Judging The Puli

By Sherry Gibson

Sherry Gibson started showing and breeding Pulis in 1976 and became a judge in 1993. She is currently eligible to judge five herding and 14 working breeds. She has bred St. Bernards, Pulis and currently has smooth standard Dachshunds in addition to her Pulis.

Judging the Puli is not accomplished by sight alone. Examining the Puli is akin to reading by Braille. That is, one has to use one's fingers to assess what is under the heavy coat. Your eyes will tell you about the dog's condition and maintenance but only your hands will reveal the dog's conformation. The purpose of this article is to make that task easier for you. The Puli may appear to be an impossible mass of hair but there are ways to find the dog under the coat and there are clues to the dog's anatomy, even from a distance.

The Puli is a square breed with slightly more leg than body. That is, the distance from the point of shoulder to the point of buttock is approximately equal to the distance from the top of withers to ground. The distance from the top of withers to elbow is slightly less than the distance from elbow to ground, the proportion being 45% body depth to 55% leg length. (That proportion is not specified in the American standard but can be found in the original Hungarian standard and appears in the official Illustrated Guide to the Puli published by the Puli Club of America.)

When I look at a lineup of Pulis, I try to visualize what they would look like standing there without their coats. Looking at each Puli, I note the placement of the feet. Is he standing under himself or are his front feet under his ears, indicating lack of front angulation? I note the Puli's attitude and interest in his handler and his surroundings. Does he exude energy and eagerness? In a class of mature dogs, I look at toplines and the amount of topline visible between withers and tail. I draw no conclusions at this point, but it gives me ideas about what I might find when I do the exam. Sometimes, I am pleasantly surprised to find that what I had thought to be a fault was indeed an illusion. Think of this first view as the summary you read on a book jacket. Sometimes, the book lives up to the hype, sometimes it disappoints. Only by reading the book will you determine if it is, indeed, a blockbuster.

When you look at a lineup of Pulis, you may not see square and you certainly won't see leg length. You have to find these proportions when the dog is on the table, but it is still helpful to keep them in mind when viewing your lineup and when the dogs are moving. Your eyes will be deceived by factors like the age of the dog, the length of the coat, and the style of the trim. There is no preferred trimming style in this breed. Some owners trim the head coat and front cords quite severely while others let the head coat blossom. All styles, including a totally brushed out coat, are completely acceptable. You must evaluate the dog under the coat, not the length, trim, style, thickness or width of his cords, or lack thereof. Only the correct harsh texture is required, not cords, and a young dog is just as competitive as a six-year-old with coat to the floor.

The proper way to get your hands into the corded coat is by spreading your fingers and sliding the hands into the coat from the bottom up. It is a rare judge who can contort themselves into a position where they can get their hands up and under the coat of a dog that is only 16 or 17 inches tall. For this reason, the Puli is always examined on a table, never on the ground. In addition, the Puli is supposed to be aloof with strangers and the young ones especially don't appreciate being hovered over by someone they don't know. The table gives them confidence and there should be no problem with them standing quietly while you examine them, but don't expect them to like it. You are not their person.

When examining the Puli head, keep the correct proportion in mind. It should be one-third muzzle to two-thirds back skull. Also keep in mind that this is a herding dog and it needs to have a strong muzzle with
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relatively large teeth. A weak, snipey muzzle is not functional. The Puli's eyes are almond shaped and dark brown in color, but they can appear rather round if the dog is unsure of itself. When you flip the hair back to examine the eyes, give the dog a moment to register who you are and you may see a round-appearing eye suddenly return to almond shape.

The Puli standard uses the words “medium” or “moderate” ten times. There are no extremes in this breed, other than the coat. The Puli is built for multi-tasking. He is neither an endurance trotter nor a long-distance galloper. He needs to be able to both trot and gallop with efficiency and be agile enough to change gears on the fly. Dogs that specialize in trotting typically have deeper, slightly longer bodies (think German Shepherd). Gallopers typically have more flexible spines and longer legs (think Sighthounds). The Puli has to be able to excel in both gaits to do his job of herding large flocks of sheep on the plains of his homeland.

Most judges assess front angulation by mentally dropping a vertical line from the point of withers to the ground. That line should pass through the dog's elbow. We then visually find the forward point of the forearm and see if the shoulder blade and forearm appear to be of equal length and to meet in an approximate right angle. Easy enough on a Doberman, but how do you do that on a Puli?

To check the Puli's front angulation, find the point of withers with your right hand and place your thumb at the top of the withers pointing straight down. With your left hand, slide your fingers into the coat at the elbow and place your left thumb along the back of the foreleg pointing straight up. Your two thumbs should be pointing at each other. Keeping your left thumb on the elbow, rotate the left hand forward and place the tip of the middle finger on the forward point of the upper arm where it joins the shoulder blade. You will now be looking at a triangle comprised of a line from right thumb to left middle fingertip, left middle fingertip to left thumb, and from thumb to thumb. The first two measures should be equal. Any variation in these points indicates a front assembly that is not correct. If the two thumbs do not point at each other in a line perpendicular to the ground, the dog is either upright in the shoulders (right thumb too far forward) or the upper arm is short and/or too upright (left thumb too far forward). Also, the angle at the forward point of the triangle needs to be approximately 90 degrees, which you can estimate by the placement of your fingers. Note that even if your thumbs point directly at each other, the front may still be poorly angulated if the forward angle is too open.

While your hands are in the area, it is now time for you to check leg length. Lay your right hand on the dog's withers and the left hand flat against the dog's chest just behind the elbow, then lean down and back and compare the distance between your two hands to the distance between the lower hand and the table. Some judges who have been approved for Pulis for a long time do not check for this proportion because they did not have the advantage of attending a PCA seminar, since seminars are a fairly recent innovation. As someone who still exhibits, I have to say that my opinion of a judge's ability to judge my breed definitely is lowered when a judge fails to check this important detail.

Examining the rear assembly is not as difficult as the front but still requires some lifting of the coat. Think about how you use your hands to examine any coated dog such as a Cocker or Briard. The motions will be the same, but you have to accommodate for the cords on the Puli. Remember to open your hands and let your fingers slide into the coat from below. Do not try to feel the dog under a layer of cords. The hindquarters are well developed and muscular with well bent stifles, the rear assembly balancing that of the front. The upper thigh and lower thigh should be approximately the same length with hocks well let down. A long second thigh results in the dog standing too far behind himself. A line dropped from the rear protuberance of the hipline should touch the ground just in front of the Puli's hind feet. You can visualize this line by holding the coat out of the way while the dog is on the table and visually assessing the placement of the rear feet.

The Puli tail is correctly carried up and over the back. It may lie flat on the back, curl to one side and extend down the dog's flank, or be tightly curled over the back in a single or double curl. All are correct, just
as long as the tail is "over" the back. We do not specify how long the tail should be, so please do not straighten the tail and pull it down to the hock. There is nothing in our standard that says that the tail should reach the hock. Dogs with tightly curled tails experience real discomfort when their tail is uncurled and pulled down.

Much more important than length is the set on of the tail. You can assess this by gently lifting the tail with your right hand and feeling the croup with your left hand while the dog is positioned on the exam table. There should be a slight slope to the croup. The standard states: "The back is level and strong, of medium length, with croup sloping slightly... The tail is carried over, and blends into the backline." The Illustrated Guide to the Puli clarifies that "As a consequence of the slight slope of croup, the Puli has a moderately high tail set." This can only be assessed by feeling the croup while the dog is on the table.

Also, you may correctly forgive a young Puli who is unsure of himself and is not continuously keeping his tail up and over his back. As long as you see it in the correct position at least once during the presentation, that is enough to evaluate whether it is correctly carried. The tail is the barometer of the Puli's mood and some puppies will drop their tail their first few times in the ring, especially when standing still. You will usually see it come up into its proper position during gaiting and can assess carriage at that time.

The Puli standard states, "At a collected, or contained trot the gait is distinctive: quick-stepping and animated, not far reaching, yet in no way mincing or stilted. When at a full trot, the Puli covers ground smoothly and efficiently with good reach and drive, the feet naturally tending to converge toward a median line of travel as speed increases." Clear enough, but the problem is seeing the dog under the coat when it is moving.

It can be a challenge to assess movement on a Puli and each stage of coat-growth has its own difficulties. A young Puli moving at a collected trot may appear to be bouncing, but that can be an illusion created by the motion of the immature coat and the springiness in the pasterns. The best procedure for judging Pulis in this age group is to watch the feet and legs to determine stride and ignore the topline, which may be doing wild things due to flying cords. Then you can assess structure and confirm the dog's topline on the table. If the dog is built correctly, it will move correctly. A typical Puli with correctly angulated front and rear assemblies will move with light quick strides. The forward reach of the front foot will touch the ground approximately under the dog's eye. The rear extension of the hind foot will balance that of the forward reach.

Evaluating movement on a fully corded mature Puli presents another set of problems. Now it is possible to see the topline and it should remain level as the dog moves. At a collected trot, there will be some springiness to the dog's movement in sidegait but the back should remain strong and level. A Puli, at an extended trot, should move like a hover craft. Any deviation is due to structural imperfections. The movement should be effortless and smooth, not bouncing. With a full coat, it will be more difficult to see the forward reach and rear extension, but you can watch the coat at the floor level and you should be able to see the feet breaking through the cords. When the Puli is coming straight at you, focus on the dog's nose. It should remain level and not move up and down or from side to side. There is a similar reference point when the dog is going away, but it is not as pleasant to look at. Any vertical or lateral movement when the Puli is coming or going indicates that the dog is not balanced and you need to be particularly thorough in your hands-on exam to determine what is causing the excess movement. Also, be wary of excess motion of the cords along the "hemline." If the Puli is making the cords fly out behind him or if the coat seems to be churning, something is wrong under the coat. Excess motion of the cords in the rear usually is caused by a dog kicking out behind himself rather than moving smoothly and efficiently. This generally happens when the Puli is not balanced and has more angulation in the rear than he does in the front.

Whether standing or moving, the Puli should bring to mind words like agile, athletic, energetic, busy and inquisitive. The Puli is watchful of his surroundings and devoted to his person. Don't expect him to wait for you, but consider yourself honored if he does. Most of all have fun judging this bundle of energy charging around your ring with cords flying.