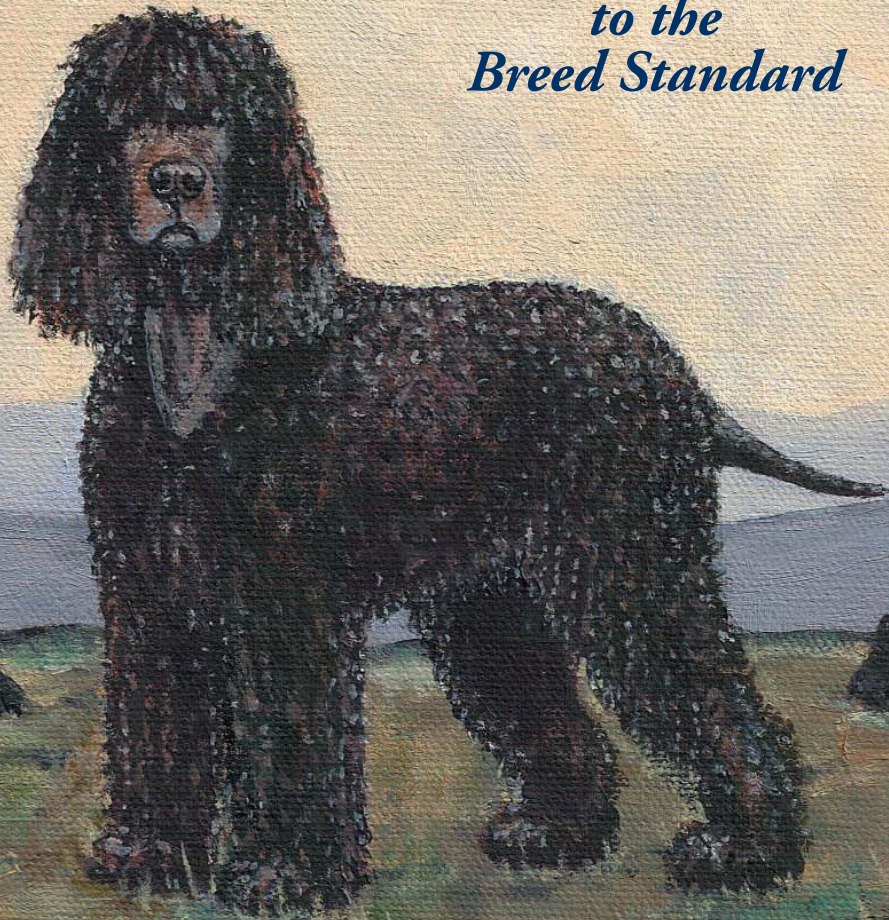


# *The* Irish Water Spaniel

*An Illustrated Guide  
to the  
Breed Standard*



Courtesy of the Irish Water Spaniel Club of America

Sayer  
2011

## **Irish Water Spaniel Club of America** **An Illustrated Guide to the Breed Standard**

No part of this work may be reproduced in any form without written permission of the Secretary of the Irish Water Spaniel Club of America.

Publication & Illustrations Copyright 2012 by the Irish Water Spaniel Club of America  
Irish Water Spaniel Breed Standard approved by the American Kennel Club on July 14, 2009  
Illustrations by Dan Sayers

All rights reserved.



# Introduction



The Irish Water Spaniel Club of America is pleased to present “*The Irish Water Spaniel, An Illustrated Guide to the Breed Standard.*” This publication is intended as an educational supplement for breeders, exhibitors and fanciers of the breed, although it is mainly a guide for conformation judges. In recognition of the need to provide a more thorough discussion of this remarkable breed, the IWSCA has endeavored to gather together illustrations and breed-specific information in an effort to bring the words of the breed standard to life.

For clarity, the official standard is presented in **bold** type and the accompanying commentary is indicated in *italics*.

# Acknowledgements

Understanding correct breed type for a numerically small breed such as the Irish Water Spaniel can be challenging. Opportunities to evaluate significant show entries are generally limited to those of the specialties and club-supported shows. It is therefore necessary to provide supplemental educational material to those individuals interested in furthering their study of this distinctive Sporting breed. This guide's function is to convey an "ideal" and is intended to translate the breed standard through word and picture.

Despite the existence of many differing styles and personal preferences, it should be remembered that this is a moderate bird dog, utilized in both water and the uplands, that is distinguished chiefly by the qualities of its water-resistant coat. Each of the breed's distinguishing characteristics pertains to the coat. Color, texture and pattern of the coat all help to define proper breed type.

For the purposes of this guide, all commentary pertains to the mature dog or bitch, unless otherwise indicated.

# Contents



The Breed in Ireland	4
The Breed in America	5
General Appearance	6-7
Proportion & Substance	8
Size	9
Head	10-11
Neck, Back, Topline	12
Body	13
Forequarters	14-15
Standard At A Glance	16-17
Hindquarters	18-19
Feet	20
Tail	21
Coat	22-24
Color	25
Gait	26-27
Temperament	28-29
Faults	30-31
Notes	32

# The Breed in Ireland

Irish laws enacted in the year A.D. 17 give specific mention of Irish spaniels. This is the first traceable record of the word “spaniel,” that family of dogs later divided into land and water varieties. It is often repeated that in Ireland, two distinct types of water spaniels existed: a liver and white dog in the north; and a larger, solid liver dog in the south. In reality, perhaps two dozen varieties came into existence, each shaped by the whims of breeders who, resorting to crosses, produced variations to suit their own preferences. St. John’s Newfoundlands, Retrievers, and various Setters and Spaniels were routinely crossed with Water Spaniels. In Dublin, a sportsman and breeder by the name Justin McCarthy

succeeded in preserving (or manufacturing) a single variety with more marked characteristics than any Sporting breed known before or since. It is through his efforts alone that the breed we know today was perfected. He kept no record of his dogs’ pedigree prior to the birth of his much-celebrated “Boatswain” in 1834. By his contemporaries, he was assumed to have taken the large water spaniel and, through wise selection, succeeded in fixing the type we know today.

The IWS was quickly received by both Irish and English sportsmen for its bold and daring retrieves, its extreme hardiness in the cold North Sea waters, and its superb disposition to please.



# The Breed in America

By the 1870's, the reputation of the breed became known throughout the English-speaking world, and a number were exported during this period. The breed appeared in North America before the time of the Civil War and has played an important, if minor, role in shaping the prosperity of "The Gilded Age." By 1884, industrial growth in the east had created vast fortunes for the robber barons of oil and steel, and great wealth was created in the west as the demand for resources such as silver and lumber spurred the development of the railroads. Trains moved commodities back and forth between cities with growing immigrant populations, and market hunters helped to feed the nation by providing many of the game animals that had become staples of the American diet. For duck and goose hunters, the water dog was an indispensable partner, and the two breeds available to them were the Chesapeake Dog (Chesapeake Bay Retriever) and the Irish Water Spaniel.

IWSs were occasionally bred in large numbers on this side of the Atlantic. By the end of the First World War, they had become the most popular of the retrieving breeds. Many people enjoyed hunting with the breed, and its heyday as an all-around gun

dog came during the years between the wars. In 1937, today's parent club was organized during a time when various British retrieving breeds started to garner favor with American hunters. As Labradors and Golden Retrievers won the hearts of many, IWSs maintained their numbers in a few isolated areas. Hunters and their families in the Upper Midwest, the Pacific Northwest, and the Eastern Seaboard remained loyal to the many fine qualities of the Irish import, competing with the breed in field and obedience trials. Today, advocates for the breed are among the most devoted in the fancy. Committed to both breed health and versatility, IWSs regularly compete in conformation, obedience, rally, agility, tracking and field events. Bench champions are often represented among the breed's contenders at field trials, the Master National Hunt Test, and in competition for the MACH and OTCH. This useful versatility is the very essence of the breed, and the IWSCA recognizes and reveres its All-Rounders; those IWSs titled in field, obedience and breed competition. A CHIC participating parent club, the IWSCA is also committed to conducting and supporting the surveys, research and health testing necessary to preserving this unique breed.

# General Appearance

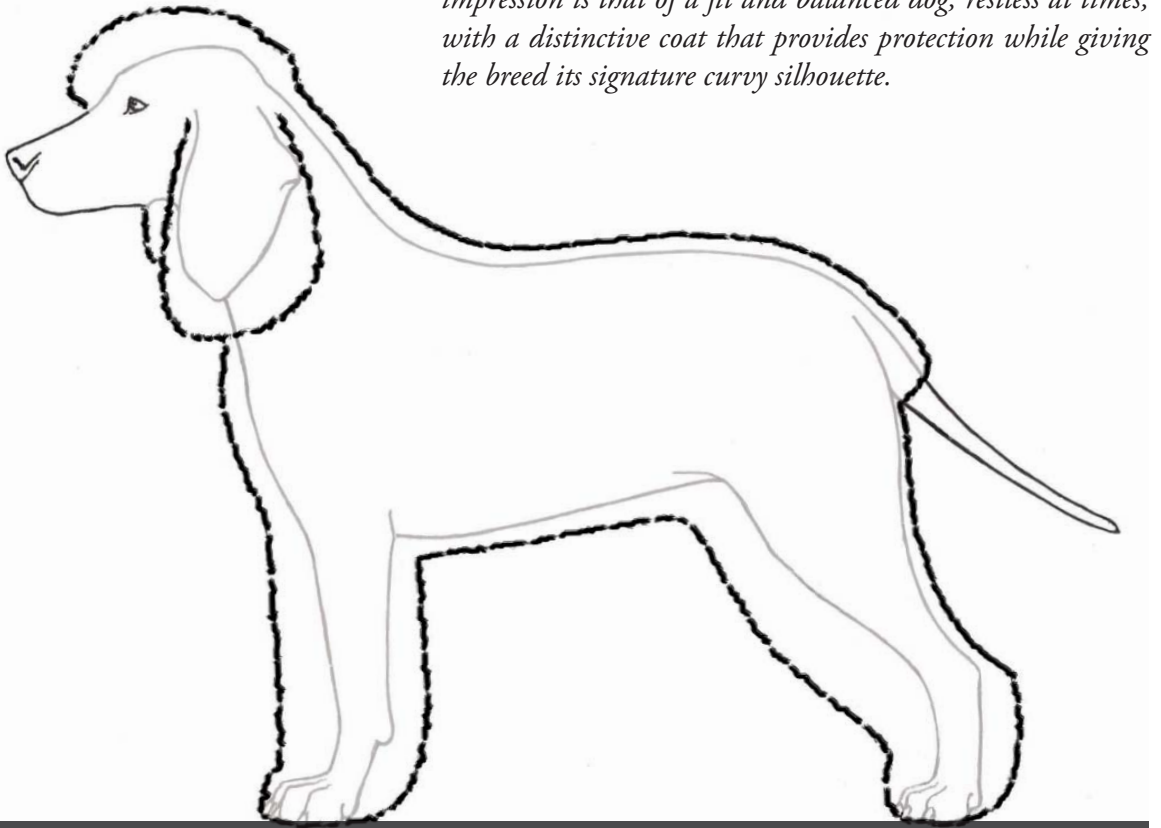
**GENERAL APPEARANCE:** “That of a smart, upstanding, strongly built moderate gundog bred for all types of shooting, especially for water-fowling. Great intelligence is combined with rugged endurance and a bold, dashing eagerness of temperament. Distinguishing characteristics are a topknot of long, loose curls and a body covered with a dense, crisply curled liver colored coat contrasted by a smooth face and a smooth “rat” tail.”





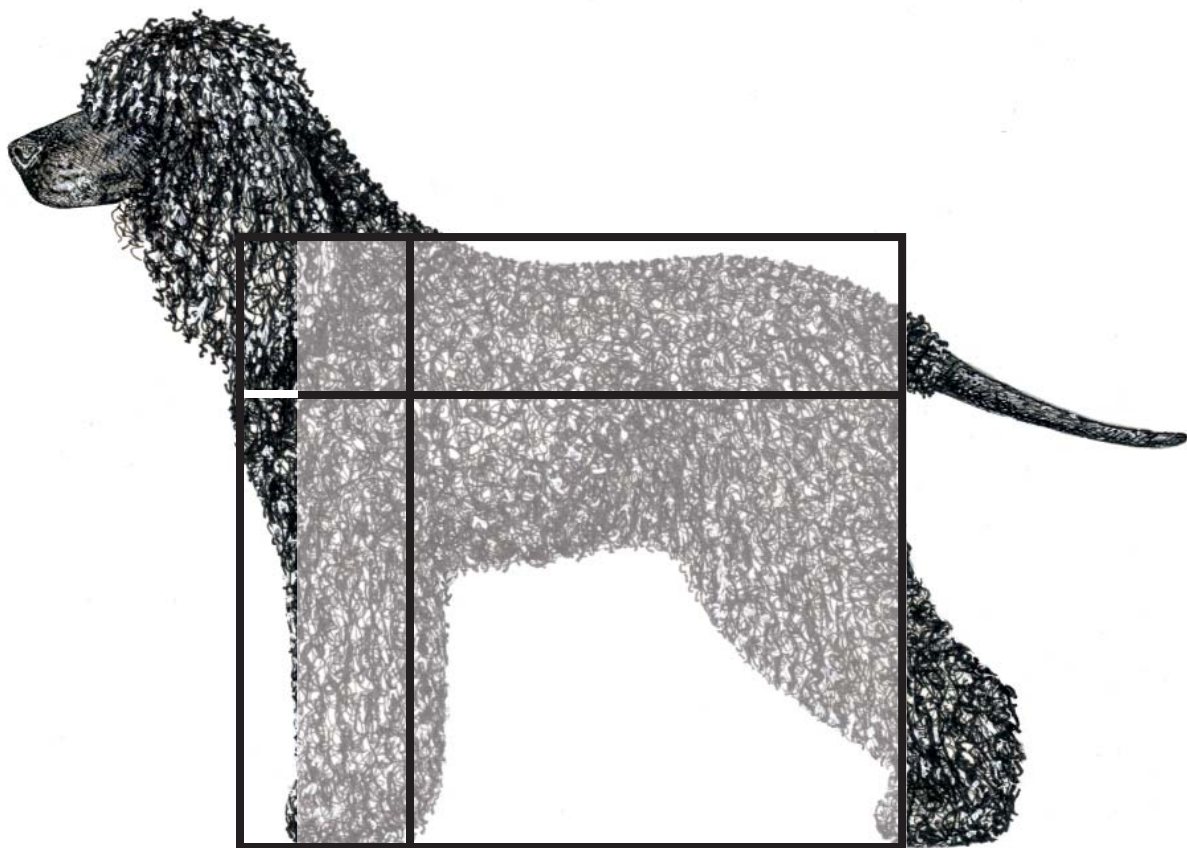
# General Appearance

*The IWS's most valued characteristics can be classified into three distinct categories: intelligence; strength; and coat. Moderate in every other way, the breed is exceptionally suited as a waterfowl retriever by virtue of its remarkable character, enduring strength, and peculiarity of coat. The overall impression is that of a fit and balanced dog, restless at times, with a distinctive coat that provides protection while giving the breed its signature curvy silhouette.*



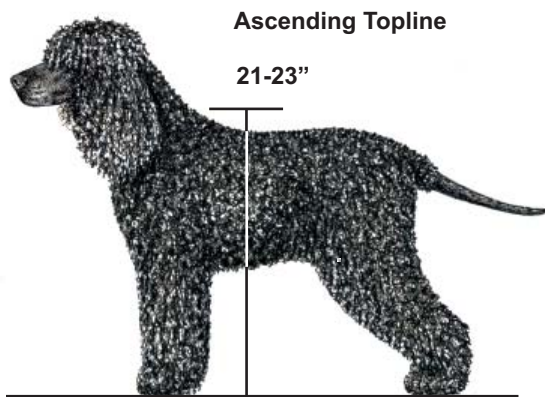
# Proportion & Substance

**PROPORTION & SUBSTANCE:** “Strongly built and well-boned, the Irish Water Spaniel is of medium length making it slightly rectangular in appearance. A well-balanced dog that should not appear leggy or coarse.”



**Medium Length - Slightly Rectangular**

# Size



**Bitch**

**45-58 lbs.**

**Height:** (Measured at the highest point of withers)

**Dogs** 22 to 24 inches

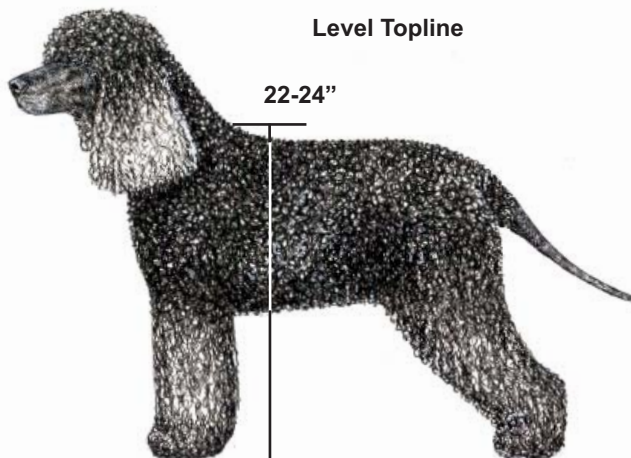
**Bitches** 21 to 23 inches

**Weight:**

**Dogs** 55 - 68 pounds

**Bitches** 45 - 58 pounds

*The IWS is somewhat longer from point of shoulder to point of buttocks than from withers to ground. Squareness creates legginess, whereas excessive length of loin compromises strength. Both extremes destroy balance. Each part should flow harmoniously in a series of gentle curves. Soundness of construction is imparted by ample bone and powerful muscling, no matter the dog's size. Permissible height varies by four inches and acceptable weight by as much as twenty-three pounds. A clearly superior specimen falling slightly outside these ranges should not be penalized for its size. There is no size disqualification in the breed.*



**Dog**

**55-68 lbs.**

# Head

**HEAD:** “The head is cleanly chiseled. The skull is large and high in dome with a prominent occiput and a gradual stop. The muzzle is long, deep and somewhat square in appearance with a strong underjaw. Lips are fine in texture, tight and dry. The nose is large and dark liver in color. The teeth are even with a scissor or level bite. Hair on the face is short and smooth except for a beard of long, loose curls growing at the back of the lower jaw which may continue up the side of the face as sideburns.”



**TOPKNOT:** “A characteristic of the breed, the topknot consists of long, loose curls covering the skull and falling down over the top of the ears and occiput. The contrast between the smooth face and the topknot is evident in a well-defined peak between the eyes. The topknot, a breed characteristic, should not be trimmed in an exaggerated or excessive manner.”

**EYES:** “Set almost flush, the eyes are comparatively small and almond shaped with tight eyelids. The color is a warm tone of medium to dark brown, dark amber but never yellow. The expression is keenly alert, intelligent, direct and quizzical.”

**EARS:** “Long, lobular, set low, hanging close to the head and abundantly covered with long loose curls of hair.”

*Although not widely considered a “head” breed, the standard places greater emphasis only on the coat.*

*As a Spaniel utilized to retrieve, proper IWS head type must be distinguished from both the Retriever and Spaniel breeds. The relationship of skull, muzzle and lower jaw create a functional head shape that performs like the former while honoring the heritage of the latter. A high dome indicates good brain capacity (trainability), a gradual stop improves peripheral vision (marking ability), a prominent occiput allows for stability of the jaw (retrieving), and clean chiseling indicates jaw muscles that are not overly developed, ensuring a “soft” mouth. Additionally, a muzzle that is long, coupled with a strong underjaw and teeth that meet evenly, provides a secure hold on wounded game.*

*Each aspect of the head’s construction works in tandem with the others for the purpose of retrieving waterfowl. A large nose gathers scent efficiently, and the smooth coat of the face dries quickly and does not accumulate feathers. The long coat of the topknot helps to protect the eyes while in the field and is a breed hallmark. With its “widow’s peak” beginning at a distinct point between the eyes, the topknot should never be trimmed excessively or shaped in an artificial manner.*

*The eyes of the IWS, through their size, shape, placement and color, best express the breed’s intelligent and eager character. Tight eyelids limit their size and shape, and an oblique (angled) placement helps to create an inquisitive look. Correct color connotes an amiability and is to be treasured. Eyes that are too large or round, yellow in color, or those with loose haws are undesirable. The correct expression is very keen, never, dull, startled or overly soft.*

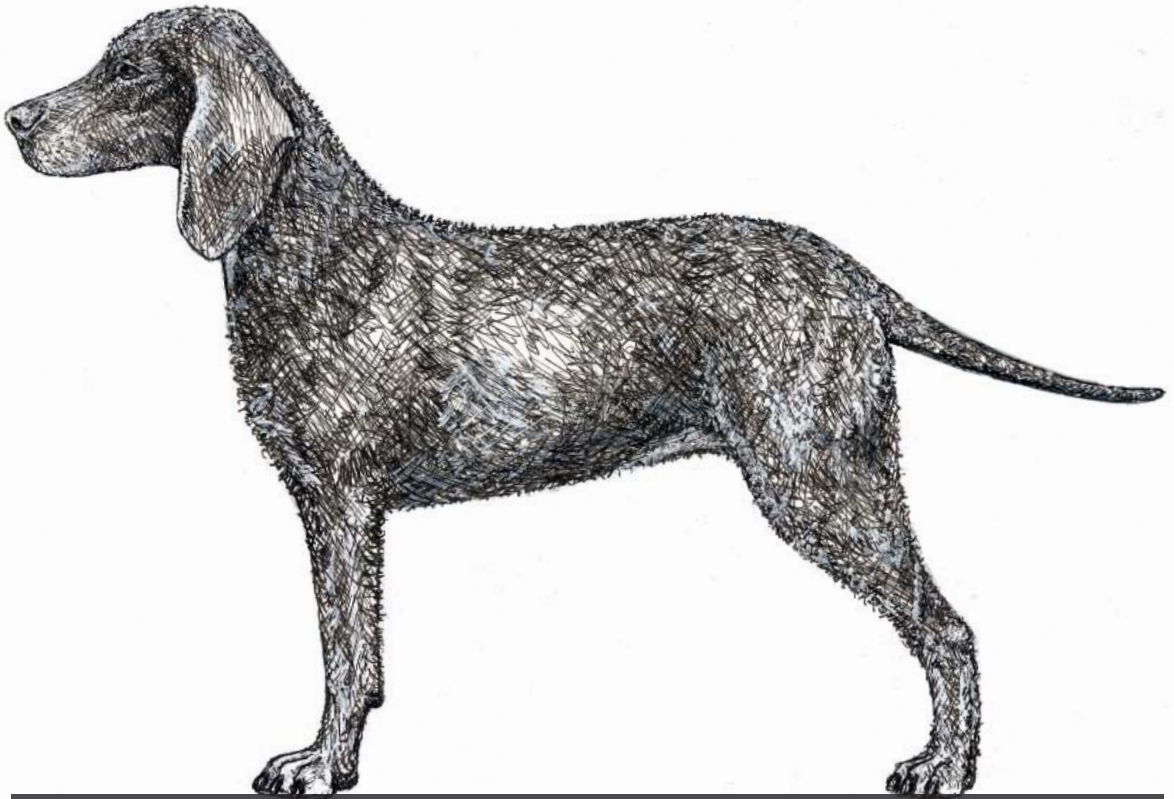
*The ears of the IWS betray its Spaniel heritage. Their length, set and furnishings set the breed apart from the Retrievers. When pulled forward, the leather should reach to the nose.*

# Neck, Back, Topline

**NECK:** “The neck is long, arching, strong and muscular and is smoothly set into cleanly sloping shoulders.”

**BACK:** “Strong, broad and level.”

**TOPLINE:** “The rear is equal to or slightly higher than the front never descending or showing sag or roach.”

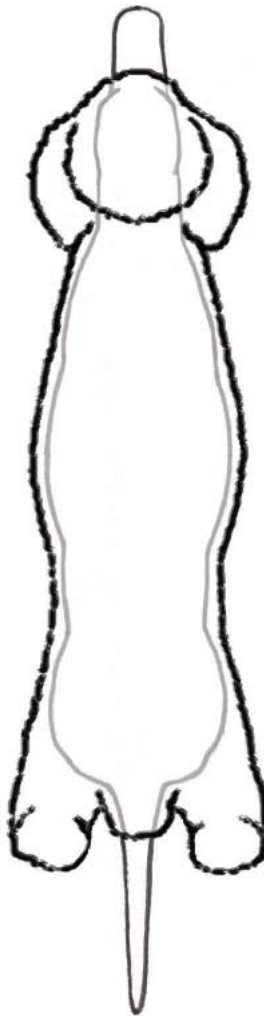


# Body

**BODY:** “Medium length. The ribs are carried well back and so well sprung behind the shoulders as to give a barrel shape. The chest is deep with a brisket extending to the elbows. The loin is short, wide, muscular, and deep so it does not give a tucked-up appearance.”

*The body and neck are best appreciated “through” the coat with a hands-on examination. The neck should be fairly long, strong and arching, holding the head above the level of the back. It is smoothly set into the shoulders and should be carried at the optimum 10-10:30 position. Smooth hair appearing naturally below the throat should not mistakenly create a “ewe” neck.*

*The shoulders and back are very powerfully coupled to the hindquarters. The back must be long enough to prevent faulty locomotion. The shape of the rib cage ensures essential lung capacity. Loins are not long, but deep enough to fill-in the flank. The whole body should exude strength. There is substantial muscling under those curls!*



**Muzzle Long,  
Deep  
Somewhat Square  
Skull Large**

**Long, Arching  
Strong &  
Muscular  
Neck**

**Moderately  
Laid Back  
Shoulders**

**Barrel-Shaped  
Ribcage**

**Loins Short  
Wide Muscular  
Deep**

**Hips Wide**

**Tail Thick at Root**

**Tapering to a  
Fine Point**

# Forequarters

**FOREQUARTERS:** “The entire front gives the impression of strength without heaviness. The forechest should be moderate. Shoulders are sloping and moderately laid back, clean and powerful. The upper arms are approximately the length of the shoulder blades with clean elbows set close to the body. Forelegs are well boned, muscular and straight, set well under the withers.”



*The shoulders are cleanly sloping, with moderate layback producing equally moderate angulation. Forelegs are set under the withers.*

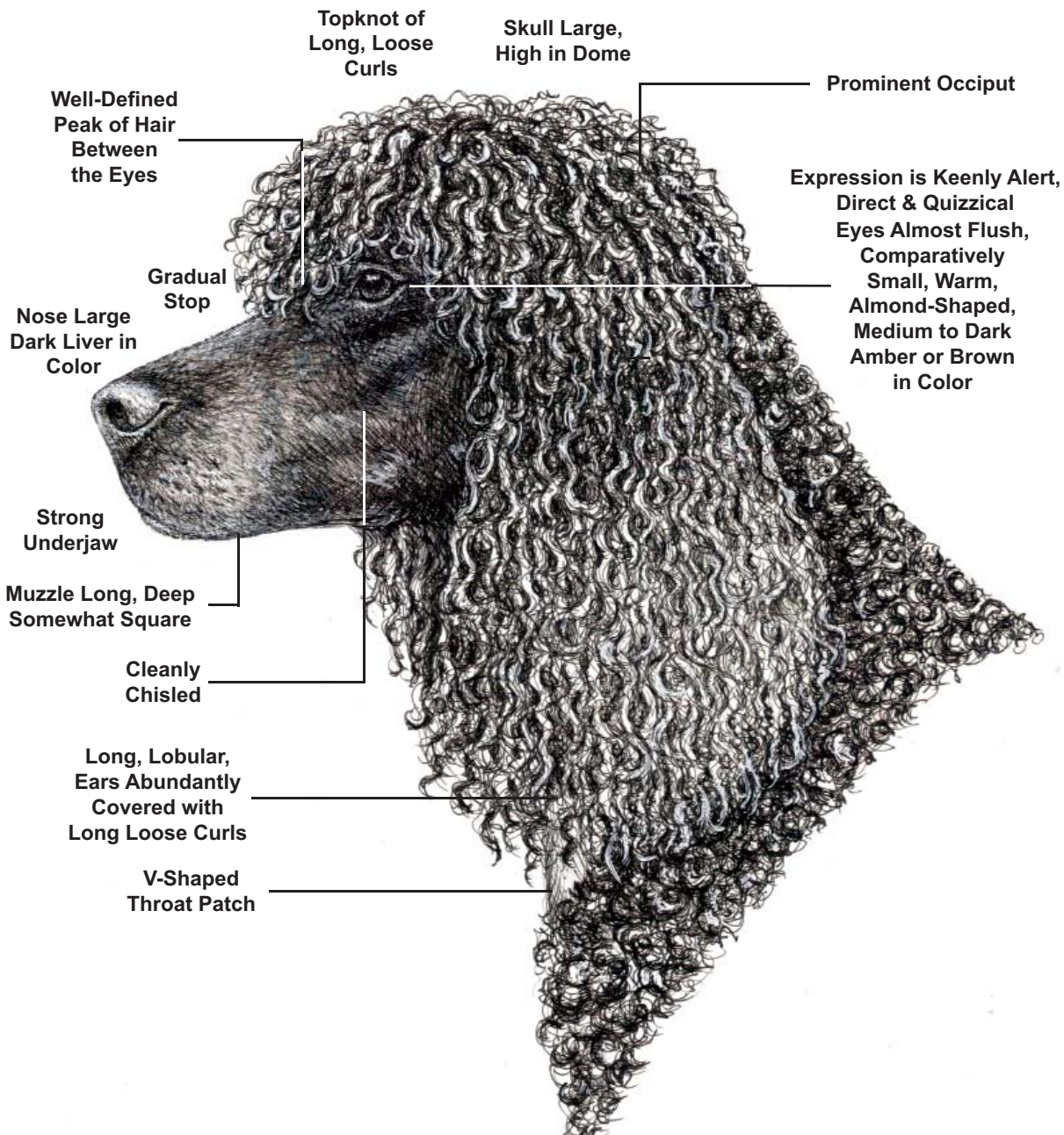
*The brisket should be deep with adequate fill. Elbows should be at the brisket. Leg length should be about equal to the depth of body (brisket.) “Pigeon breast” (narrow chest, protruding breastbone) or lack of prosternum are not desired. The ribcage should be large in girth, with ribs well-sprung behind the shoulders, not too wide or round between the fore-legs. Legs are strong in bone and muscle, and straight, with good length of upper arm.*



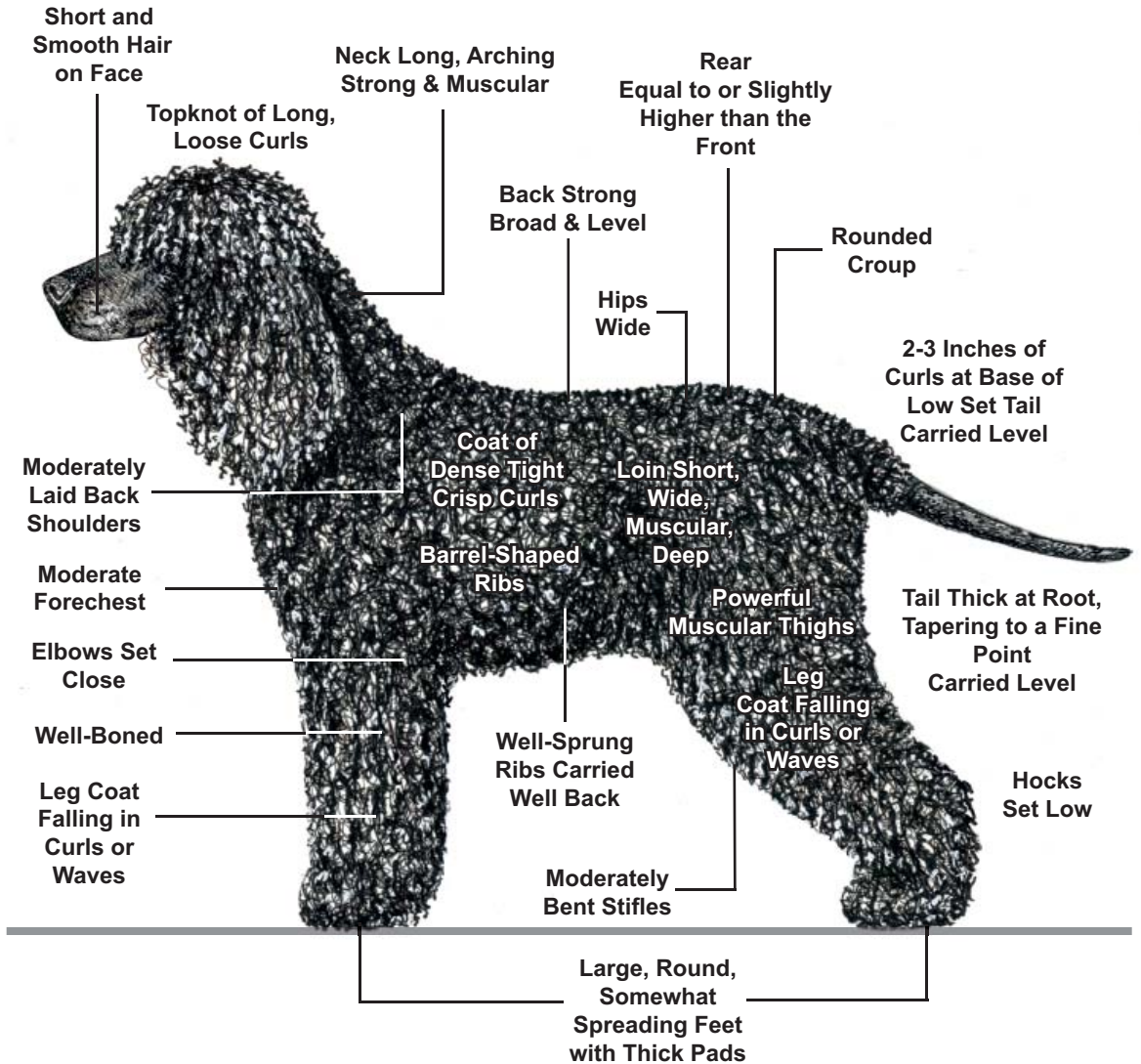
# Forequarters



# Standard At-A-Glance



# Standard At-A-Glance



# Hindquarters

**HINDQUARTERS:** “Sound hindquarters are of great importance to provide drive and power while swimming. They are as high as or slightly higher than the shoulders with powerful, muscular, well-developed thighs. The hips are wide. The croup is rounded and full with the tail set on low enough to give a rounded appearance. The stifles are moderately bent. Hocks are set low and moderately bent. Balance of front and rear angulation is important.”



*The hindquarters of the IWS are very strong as demonstrated by their jumping ability. Hips are not so steep as to restrict rear extension. Dogs that have spent a great deal of time swimming will demonstrate especially well-developed second thigh muscles. Stifles are moderately bent, never straight. The angle of the hock is moderate as well, with rear pasterns perpendicular to the ground. Low set hocks (short rear pasterns relative to the length of the second thighs) provide efficient drive needed for endurance. Care must be given in assessing balanced front and rear angulation, as well as determining if the appearance of angulation is merely the product of clever grooming. Over angulation in the rear is faulty. Any loss of balance with the front devours energy and, over time, affects both endurance and working ability.*

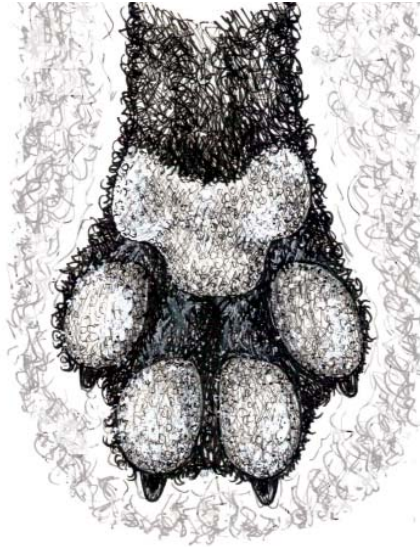
# Hindquarters



# Feet

**FEET:** “Large, round, somewhat spreading. Well clothed with hair. Pads are thick.”

*The feet should be of good size and somewhat spreading, but by no means splay-footed or weak of knuckles. Aided by webbing between the toes that is more pronounced than in most breeds, the IWS is able to propel itself through rough waters while taking to peat bogs, mud flats, and tidal marshes with ease.*



# Tail

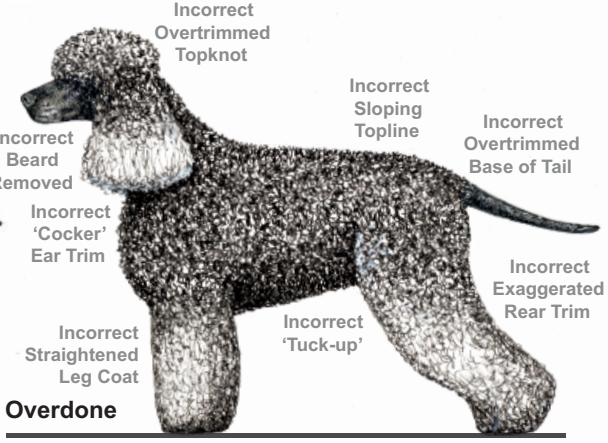
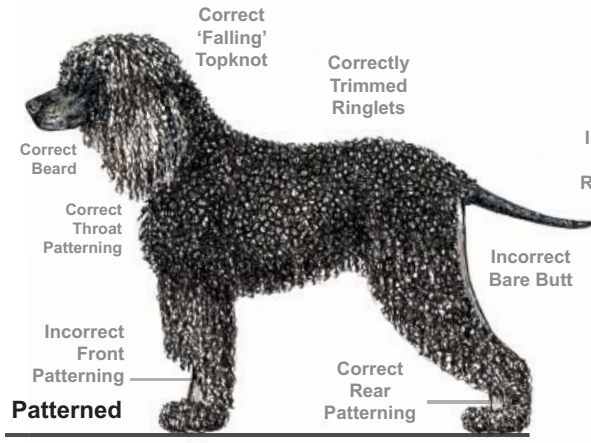
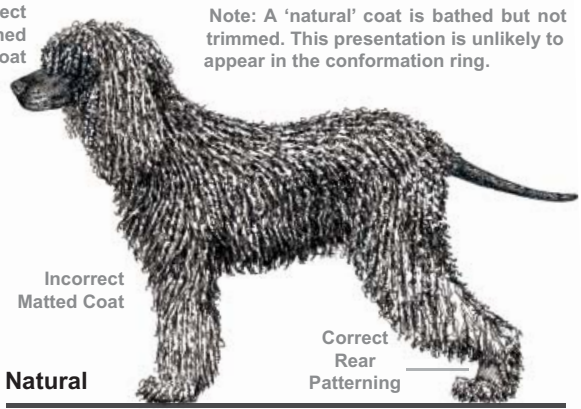
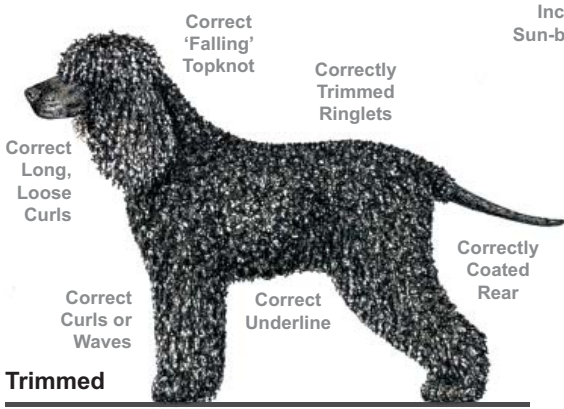
**TAIL:** “The “Rat Tail” is a striking characteristic of the breed and is strong, low set and carried level with the back and is not quite long enough to reach the point of the hock. The tail is thick at the root where it is covered for two to three inches with short curls which stop abruptly. From that point the tail is covered with smooth hair and the tail tapers to a fine point.”



*The tail is unlike that of any similar breed of dog and gives the IWS one of its nicknames, “Rat Tail.” It is very nearly straight when the dog is at rest and on the move, however a very gentle curve is permissible. A high tail set or a high tail carriage is not desirable. The smooth coat on the tail should occur naturally and require no clipping.*

# Coat

**COAT:** "Proper coat is of vital importance to protect the dog while working. The coat on the face is short and smooth framed by the distinctive topknot and ears of long, loose curls. The coat on the throat is smooth forming a V-shaped patch from the back of the lower jaw behind the beard to the breastbone. The remainder of the neck, body and base of the tail are covered with dense, tight, crisp curls. The remainder of the coat on the tail is short and smooth coated. Forelegs are covered down to the feet with curls or waves all around. The hind legs are also abundantly covered with curls or waves except that the hair is short and smooth on the front of the legs below the hocks. Feet are well clothed with hair. Dogs may be shown in natural coat or trimmed. However, no dog should be groomed or trimmed so excessively as to obscure the curl or texture of the coat."





**COLOR:** Rich liver to dark liver with a purplish tinge, sometimes called puce liver. No white hair or markings except for the graying of age.



*The IWS sports a “patterned” coat that is smooth on the face, the front of the neck below the throat, over most of the tail, and at the front of the rear pasterns below the hock. Excessive patterning can also appear on the sides of the neck, over the shoulders, beyond the eyebrows, on the backs of the rear legs or the front of the forelegs above the feet, and on the abdomen. Inadequate patterning is expressed by curled hairs on the muzzle, front of the neck below the throat, or on most of the tail.*



*The breed is somewhat double-coated, in that it possesses a hard, water-shedding outer coat, and a softer, insulating secondary coat. The degree to which both coat types are present is largely affected by the seasons, and both curl together to form individual “ringlets” that are quite dense and grow to varying lengths. Curls should appear tight to the eye and feel crisp or springy to the touch. Woolly coats or those with “open” curls are not desired.*

# Coat

*Every distinguishing characteristic of the Irish Water Spaniel pertains to the breed's coat. Fundamentally, there are three aspects to the breed's coat: texture, pattern and color. Perhaps the most important of these is texture, which in this breed refers to two distinctly different types of hair. The first type is a long curl known as a "ringlet" that covers the skull, ears, beard, neck, body, legs, feet and base of the tail. The curls of the topknot and on the ears may be "loose" and the leg coat may appear as "waves," but the neck, body and base of the tail are to be covered with "dense, tight, crisp curls." Here, density refers to the insulating quality of the hair, and should be so abundant as to make the skin impervious to water. The tightness means that each curl, comprised of perhaps hundreds of individual hairs, has a rather small diameter that traps air and provides further insulation while in the water. The crispness indicates a "springy" quality, and is present only when those curls possess both sufficient length and a natural oiliness. Crisp does not refer to the texture of the individual hair, which should be neither soft nor brittle.*

*The second type of coat texture is "short and smooth" and, together with the curls, forms the second aspect of the breed's coat: its unusual pattern. The face and throat, a small portion of the rear legs and the majority of the tail are normally smooth-coated. "Face" refers to the entire muzzle (including the lower jaw) up to and including the eyes, but not exactly between them where a long, curly widow's peak grows. "Throat" includes that area from the back of both sides of the mandible to the prosternum or, from "behind the beard to the breastbone," thus creating a "V-shaped patch." On the front of the hind legs, below the hocks, and on the tail beginning two or three inches from its origin the hair is short and smooth. Coat "patterning" occurs naturally and is ideally limited to the aforementioned areas, although extremes examples would include smooth hair on the neck, the shoulders, the front of the forelegs or the back of the hind legs. A complete lack of hair on the throat and tail is not uncommon, however, hindquarters that are bare inside and behind are undesirable, as is a curled coat on the face, throat or the entirety of the tail.*

**COLOR:** Rich liver to dark liver with a purplish tinge, sometimes called puce liver. No white hair or markings except for the graying of age.

*The last aspect of the breed's coat that deserves attention is its unique color, described as "puce" liver. The brown of this self-colored breed possesses a "purplish tinge" that is best observed at dawn or dusk. Young dogs and dogs that have not spent a great deal of time in the sun or in the water will especially appear to be in bloom. Only one color is acceptable and this is referred to as being "rich" to "dark." Variations do occur, even on the same dog, however white may appear only due to "the graying of age." White hairs interspersed throughout the curled coat of a young dog, commonly referred to as roaning or frosting, are faulty and occur most often at the base of the ears, at the elbows and of the rear legs above the hocks.*



**Acceptable Curl and Color**



**Ideal Curl and Color**

# Gait

**GAIT:** “Moves freely and soundly with balanced reach and drive. Should be true, precise and not slurring; may have a characteristic rolling motion accentuated by the barrel-shaped rib cage.”



# Gait

*The front and rear legs should align vertically and move within the same plane. Reach and drive must be balanced: hackneyed fronts and over-driven rears produce uneven gaits and/or descending toplines. Correctly angulated dogs will “show pads” while moving away. The gait is never “slurred,” with toes dragging. The smooth, effortless and ground-covering gait will hold the IWS in good stead all day in the field.*

*The IWS may exhibit a characteristic “roll,” best appreciated at a slow walk or a natural trot. This motion is accentuated by the curled coat and differs from that of any other similar breed.*



# Temperament

“Very alert, inquisitive and active. Stable in temperament with an endearing sense of humor. May be reserved with strangers but never aggressive or shy.”



*Celebrated as the “Clown of the Spaniel Family,” the breed’s “moptop” appearance likely figures heavily into this appellation. Because the breed’s antics often causes us fits of laughter, individuals quickly learn that what pleases us brings them rewards in the form of positive human interaction.*

*This is a **very** intelligent breed!*

# Temperament

*The IWSs “bold, dashing eagerness of temperament” is as unique as its athletically moderate body and curly coat. A history as a personal hunting dog and all-purpose companion has shaped their character. A natural bidability lends the IWS a degree of sensitivity and a loyal devotion to its people. The breed’s keen marking ability in the field is also expressed by taking notice of everything in the immediate surroundings. Although exuberantly demonstrative with those they know, the breed can be reserved with strangers. A well-socialized IWS of good temperament will not be as indiscriminately friendly as many other Sporting breeds, but will be attentive to its environment - alert, curious and with a characteristic happy demeanor while moving.*



# Faults

“The foregoing description is that of the ideal adult Irish Water Spaniel in hard working condition. Any deviation from the above-described dog must be considered to the extent of the deviation, keeping in mind the importance of various features toward the basic original purpose of the breed, which is that of a gundog used for work in all types of shooting and particularly suited to water fowling in difficult marshy terrain.”

## **General Appearance:**

*not upstanding (insufficient leg under an otherwise correct dog)*

## **Proportion & Substance:**

*tall and leggy*

*too square*

*too long*

*too coarse*

*weediness*

*lacking in proper rib spring*

*too fat*

*lacking substance*

*lack of angulation (front and rear),*

*overangulated rear*

*pinched elbows*

*tucked-up appearance*

## **Size:**

*under or oversized*

## **Head:**

*muzzle too short*

*too blocky*

*too wedge-shaped*

*broad backskull*

*loose flews*

*wet mouth*

*atypical expression, i.e. prominent stop*

*prominent brow*

*light eyes, round eyes, loose lids, etc.*

*high earset, short ears*

*flat skull, lack of prominent occiput*

## **Neck, Back, Topline:**

*descending topline*

*roached topline*

*arch over loin*

*steep croup, flat croup*



**Body:**

*slab-sided*

*shallow brisket*

*long loin, narrow loin, shallow loin*

**Forequarters:**

*not upstanding (insufficient leg under*

*otherwise correct dog)*

*small feet lacking thick pads*

**Hindquarters:**

*narrow, weak, straight or overangulated stifles*

*flat pelvic angles*

*underdeveloped upper and second thighs*

*cow hocks*

**Feet:**

*small feet*

*flat pads*

**Tails:**

*high set, low set, curved, curled, carried too*

*high, too long, lack of thickness or curls at root*

**Coat:**

*soft coat, open (not tight) curl*

*straightened coat*

*smooth rear, bare butt*

*smooth front legs*

*setter-like feathering, beanie topknot*

*no fall over occiput*

*Poodle or Cocker styling to hide faults*

*fluffy coat*

**Color:**

*pale brown*

*roaning or frosting*

**Gait:**

*lack of reach*

*inefficient drive*

**Temperament:**

*excessive shyness*

*aggression*