlike look in a Flatcoat. Although the Flatcoat appears in numerous countries around the world it was born and designed in Britain and according to the "unwritten" rules of the dog world it's a British breed. Britain is mainly responsible for its maintenance, even if many other countries are challenging the Brits today when it comes to first class Flatcoats. As O'Neill declares above the Flatcoated Retriever Society "made the Standard, and they are responsible for its maintenance." So, I believe it's of vital importance to listen to the wise words of these ladies asking for a workmanlike appearance and banning too large and heavy dogs and what they call Scandinavian trimming, at first becoming an ideal in the Nordic countries, where show dogs no doubt are heavily barbed today.

Looking at historical Flatcoats and the need to keep a practical coat in the dog all this could be summarized in a few words: the coat should be tidied or trimmed, with a finger and a thumb, to take away dead or excessive coat on the ears, brisket, underneath, legs, feet and tail to make it practical. The coat should look natural and the trimming or barbing of a dog, giving it an artificial outlook, spoils the desired workmanlike character in a dual purpose Flatcoat.

## **Size**

It's no doubt that size (=height at the withers) has varied a lot over time and that the Flatcoat genepool has a tendency to produce larger dogs, now and then, that are far from what is considered to be of a medium size. Most probably there has been a tendency as well among parts of the Flatcoat show fancy to look for a bigger dog probably being a main reason for the long-time absence of height in the breed standard.

These were the words of Gordon Staples in 1895 at the time when the first versions of a breed standard were written although not stated by a formal assembly; "Size. I do not remember ever hearing any great authority on dogs saying anything about the size of a Retriever of this variety, but, all other things being equal, I have always, when judging them, given the prizes to medium-sized animals. When too large they are apt to be coarse, and a dog of this stamp does not do well in the field. On the other hand, a very small dog would be useless as a Retriever."

Major W.G. Eley presents a commented description of a standard around 1910. Weight - 60 - 70 lbs., as a dog of "medium" size, if properly put together will invariably kill the heavy, big dogs, on a hard shooting day.

Theo Marples, in his book "Show Dogs (1920)", refers to the standard description telling about a dog of medium size (weighing from 60 lb (27 kg) to 70 lb (31 kg)). Given the typical proportions of a Retriever this means a dog just around 60 cm at the withers.



Size has varied a lot in the breed and the fact that there have been many oversized Flatcoats is probably one of the reasons for the decline in popularity during the first half of the previous century. Variations when it came to size and most probably different views on size had the consequence that the original breed standard just talked about weight, which of course is a most difficult target to be measured against.

Stanley O'Neill told that Reginald Cooke (Riverside) was taking a lead in the middle of the twenties to the movement for reducing size. He considered it to be a reasonable and sensible aim. However, "a smaller dog at all costs" seemed to become an overriding law, and at the Crystal Palace in 1930, Mr. Cooke, after judging, made an open statement that on account of size he had put out of the prizes what he described as "the best dog in the country if he were only half-an-inch less".

The founding "fathers" of the modern Flatcoat, Nancy Laughton and Colin Wells were the strongest advocates for a show type that shouldn't deviate from the image of a working retriever. The dual-purpose ideal has always been about keeping a show dog shaped by the timeless requirements of the shooting field and not by the fashion of the day, dictated by any variety judges looking for potential group or BIS winners. In the middle of the seventies the debate was resolved when they made a statement saying that the ideal size of a male Flatcoat is 58,5 cm (23 inch) and a bit less for a bitch.

Soon after an addition was made to the breed standard saying that the preferred height in dogs is between 58-61 cms (23-24 ins) and in bitches: 56-58 cms (22-23 ins).

The preferred weight in hard condition is for dogs: 27-36 kg (60-80 lbs); and for bitches: 25-32 kg (55-70 lbs). For some peculiar reason the preferred weight in a dog, that had been a fully accepted standard since the days when the breed was born, was raised from 60 – 70 lbs. to 60 – 80 lbs. I haven't seen any logical arguments why about 5 more kg could add any value in a working Retriever and to me it was an expression of the fact that even Flatcoat people were affected by the general trends in the Retriever world to go for heavier show dogs.

When the standard states that the preferred height for a male is 58 – 61 cm and 56 – 58 cm for a bitch it shouldn't be a bottom level but a target level on which a Flatcoat should be measured, allowing minor deviations a bit upwards as well as downwards. But today it's probably so that a dog being 58 cm at the withers is given the remark for being too small at many shows.

## **General appearance**

If you study the great show winners from the earlier days, they were often almost four-square when comparing the height at the shoulders and the length from the withers to the tail set. The typical slightly elongated appearance was shaped by the unbroken but slightly curved line from the neck to the tail tip, of a moderately long neck, a long, moderately curved and deep chest, of the 1: 1 ratio between the depth of the chest and the length of the front legs and of a tight muscular constitution. This is what the author of the original standard was aiming for with the term "racy" (= racehorse). Elegance is something different.

You could find the Flatcoat breed standard on the (British) Kennel Club homepage. Under the headline "General Appearance" it's stated that a Flatcoat should be "A bright, active dog of medium size with an intelligent expression, showing power without lumber, and raciness without weediness. This is a description of a working dog and these words summarizes what a Flatcoat is supposed to look like.

### What do others think?

A dog breed is a tradition in the sense that ideals when it comes to type and conformation are passed down through generations. As Stanley O'Neill clarified during the fifties the British breed standard is just giving the overall frame for a breed, being a mirror of the best dogs at the time it was written. Looks are shaped by breeders having learned about the breed from more experienced breeders, inspired by role models being the greatest winners and the leading breeders of their time. Show judges have an enormous influence. Specialist judges will hopefully promote the timeless ideals of a workmanlike dog that is the essence of the Flatcoated breed standard. Allrounders, judging numerous different breeds, no matter how familiar they are with these ideals, tend to reward features that are favoured in many different breeds on group level such as a flowing stride, heavy and perfectly trimmed coats, razor-sharp lines and typical breed features drawn towards the extremes. That's probably one major reason why many breeds, frequently competing on group and BIS level, gradually could be transformed into a dog, that it wasn't meant to be when the standard was defined.

Changes due to that are subtle over a shorter period of time but it's obvious for anyone looking back into dog history that they are quite dramatic in most breeds. But few breeders seem to look back and consider did we do it right? Were these changes for the best of the breed? Few leading breeders have tried to change what seems to be the relentless changes of time towards the extreme when it comes to increased size, substance, coat and what I would call "the straight line syndrome", where the ideal shape of a dog is considered to be drawn with a ruler and a pen instead of the smooth curving that is shaped by nature. And why is big size such a trigger for most judges looking for the winner. I can hear many experienced breeders say that a Flatcoat male, of the ideal size between 58 – 61 cm, is considered to be too small at most shows.



*This is one clearly visible example of how fashion has changed over the years. Mr Chips (left) was a winner in US during the sixties and the bitch (being unknown to me) a US winner during the last few years. But why do we add that length into a working Retriever?*

In the early days, when I entered the breed, prominent breeders like Nancy Laughton, Amelia Jessel and Read Flowers made authoritative statements about the breed from time to time, to give guidance to the more junior breeders. Outside Britain it was no doubt that the US breeder Ed Atkins spent more time and efforts than most other breeders to dig deep into Flatcoat history. I remember how Nancy Laughton grumbled a bit, but I'm sure she was thrilled as well, when she had the lengthy letters from Ed Atkins. He was asking about historical issues and expressing



strong views on breeding and not the least on genetics, which I believe is his special competence area. I had the pleasure to correspond quite frequently with the two of them for a while and I'm quite sure that Nancy sometimes grumbled over my curious letters as well.



*When the Flatcoated Retriever Society made its first "Clarification of the standard" the photo of Fenrivers Golden Rod (right) was used to illustrate the shape of an ideal Flatcoat male but I believe the statement "lacking raciness" was added. I believe it's partially due to the angle of the photographer but no matter what he could be somewhat lighter, although I'm sure he was the best looking Flatcoat at that time and five (5) times a CC-winner at Crufts. His son Tonggreen Sparrow Boy succeeded him at the top, showing a racier type than his father and it's little doubt that he's had a stronger impact on the current show Flatcoat than most other dogs. Photos: Mrs Ann Edman-Strander.*

Ed Atkins no doubt made a strong mark on the US Flatcoat scene with a number of wisely chosen British imports and I'm sure his spirit can be traced behind the detailed US version of the breed standard. One of his major efforts was to look for outcross blood, probably being more aware of the very narrow gene pool than most other breeders. The most important outcrosses I presume were the progeny out of Forestholm Rufus and Greenlane Jess, becoming a bit of a backbone of the Flatcoat over there.

It's no doubt that Ed Atkins had a stronger in-depth knowledge about the breed than most breeders around the world and being a very determined breeder he for sure had his own views on Flatcoat conformation. When the New Zealand Retriever Club looked for guidance about the breed for their Flatcoated Retriever breed supplement in 2006 Ed Atkins was asked to contribute. He wrote an authoritative description which focused on many aspects being vital in a working Retriever, of which I quote the parts commenting the breed standard: (the complete article is most easily found on the Flatcoated Retriever Society homepage under "News/Articles").

"The one thing that separates a quality Flatcoat from other retrievers is a very distinctive and practical outline. The head is long and clean with the strength to carry any game. It is a one-piece head with little distinction between skull and foreface and these are equal in length. Stop is slight and gradual but a down face or collie like head would be atypical. It is set upon a strong neck that flows well into the dogs back. This is essential for a proper front end and makes the back of the dog appear square while the overall profile shows a long (from point of the breast or prow to the last rib) deep ribcage that tapers up to a strong square loin.

The fore chest is only moderately broad but viewed from front or 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 approximate 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. When standing approximately 65% of the weight is on the front assembly and in action over 90% of the concussion of striking the ground is absorbed up front. The proper front also allowing for a smooth ground covering action; the efficiency of fewer steps also minimizes shock to the system and encourages both endurance and durability.

The Flatcoat topline should be generally level, never sloping or swayed. If the neck is properly set and shoulders set well into the back, there will always be a very slight but perceivable dip just behind the withers. Any softness of back or longer than square loin region is seriously faulty and tends to render a hard-worked dog unsound at a relatively early age. In this respect, upright shoulders, weak or upright pasterns, a soft back and loose loin region (open couplings) are as crippling to a worker as moderate hip disease.

The rear of a Flatcoat should be well muscled with angulation in balance with the shoulders. The second thigh or gaskins (knee to the hock) should be of a good length (equal to the thigh - hip to knee), with hocks well let down (short). The optimum function for a retriever is to propel itself forward using the rear as an efficient lever not as a pushing instrument. Dogs that are over angulated must push in a constant uphill position, squandering needed energy for endurance and placing greater stress on the hips and spine."

In summary the Flatcoat is a strong but elegant medium sized dog with substance and bone. Deep rather than rounded in ribcage with a very distinct blunted triangle shape formed by the level back, deep brisket with prominent prow, tapering up to the last rib to form a tuck up. A Flatcoat is never compact or cobby, nor is it overly rangy (length of body). The general appearance of the breed; "showing power without lumber (excess flesh) and raciness (higher stationed on legs) without weediness (slightness in bone or general build).

Any attempt to stylize or change the shape of the dog by shaving, barbering, fluffing, etc is reprehensible and more often than not is a red flag calling attention to the very faults it seeks to hide. A bit of tidying of the ear fringes, throat and feathers should be the only grooming needed."

It's an excellent writing about the very details of the breed standard. There is one issue however where I can see a clear risk for misunderstandings. When describing the ideal body profile as a "very distinct blunted triangle tapering up to the last rib" I can easily see the "bull like" males appearing now and then with an oversized forefront that has nothing to do with a typical working Retriever. I think I know what it means when looking at the beautiful drawings presented by the American Flatcoated Retriever Society in its "Guide to the Flatcoated Retriever". But the power of a word could be strong and the "blunted triangle" approach could encourage the breeding of untypical dogs that I'm quite sure isn't the intention behind this wording.

The shape of the ribcage of a typical Flatcoat is more emphasizing length, where the deepest point is rather behind than between the elbows. There is a slight tapering towards the couplings but that is very moderate. The "blunted triangle" ideal easily promotes a distinct but untypical setter image, with a shortish rib cage, overloaded forequarters and for sure to "the highly undesirable open couplings". This isn't according to the ideals behind the British breed

standard and it has nothing to do with the preferred working Retriever type. From a working Flatcoat aspect it's definitely a negative issue if it promotes overloaded forequarters as it could risk putting excessive weight on the front and consequently an unwanted stress on the skeleton when a dog is running fast or jumping.

But saying this I would definitely recommend the usage of the US "Guide to the Flatcoated Retriever" to all breed clubs around the world. We are quite far from those ideals today and if we could agree on a common interpretation of the standard for a dual purpose working Retriever we could more easily share breeding material across all borders.

### **Six British specialist judges on the breed standard**

Sometime after 2007 (according to a date in the text) the New Zealand Kennel Club did ask Flatcoated Retriever Society as well to respond to a few questions about the breed for inclusion into the New Zealand Kennel Club's Flatcoated Retriever Breed Supplement. The questions were forwarded to six British senior specialist judges expressing their views on Flatcoat conformation and where the breed stands today.

As always, those words must be read in the light of the time when it was written but it's a strong statement for keeping the show Flatcoat as a workmanlike dog seen from all aspects. I quote what I consider to be the major parts, being more or less common for all these experienced specialist judges, but don't hesitate to read the full text on the Flatcoated Retriever Society homepage under News/Articles.

The chosen Judges were Jenny Bird, Becky Johnson, Brenda Phillips, Valerie Foss, Val Jones and Maureen Scott.

#### **Jenny Bird**

Overall the dogs have got bigger and we have lost type and soundness. Type within the breed is very mixed. Heads vary, and the truly classical head is rare today. It's difficult to find five dogs in a class of 20 plus that fulfil my interpretation of the breed standard.

The changes I have mentioned are to the detriment of the breed. "A medium sized workmanlike dog". That should always be remembered. A Flatcoat should not be glamorous. Flatcoat construction is unique in the Retriever breeds calling as it does for the dog to be slightly longer than it is tall. But that length must come from the ribs and not the loin and we now have a number that are long in the loin.

#### **Becky Johnson**

It's no doubt that the dogs have changed. Heads are generally a lot better – gone are some of the heavy two-piece Labrador head with jowls that you used to see. Dogs are almost "settery" in their appearance – narrow in body with fine silky coats. This is not what is required in the standard. They are also taller. At the end of the day form follows function. The standard was written with what the dog had to perform to in mind. The dogs have to look and move as if they can do a day's work and since the ruling in 1957 I think that the majority of people have been content to have a SH CH, rather than a CH. Unless you work dogs, you cannot possibly begin to appreciate it.

I remember the days when the dogs just had the dirt knocked off them and were taken into the ring untrimmed and unbathed! Read Flowers used to use a knife to get the excess hair out prior to going in the ring! Nowadays all that has changed. The presentation of Flatcoats is



generally top class. However, I would say that the style of stripping down their necks which originated in Scandinavia and has trickled across to the UK should be nipped in the bud sharpish. It is NOT the way to present a Flatcoat.



*The half siblings, Read Flowers' Fenrivers Golden Rod and Colin Wells' Wood Poppy sharing the top honours at a show during the nineteen sixties. Truly workmanlike Flatcoats, two of the greatest dogs of their time and excellent role models for the working Flatcoat.*

### **Brenda Phillips**

The breed has developed in many different ways depending where fashion has taken it. The breed changed rapidly especially when the number of gamekeeper owner/ breeder/judges declined especially in the eighties. Post war I believe the decade from the mid-seventies to the end of the eighties was the time of optimum quality relating to breed type.

In the eighties the UK Kennel Club modernized and standardized all the "breed standards. The Flatcoats certainly lost very important breeding & judging pointers, they are just a few words but as the example of the original standard they say so much. One of the universal problems in the Flatcoat today is "open coupling" this displays itself in overlong dogs with weak backs and poor topline or the other phenomena short barrel chest and overlong loins, these are the hardest to see from the ringside as dogs can look balanced. Sadly, both these structural faults are being forgiven by judges in the ring today.

The old standard asks for:

"Forequarters - The chest should be deep and fairly broad, with a well-defined brisket on which

the elbows should work cleanly and evenly. The legs are of the greatest importance, the forelegs, should be perfectly straight, with bone of good quality carried right down to the feet, and with the dog in full coat the legs should be well feathered.

Body - The fore ribs should be fairly flat, showing a gradual spring and well arched in the centre of the body, but rather lighter towards the quarters. Open couplings are to be ruthlessly condemned. The back should be short, square and well ribbed up.

Hindquarters - Should be muscular. The stifle should not be too straight or too bent, and the dog neither be cow-hocked nor move too widely behind; in fact, he must stand and move true on legs and feet all round. The legs should be well feathered.

Do you think that the exhibitors of today really understand the breed standard and what they are trying to produce? Sadly no. I do not believe they understand the anatomy and physiology of their dogs under their jacket, few understand how poor construction affects their dog's ability in so many ways. We as judges today are advised by the UK KC that obvious "health issues" must now be taken into account when judging. To me this includes in the Flatcoat, poorly constructed forequarters, bodies with incorrect ribcages & open couplings, also over angulated and poorly angulated hindquarters as all these put stress on limbs spines etc.

My main concern for the future Flatcoat is the breed type. I see they're becoming very flashy black & liver dogs. Sadly, very little relating to the unique retriever that it should be. Many judges today are influenced especially with the male by flash and big coats not asked for in the breed standard. One must always remember they are "A WORKING BREED" who need a good "waterproof jacket plus leg and tail feathered for protection.

### **Valery Jones**

During the last 20 years the dogs have changed in body proportions, i.e. instead of having the long, deep ribcage with a short loin the proportions have become reversed, you now see dogs with short ribcages and long in loin, I cannot remember seeing those 20 years ago.

The above is of obvious detriment to the breed, as the ribcage houses the vital organs, lungs and heart in which they need room to work efficiently, if you shorten the ribcage to have enough room for these organs the ribcage will have to become wider and thus the Flatcoated Retriever will lose its racy appearance and become compact and type will become lost

I abhor the stripped out look that is fashionable in some overseas countries, the neck feathering is there for a purpose, to protect the dog, when out working in heather or bramble. The standard was laid down by those who were trying to evolve a moderate dog for use in the field.

### **Maureen Scott**

The height of the Flatcoat has increased and those dogs of the preferred height are classed as small. We must remember that the Flat Coat is a medium sized dog and that open couplings are highly undesirable. We are losing the lovely one-piece moulded head, with the almond shaped eye and intelligent expression, eye colour is also getting light. We are seeing more broad skulls, with round light eyes, upright shoulders and straight upper arms.

The trend in presentation nowadays seems to be that of over trimming, particularly neck and fronts, this is how the Scandinavians trim their dogs and is being copied here. I personally would penalise excessive trimming in the U.K. as I feel it spoils the look of the dog.

## What is exposed by the Clubs?

Illustrations to the Flatcoated Retriever Breed Standard presented by the different Kennel Clubs.



*The (English) Kennel Club*



*FCI (Fédération Cynologique Internationale)*



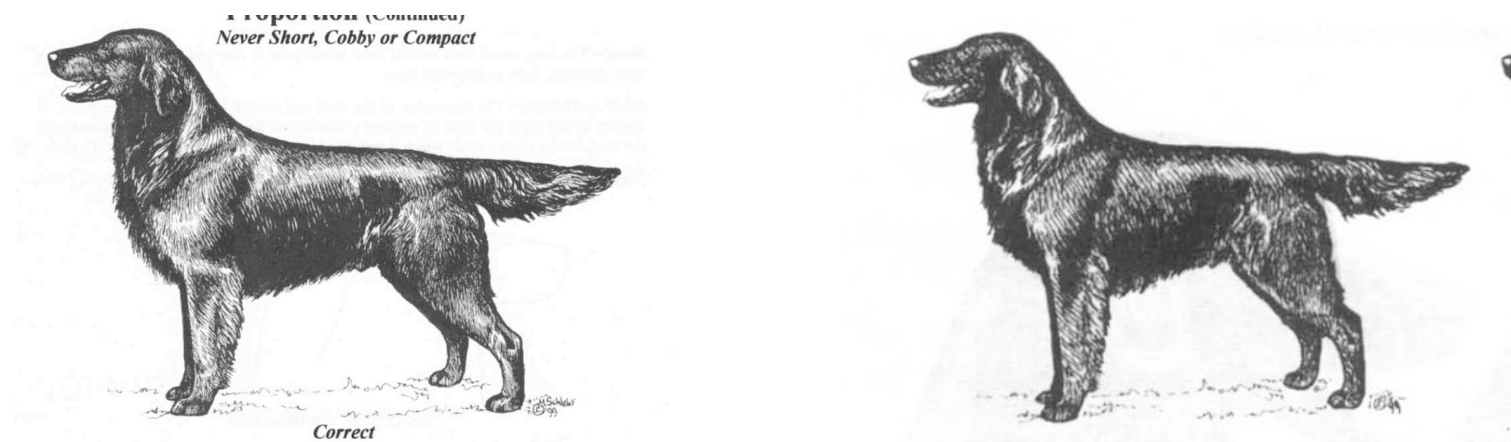
*The American Kennel Club (AKC)*



*To me those illustrations above are quite far from a classical Flatcoat outline exposing a dual purpose working Flatcoated Retriever. The one being used by the English Kennel Club isn't that bad for sure, but the three others are showing absolutely untypical Flatcoats which should be strongly questioned by the responsible breed club.*



Illustrations below being presented by the American Flatcoated Retriever Society (FCRSA)



*These stylized illustrations to the standard are made by FCRSA around 2000. Both are excellent catching the essence of a racy workmanlike Flatcoated Retriever. The one to the left is described as the one with the ideal proportions but to me it's no doubt that the shorter one to the right is the one that represents the classical working Flatcoat outline and a dog conformed to be a galloping Retriever. Sorry for being somewhat critical but I would have preferred a ribcage with its main depth behind the elbows and a smoothly s-shaped topline.*

## **Style in a working Retriever**

What has style to do with this? Style is an undefined term that summarizes the overall impression of a Retriever in the field. It's about having a polished behaviour when interacting with humans and other animals, it's about how to walk at heel, it's about the behaviour when waiting quietly, relaxed but concentrated at a drive, it's about how it gallops at a high speed in the field, straight out on a marked bird or a blind or quartering the given grounds in speed and a close pattern without unnecessarily disturbing unshot game, it's about how it crosses a high fence without hesitation and it's about the pickup and willing delivery of shot game.

Most issues when it comes to style is about a skilful training and the dogs own mental capabilities. But a big and/or heavy dog won't show the drive and racy movements that goes with a perceived good style in a Retriever no matter if it's an efficient worker or not. A long back counteracts the close quartering that is asked for in a Retriever and contributes to a setter like impression. A heavy unbalanced body, with overloaded shoulders/forequarters will limit the capability to work, gallop and jump with drive and perseverance.

The positive, willing and cooperative attitude that is asked for in a Retriever is exposed via a bright, intelligent and "interactive" expression, rapid responses when the whistle and hand is in action and with a happily, constantly wagging tail when the dog is at work!

## **The black setter myth**

Mr Wilson Stephens, being the editor of the leading British country magazine, *The Field*, from 1951 to 1977, was an active shooting man, breeding winning retrievers and spaniels. He was well known in the early Flatcoat world as the breeder of the greatest worker ever, Int. FT Champion Hartshorn Sorrel, and a few other first-class workers during the sixties. His book "Gundog sense and sensibility", initially published in 1982, is one of the best for anyone trying to understand the basic drivers behind all British gundog breeds. It's in no way a training book explaining how to go from A to Z, but it gives an in depth understanding of the differences between the British gundog breeds and its mental capabilities.

Talking about the British Retriever breeds he states that "distant ancestry stamps its mark on all four breeds. The greater element of setter blood in the Flatcoat's make-up is both his strength and his weakness, being the root cause of his swift supersession by the Labrador eighty years ago (=in the beginning of the last century) and his position as the third breed in modern retriever field trial ranking. His "nose" is demonstrably the most sensitive, giving him touches at several yards further range than others. But what he does with the touches is compromised by the excitability which comes of setter ancestry, and with it an instinctive reaction to rely on effort, movement and energy rather than on painstaking thoroughness. He relies on his legs rather than his brains, and though unsurpassed as a game finder, he covers a great deal of ground in finding it. This characteristic of Flatcoats tells us, by comparison something of value about Labradors and Golden Retrievers."

"Nothing short of many generations of careful breeding will eliminate the setter element from the Flatcoats hunting style. It is there for all to see. The wide swinging pattern orientating on the wind, the recurrent high head searching for body scent, the sweeping of the ground as distinct from hunting it closely then gradually closing the range on a "touch" all bespeak the airiness of setter work. The contrast with the Labrador is revealing. The Labrador hunts small areas closely, its nose constantly down, criss-crossing on its previous course and continually turning, plating its movements together and giving itself the benefit of varied angles to the wind. If this process is watched in cover which gives full visibility, such as sugar beet, an irresistible vision is created. It is of a dog which is not working on land at all, but swimming – twisting and searching for some object made elusive by choppy waters. The Labrador's long-ago role in human service was precisely that."

"The need with the Labradors and Golden Retrievers is to teach them to apply their close hunting techniques to the areas where the lost game is most likely to be lying; in short, to work to signal. The readiness with which the Labradors acquire this skill is alone enough to explain their supremacy in field trials. It enables their hunting power to be deployed effectively and quickly, and the game to be recovered with minimum disturbance to unshot birds lying in vicinity with which the shooting party hope to deal later. The problem for the trainer of a Flatcoat is to contain the scope of ground coverage, concentrating it to the locations where it is likely to be useful. He will be a good man if he succeeds, but it can be done; and when it is done, a dog with exceptional capability results."

Wilson Stephens comes back to the Flatcoat issue a bit later when talking about the dogs being used by the gamekeepers noting the fact that the Flatcoat at least been a popular gamekeeper's dog. He says that "several keepers, known to me, work Flatcoated Retrievers at hunting up in the beating line at a drive. I must declare a personal prejudice in favour of the Flatcoat but cannot believe it ideal in this role. What has been well described as the Flatcoat's

“setterness” makes the close ground treatment which this work requires very difficult to maintain. However, the Flatcoat does have a valuable supplementary benefit from this same cause; if allowed to, it will point close lying unshot birds, and remain staunch on point. This minor skill is especially valuable on cocks-only days, when birds are often found well out on bracken hillsides, or under fallen trees, wide of the nearest Gun. The point provides time for him of course to get into position to shoot.”

It's an excellent and most striking writing for sure. But I'm quite sure that this is not the complete picture and different strains are no doubt differing in style. Wilson Stephens, was no doubt one of the most knowledgeable persons when it came to the different gundog breeds in Britain. But like most other “modern” time writers he's a bit stuck with the tenacious myth indicating that the Flatcoat is a bit of a setter hybrid unlike the “pure” Labrador. Setter crosses were most probably made among the Flatcoat ancestors in the very early Retriever history, in the early eighteen hundred, when Labradors were mixed with Pointers and Goldens, at first being yellow Flatcoats, was crossed (at least once) with a yellow Water Spaniel. But if the Golden “Flatcoat” is hunting with a lower nose, as indicated above, where does that come from?

Interbreeding between the different Retriever types was quite frequent during the first half of the nineteen hundred although it gradually decreased until the door was closed by the Kennel Club in 1970. Flatcoats were used in the Labrador lines. Working Labradors had a strong impact on the working Flatcoat and Golden. I've told before about the true story behind the Flatcoat/Labrador Interbred Pewcroft Plague (born 1939), being one of the most important foundation bitches for the modern Flatcoat with a major impact on the strongest working lines. So, It's obvious that there's a “lower nose” accessible in the Flatcoat DNA.



*Dual Ch Tittie. A smaller and more short-cast bitch and a hunter focusing on ground scent.*



*O'Flanagan Superman – A beautiful Flatcoat, no doubt being stamped by his great grandsire Sparrow Boy and with three generations of long cast dogs on his sire's side like many other descendants of Sparrow Boy. From many aspects a role model but the length of back is not ideal in a working Flatcoat.  
(Photo: Ann Edman-Strander)*



But It's no doubt that many Flatcoats are exposing a setter like, widely ranging, working style with a higher nose action. A taller and more long-cast dog will for sure quarter in wider circles, with a higher nose. I remember keeping a dog named Hovhills Tornadoman for a while during the late seventies. He was owned by a friend of ours who had made him up a dual champion, a good sensible worker. But I remember his working style being totally different from that of our own dual champion Tittie. Tittie being a smaller, shorter, but still racy Flatcoat (a good type given CC by Nancy Laughton as well as Colin Wells) was quartering the grounds and following scent in a close, "Labradorlike" manner when Tornadoman was quartering in a "Setterlike" style running over a quite large share of the grounds in every turn. He was the grandson of Tonggreen Sparrowboy, and very much like him in looks. A quite large dog with a longer back which I believe is as much to explain his wide working pattern as his brain. Looking at Tittie she was in no way the air scenter talked about above which might be due to the fact that she had at least fourteen lines back to the Labrador/Flatcoat Interbred Pewcroft Plague and beyond that several lines to the Interbred Bibby. She was a different type of a Flatcoat and I believe as well that you can't describe Flatcoats in general as air scenters. But the ancestry of Tornadoman wasn't that far from Tittie's, so I'm quite sure the main difference was about conformation more than brains.

Even if the Setter influence is there somewhere close to two hundred years back in history, the common ancestry with the Labrador is much stronger and according to Cookes scrapbooks Flatcoat blood was used in the early working Labradors "to keep their noses down". I'm sure the hunting style has as much to do with the breeding, breeders individual choices when it comes to stud dogs and which individuals we have multiplied in our pedigrees. It's about these dog's brains as well as the conformation we promote when we breed. Looking at the dogs that built the backbone of the Swedish Flatcoat they had a pedigree that looked very much the same as Tittie's and of those her litter brother Laddie, being Ragnhild Ulin's (Almanza) foundation dog, played a quite significant role. And, of course, the dogs behind were all British Flatcoats!

### **Style is about numerous things**

Style in a working Retriever is about numerous things. It's definitely about the working pattern, it's about how it covers the ground, how it tackles heavy cover and challenging obstacles, it's about the way the nose is used and how the scent is followed up, it's about the body language, the willing reaction when the whistle is blown, it's about the happily wagging tail that is used for balance as well as to tell if it's getting close to the fall, it's about the fast and balanced pick up of the fallen game and the fast, direct and willing delivery in front of the handler, it's about how fast the dog is directing his focus after the delivery to the next task, it's about how relaxed and attentive the dog is at the handlers side at heel or sitting at a drive. In short, it's about how efficient the dog is to carry out his main task to "get the food on the table". But adding to that, it's about how the dog behaves in a group or people or with other dogs, in the car, in the kennel or at home. It's about the finetuning of good manners coming from the good breeding of a kind and happy Flatcoat with a happily wagging tail.

The word style summarizes all good aspects of what a (working) Retriever is supposed to be. But you can't get the desired style out of a Flatcoat that hasn't got the attentive and intelligent expression of the typical dark Flatcoat eye. And you can't get the desired style out of a Flatcoat that hasn't got the racy and powerful conformation that's there in a typical truly medium sized, short coupled Flatcoat, not being too unlike the other working Retriever breeds and for sure being smaller, shorter and lighter than the average Flatcoat of today.



*Colin Wells with his Claverdon Tawny Pippit - Few if any breeder throughout Flatcoat history had a more dominant impact on the breed history than Colin Wells. Being a gamekeeper (head keeper at Belvoir Castle) he preferred a smaller and shorter Flatcoat than the one being in vogue today and it was for sure a beautiful working Flatcoat.*

### **A few last words on Flatcoat conformation.**

I remember the early days of our Flatcoat life during the seventies when Nancy Laughton payed her first and only visit to Sweden. Stina and Olle Högstedt (Tryggs) had bought Wood Man and Claverdon Fantasia and inspired an invitation by the Swedish Spaniel and Retriever Club to Nancy to judge at the very first Swedish Retriever Championship and a Retriever show. We had our first Flatcoat bitch Tittie starting to win a bit at that time, I had read Nancy Laughton's marvellous book, *The Review of the Flatcoated Retriever*, and we wouldn't miss an option to show under the legendary lady.

The challenge was that Tittie had a severe ulcerous eczema probably due to an over-consumption of dried fish. Her back was shaved from the withers to the tail set and her skin looked like a sore moonscape. But we were young and naive, we looked forward to getting some kind of qualified judgement and went to the show where Mrs Lilliehöök (at that time being the grand old lady of the Swedish Retriever world) told us not to enter saying that British judges were so strict on coats. But the secretary forwarded a request to Nancy who waved her hands meaning I don't care. All the best Swedish Flatcoats were there at the time but Tittie was awarded being Best Opposite Sex and when looking at the judge's notes again she'd written "good coat". Nancy could see beyond her sore skin and that's what dog shows was meant to be wasn't it, an examination of a purpose bred working Retriever well fitted to do a day's job.

Today no one could deny that shows are beauty contests and I don't mind. But many allrounders tend to look for the extremes when show bred dogs are getting more and more even in type and quality. Enough is not always just enough in the show world. Size is going up, backs and necks are getting longer, bodies and bones are getting heavier, the moderate coating that was the ideal in the classical Flatcoat is getting richer and heads are getting longer, even more filled in and quite often too narrow spoiling the intelligent expression. That's how it always has been in most breeds, but if we could say; let's make the Flatcoat a bit smaller, a bit lighter, a bit shorter, a

bit less coated and a bit more workmanlike we would definitely counteract the diversion of types to the benefit of a more even dual purpose Flatcoat.

I've made these writings to try to find the "scientific" approach, based on utility aspects and the good knowledge being built up by generations of skilful breeders, when analysing the one and only original Flatcoated Retriever breed standard seen from a working Retriever perspective. I believe that a breed standard and the interpretations of it should be timeless and holistic and at no extent based on the fashion of the day, or viewpoints defined by any variety show judges looking for features that are decisive factors in group or BIS finals. I believe the Flatcoat world, trying to keep a dual purpose ideal alive, must take working aspects into consideration when looking for the best looking working Retriever in the ring. Doing so every judge should be aware of the main factors that constitutes a stylish working Retriever tirelessly galloping, constantly quartering and not trotting through the field.

*Any thoughts or questions on the content of this article are more than welcome to [bearstream@me.com](mailto:bearstream@me.com).*

*We wouldn't mind connecting some relevant comments to the article.*



*Swedish FT Winner SE J CH Hinnared's Älton - John*