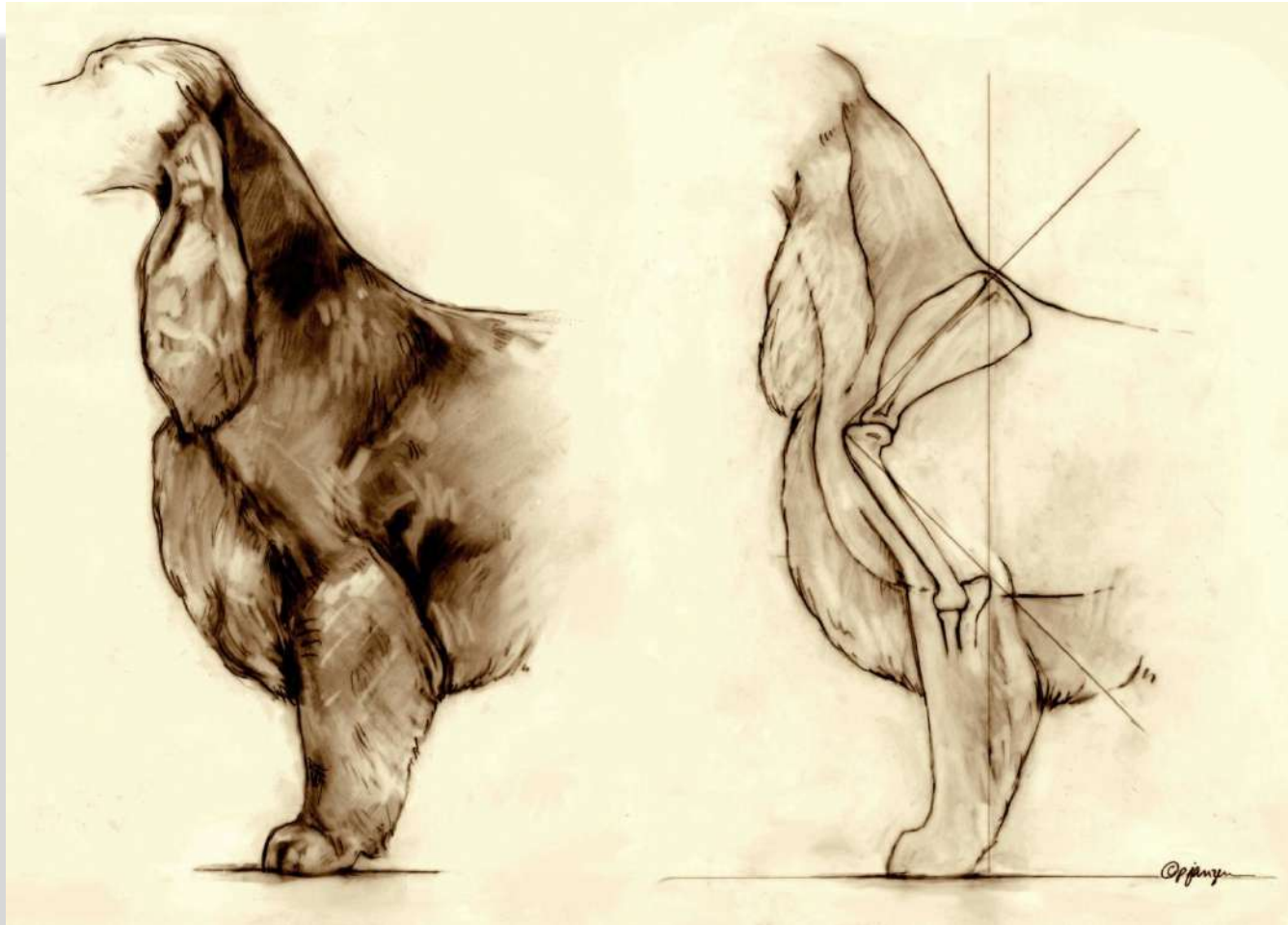




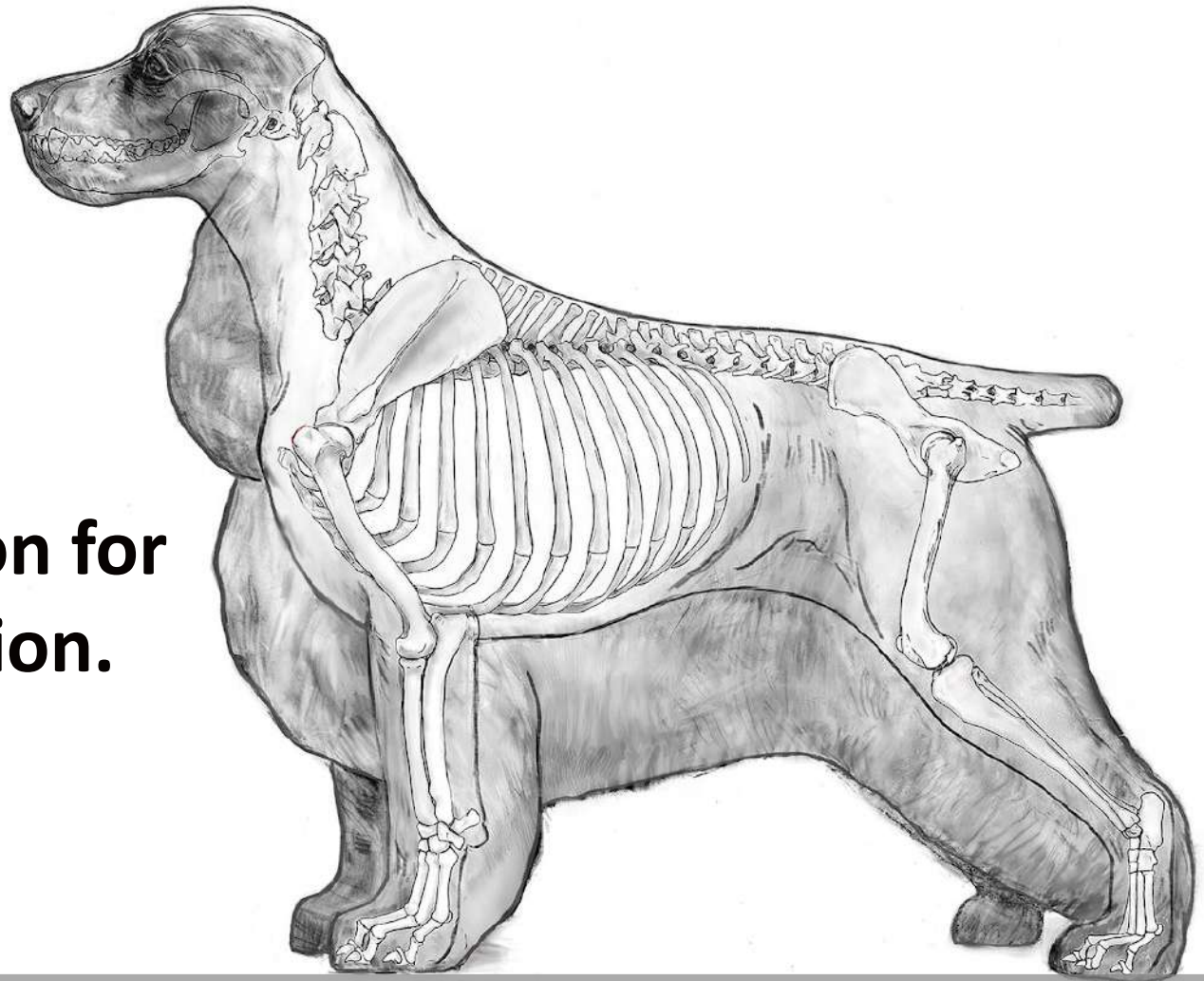
Unlocking the Mystery of English Cocker Spaniel Fronts



The English Cocker Spaniel Club of America's Breed Education Committee

We should be breeding for correct type & the overall whole dog; but without a basic understanding of correct structure (which is also part of correct type) we may end up with something pretty that isn't functional. While structure is basic dog knowledge, fronts are the most difficult to understand.

**This is the reason for
this presentation.**



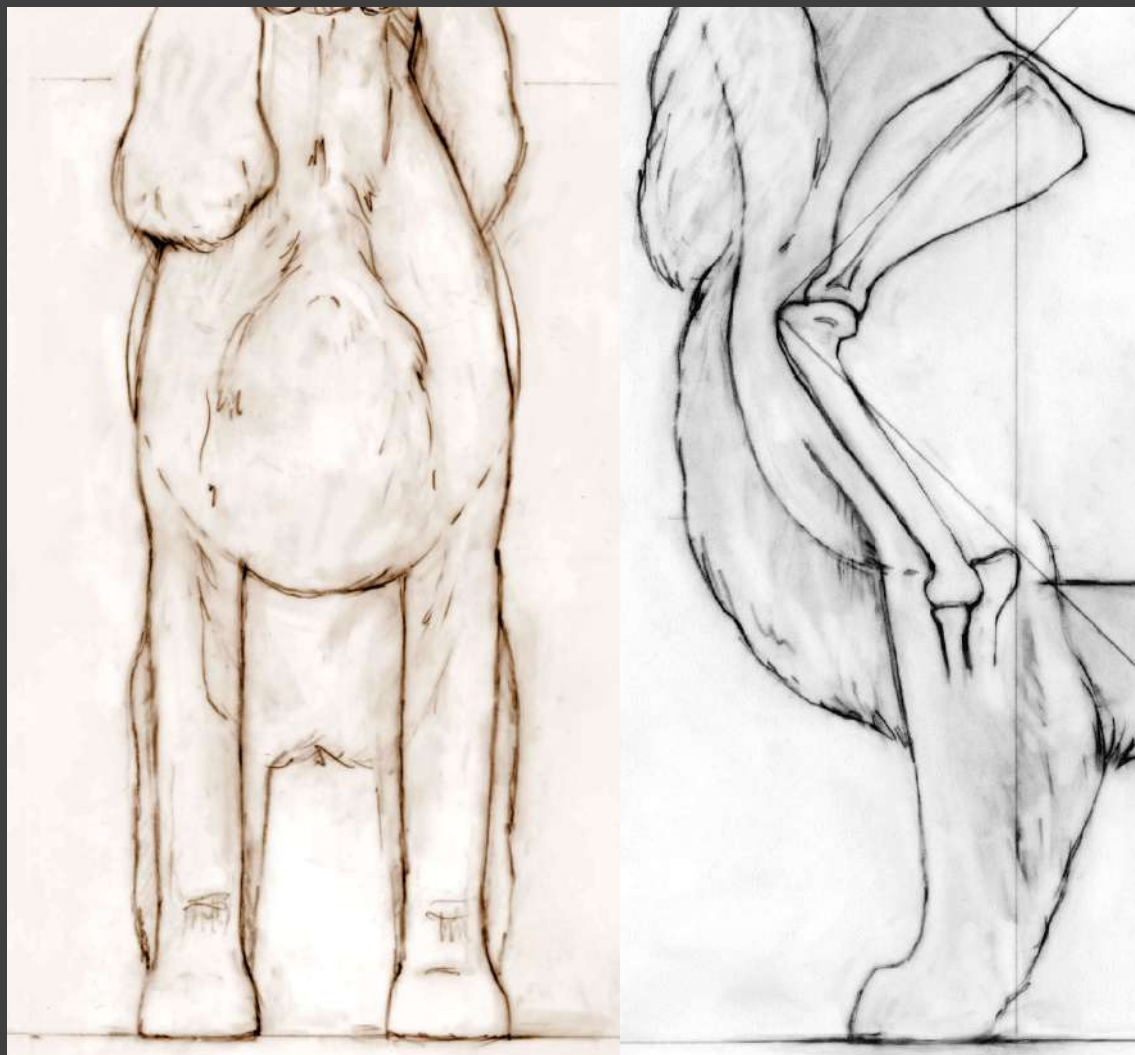
FRONT: THE FOREPART OF THE BODY AS VIEWED HEAD ON OR FROM THE SIDE,
TO INCLUDE FORELEGS, CHEST, BRISKET, AND SHOULDER LINE



**The front is possibly the most important part of the four-legged
mammal, including dogs.**

TO UNDERSTAND WHY THE FRONT IS SO IMPORTANT, WE NEED TO CONSIDER SOME IMPORTANT FACTS:

Like all parts of the skeletal system, it includes SCAFFOLDING upon which everything hangs. It provides LOCOMOTION. It is a HOUSING that protects the vital internal organs. Each of these is of extreme importance on our smallest of gun dogs, who have to be stronger for their size than any other gun dog.



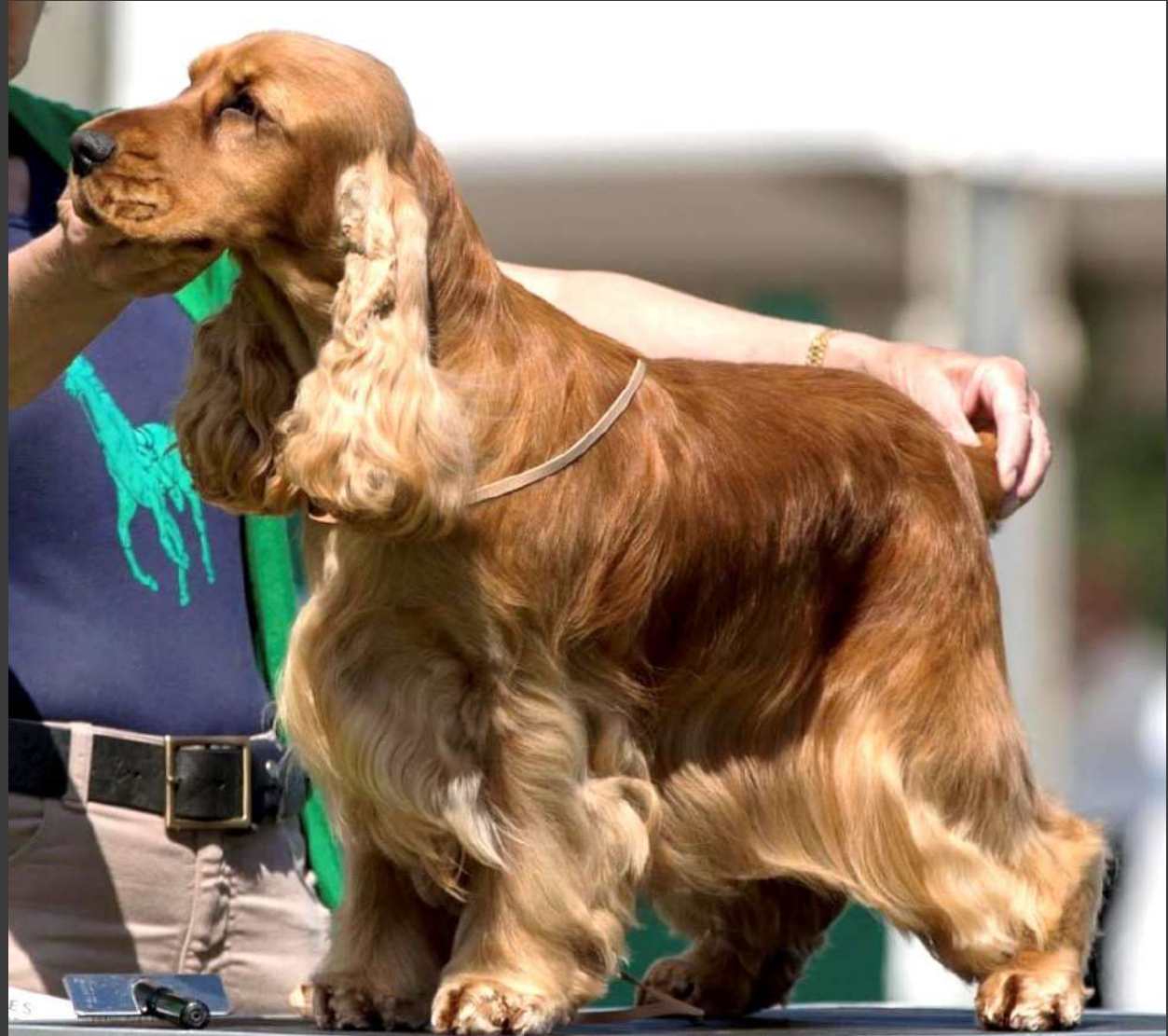
Why is front construction especially important?

The front bears more weight than the back half of the animal, (even more when the dog carries heavy game), therefore it must be correctly constructed to provide sufficient strength to function.

During movement, the momentum from rear propulsion will shift the dog's weight forward, increasing the percentage of weight carried by the front. Because the dog's front does carry more weight with each stride, it must be strong enough to catch the weight and also be well cushioned for impact.



The front also houses the heart and lungs of a hard working, athletic, hunting animal. It needs to have adequate space within the ribcage to accommodate well developed organs.



FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

On an English Cocker, a good front is not just a pretty coated, well feathered forehand with withers that are slightly higher than the rear, only ever viewed from the side.

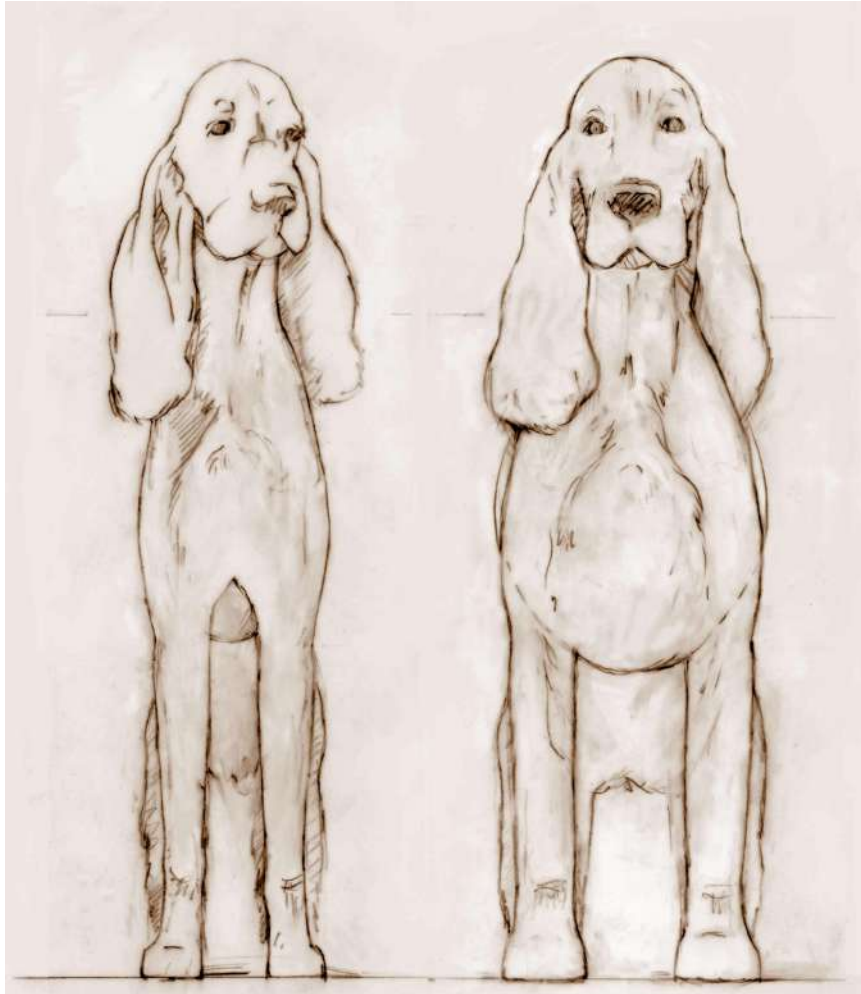
The cocker must push through heavy cover carrying game larger for its size than any other sporting dog. Historically it has been used for pheasant and other game birds, as well as hare.



The amount of dense and trappy terrain a dog needs to go through is in proportion to the amount of bone and muscle a breed needs. In human form, think of a weight lifter's build as opposed to a runner's build . This is why we say the cocker is rounded and contoured and is not made of angular planes with long, flat muscle type.



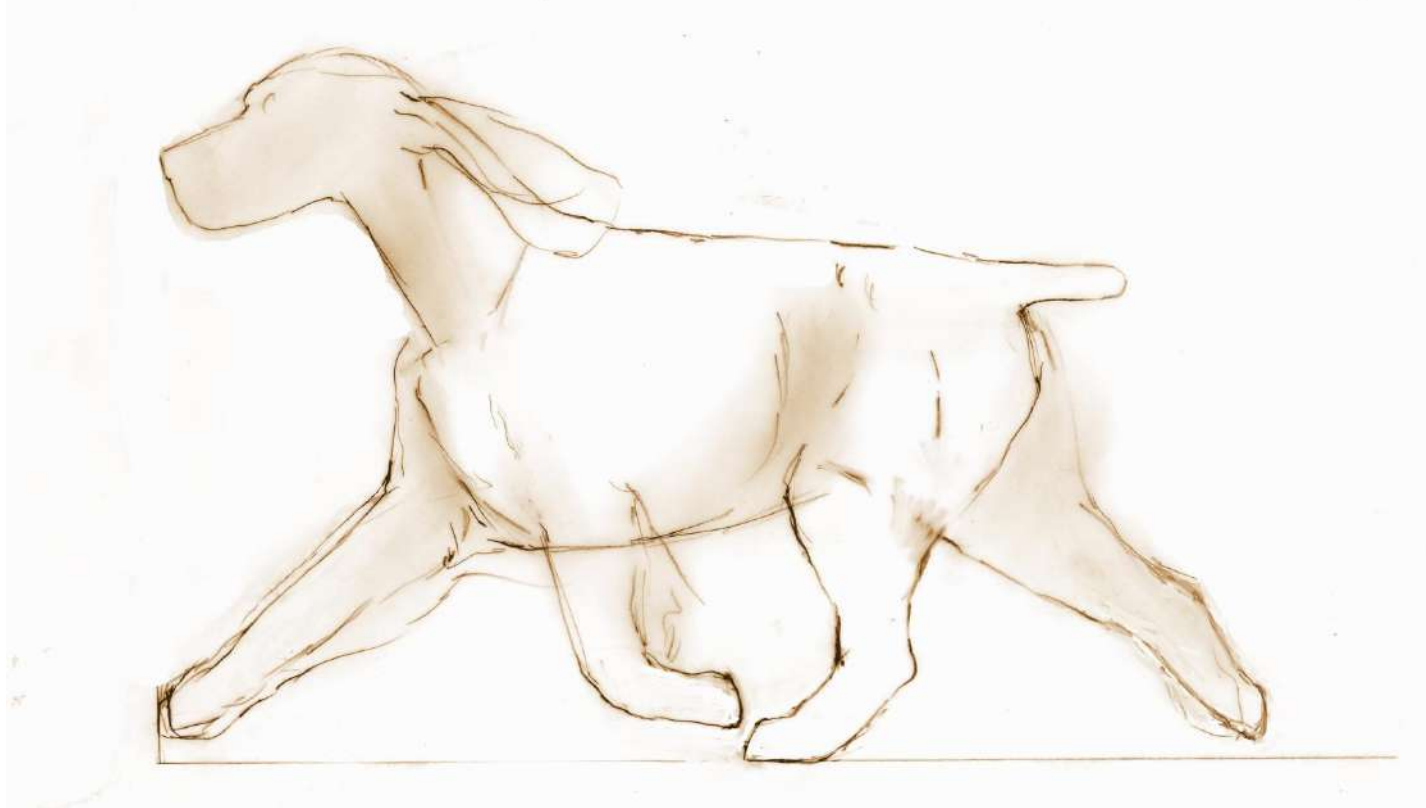
There is a reason our beautiful breed's front needs to be as the standard calls for.



The standard states: “The English Cocker is a solidly built dog with as much bone and substance as is possible without becoming cloddy or coarse.”

Bone needs to be significantly strong, in order to carry heavy muscle. The muscle is more typical of a weightlifter, capable of pushing through dense cover and carrying heavy game, as opposed to the type of muscling found on a gun dog that runs over large, open fields.

The standard states: “His gait is characterized more by drive and the appearance of power than by great speed. He covers ground effortlessly and with extension both in front and in rear, appropriate to his angulation.”



To carry the dog, his front needs to move efficiently. We want strength and endurance, not speed. The ideal, efficient stride allows the front foot to reach forward to a line dropped vertically underneath the nose, landing just behind the nose, in order to push off when it is underneath the dog. This allows the dog to take fewer, more efficient steps; therefore, he can work for longer periods of time.

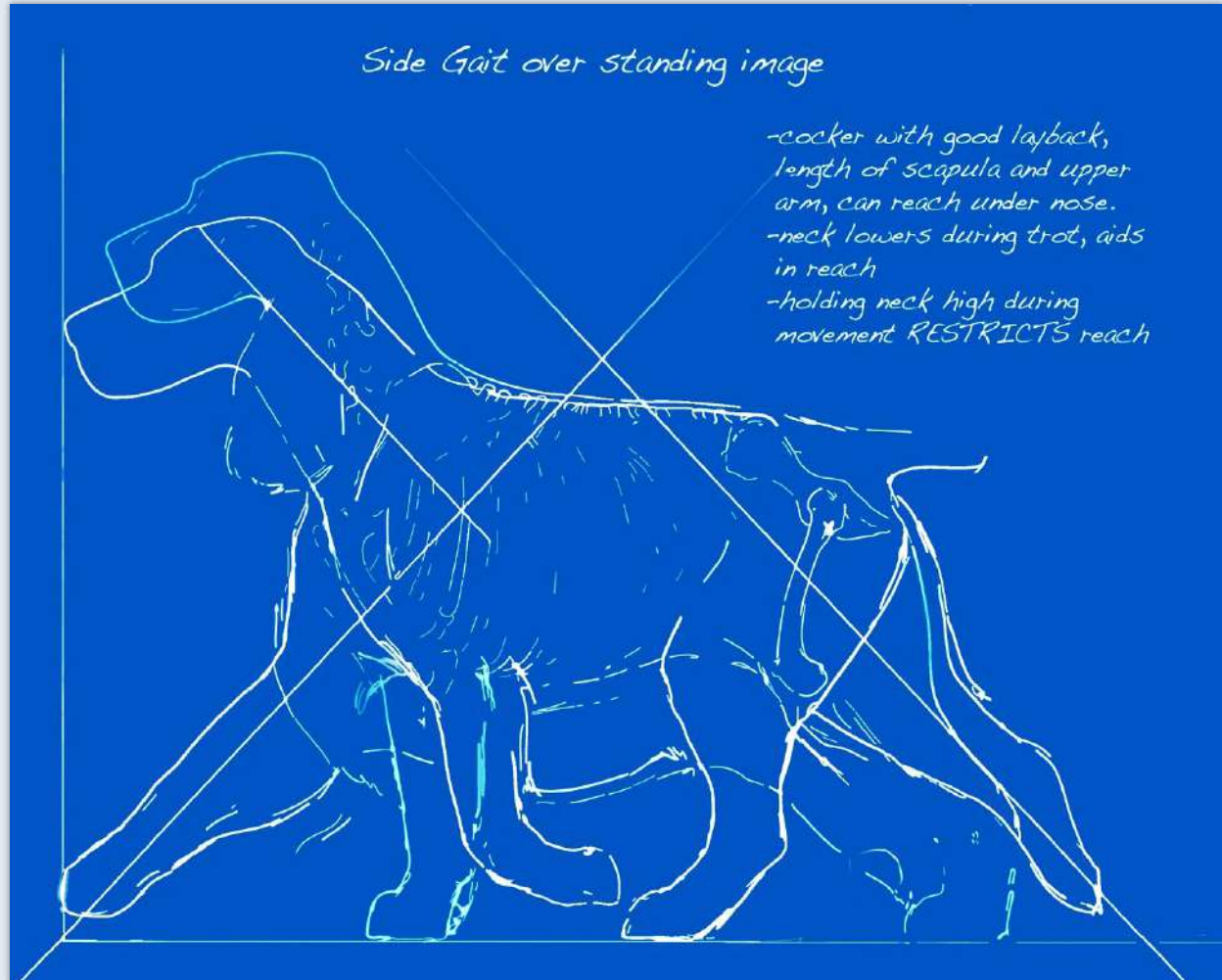
EXACTLY WHAT IS “EXTENSION APPROPRIATE TO HIS ANGULATION?”



The standard calls for a dog's withers to be well laid back and the upper arm to return, or lay back, the same distance and at the same degree as the scapula. The ideal angulation is for the front to form a 90-degree angle, with the highest point of the shoulder (withers) to be directly above the elbow, which is also directly above the back of the front foot when properly stationed. The reason for this is mechanical advantage: the front legs can reach forward in a projected line that follows the degree of layback of scapula. It is crucial that the upper arm be the same length as the shoulder blade. An upper arm of equal length coupled with length and layback of shoulder makes for optimal length of stride and propulsion.

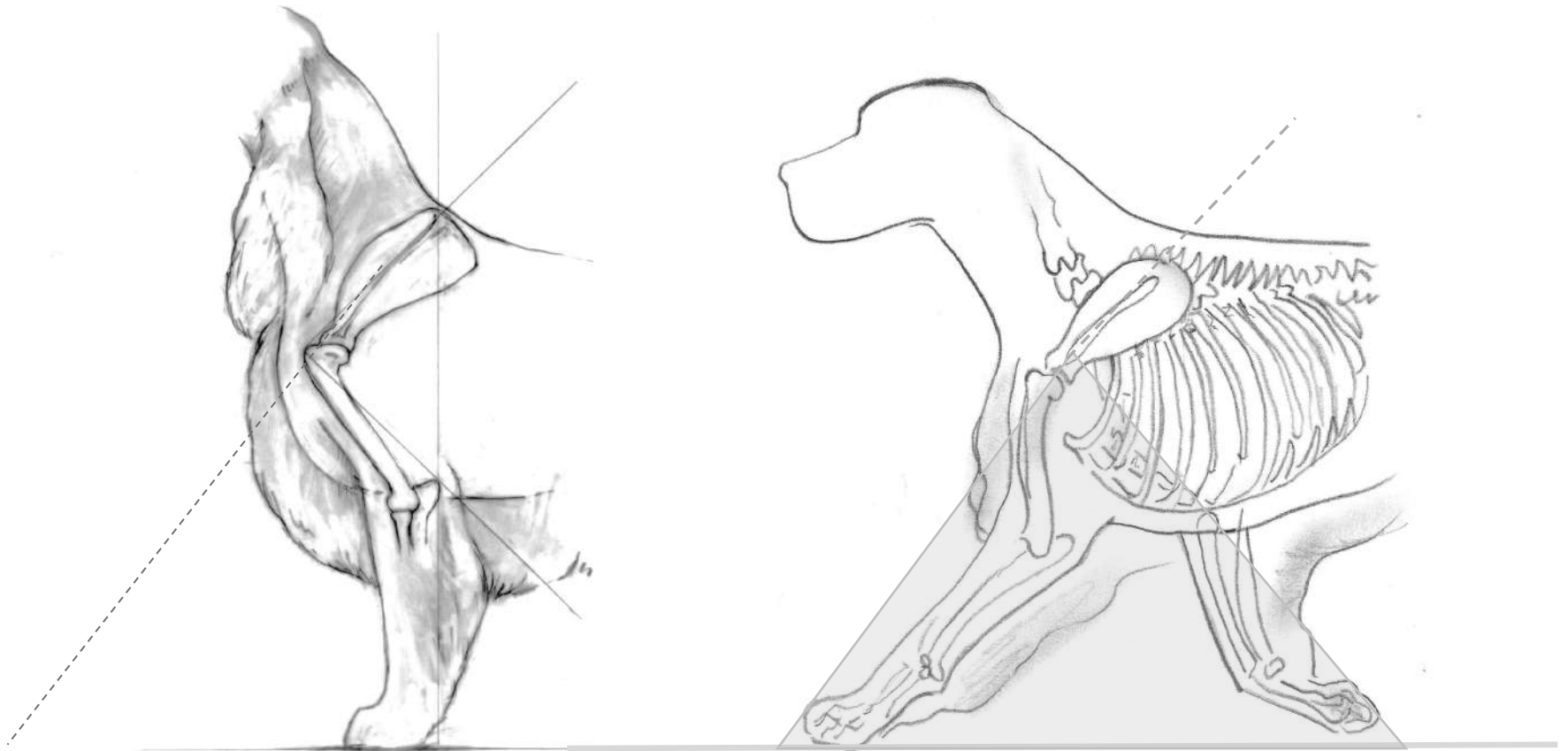
Here is our cocker's standing outline with an image of balanced movement over it. Note the 45-degree angled lines over the front and rear legs. This illustrates equal reach and drive. To allow freedom in front and correct front reach, the head also drops to about a 45-degree angle. In the show ring, when a cocker is "strung up" with the lead held vertical and taught, the head stays in a more upright position, which doesn't allow the cocker opportunity to show correct, sporting dog movement.

Also restrictive to correct reach in front, is a dog in the showring who is always looking down, searching for food on the floor.



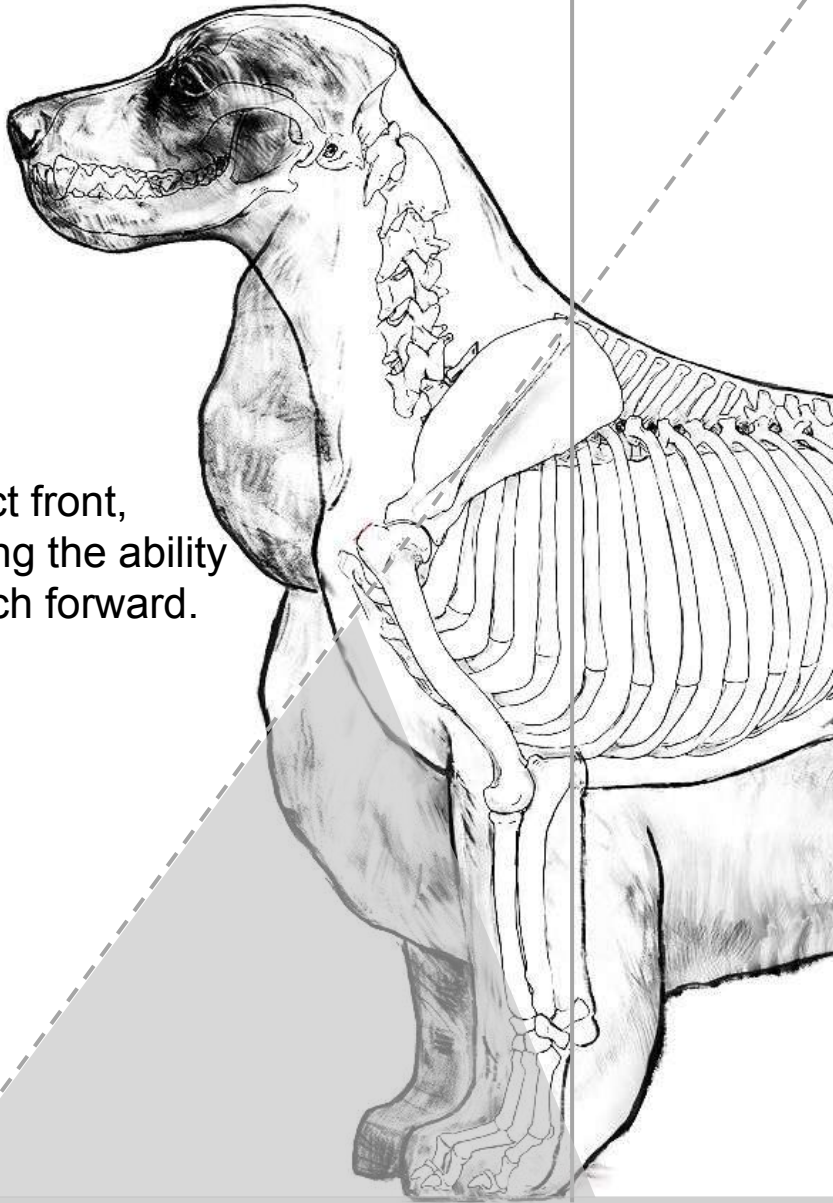
The shoulder angle correlates with the amount of reach a dog will have in front, as well as the amount of follow through underneath the body. This image shows a correctly made front assembly.

Note how the head and neck drop forward when the dog is gaitting.

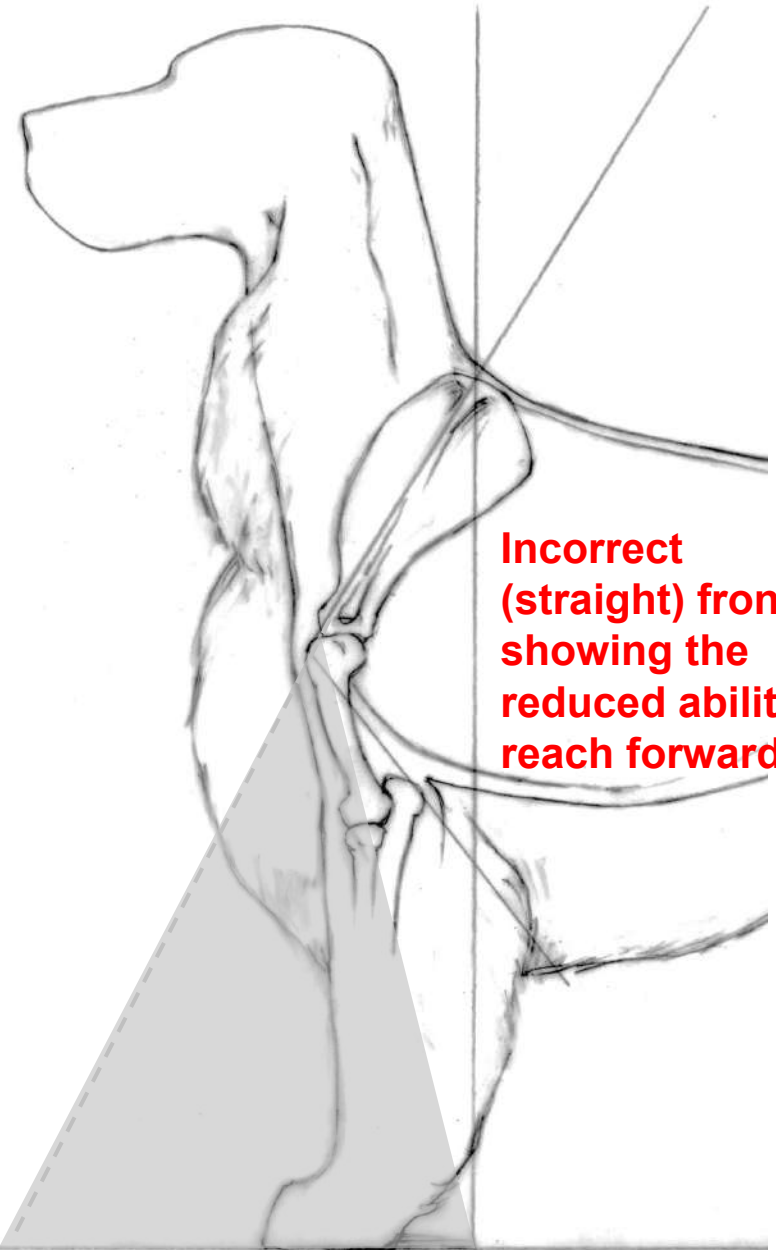


Even in a static pose, you can see the ability for the front to reach forward.

Correct front,
showing the ability
to reach forward.



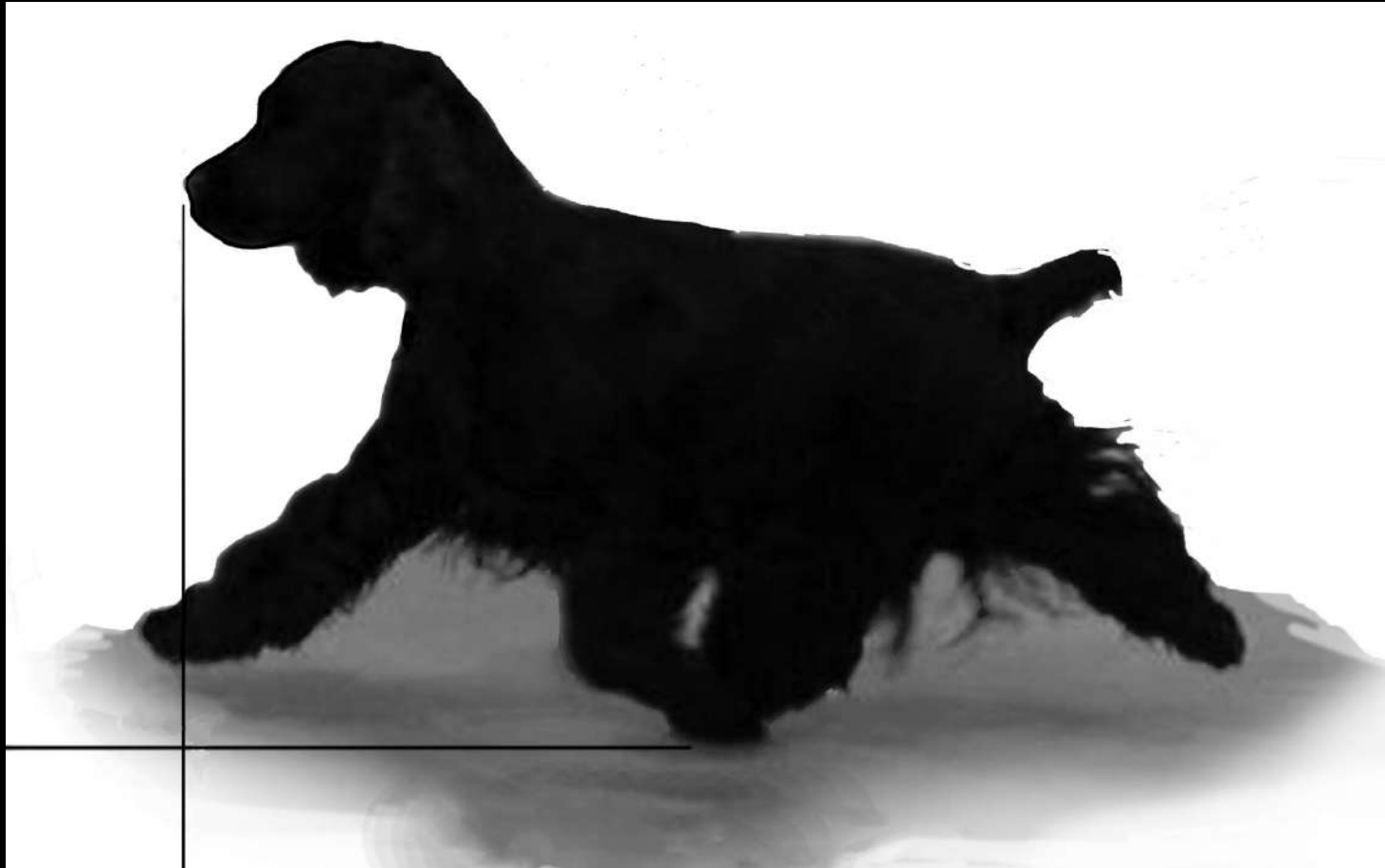
**Incorrect
(straight) front,
showing the
reduced ability to
reach forward.**



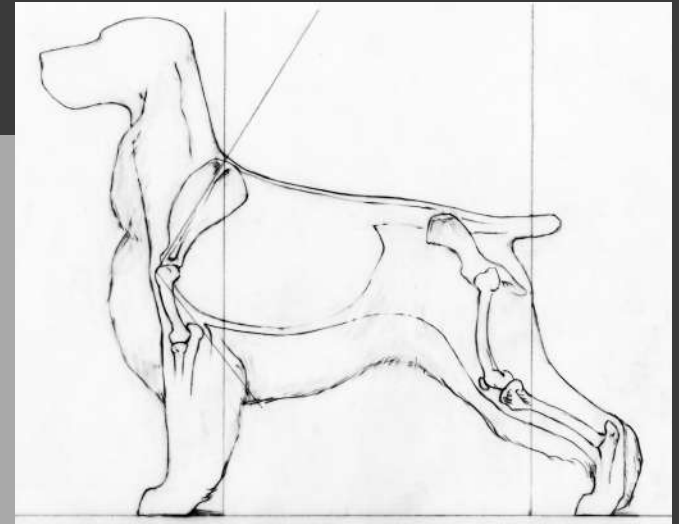
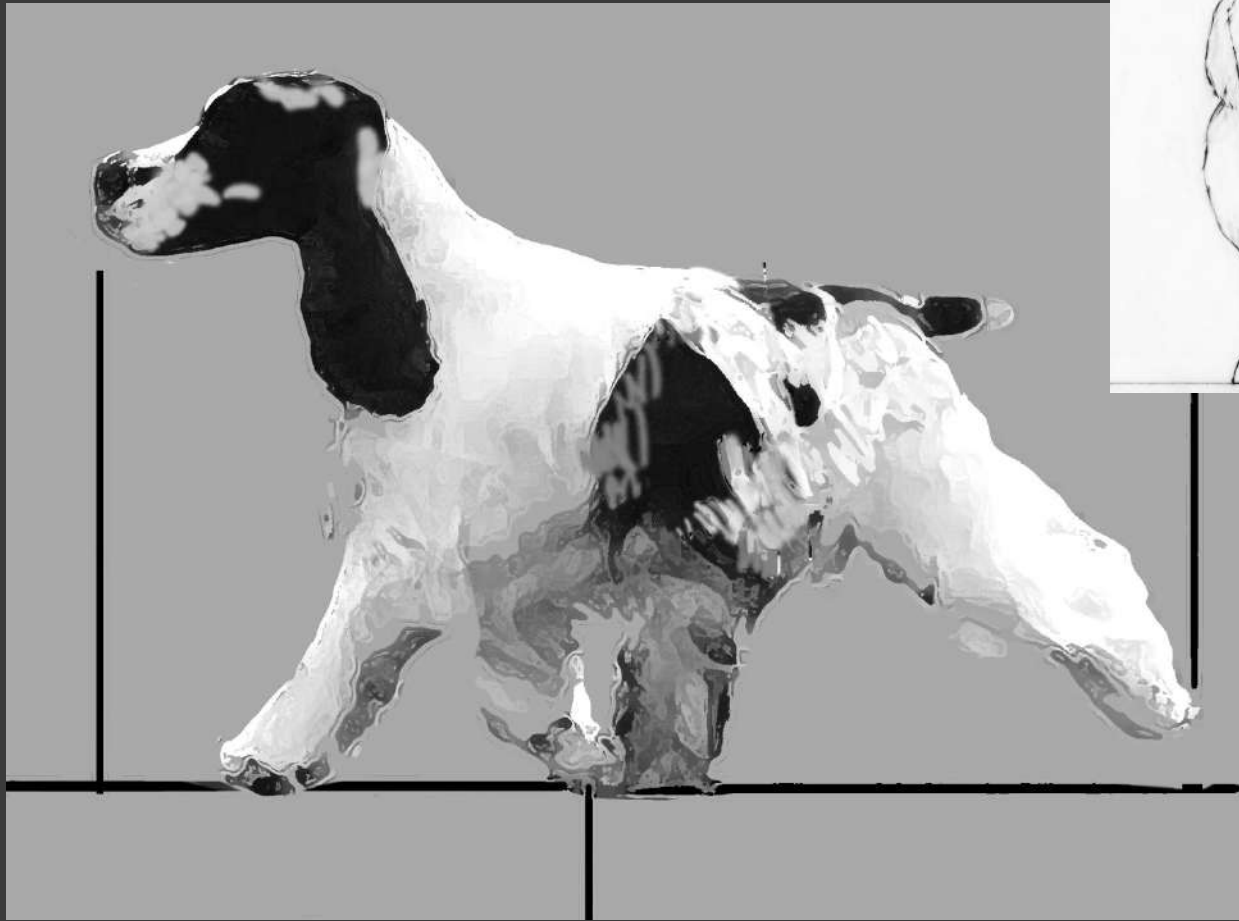


The dog with an inadequate front cannot reach to its nose. It is completely wrong for a gundog to be short-strided in front. If the scapula is more upright, the upper arm and foreleg cannot reach to vertical line dropped from the nose of the dog, causing a shorter stride. Neither can the dog lacking correct length of leg have a stride of sufficient length or have ideal leverage to propel the dog forward. Also, a dog with a more upright upper arm does not have the ability to have an ideal range of motion, and it tends to have a more upright pastern as well. Any of these faults cause the dog to take more steps during the course of an hour, a day, its lifetime.

Neither does the dog have any need to reach past the nose. Anything more that the described ideal creates wasted motion, wasted energy.

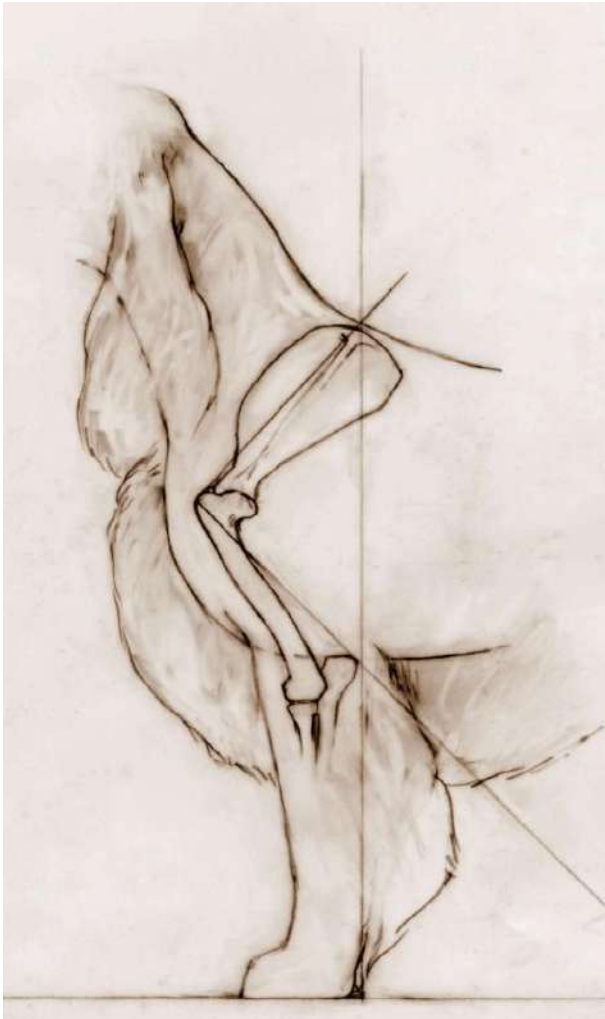


While flashy and eye catching, this type of movement is atypical of a correct Cocker and is of no use in the conditions under which the breed works in the field. It should no more be rewarded in the ring or incorporated in a breeding program, than any other movement fault which inhibits the Cocker from functioning correctly.

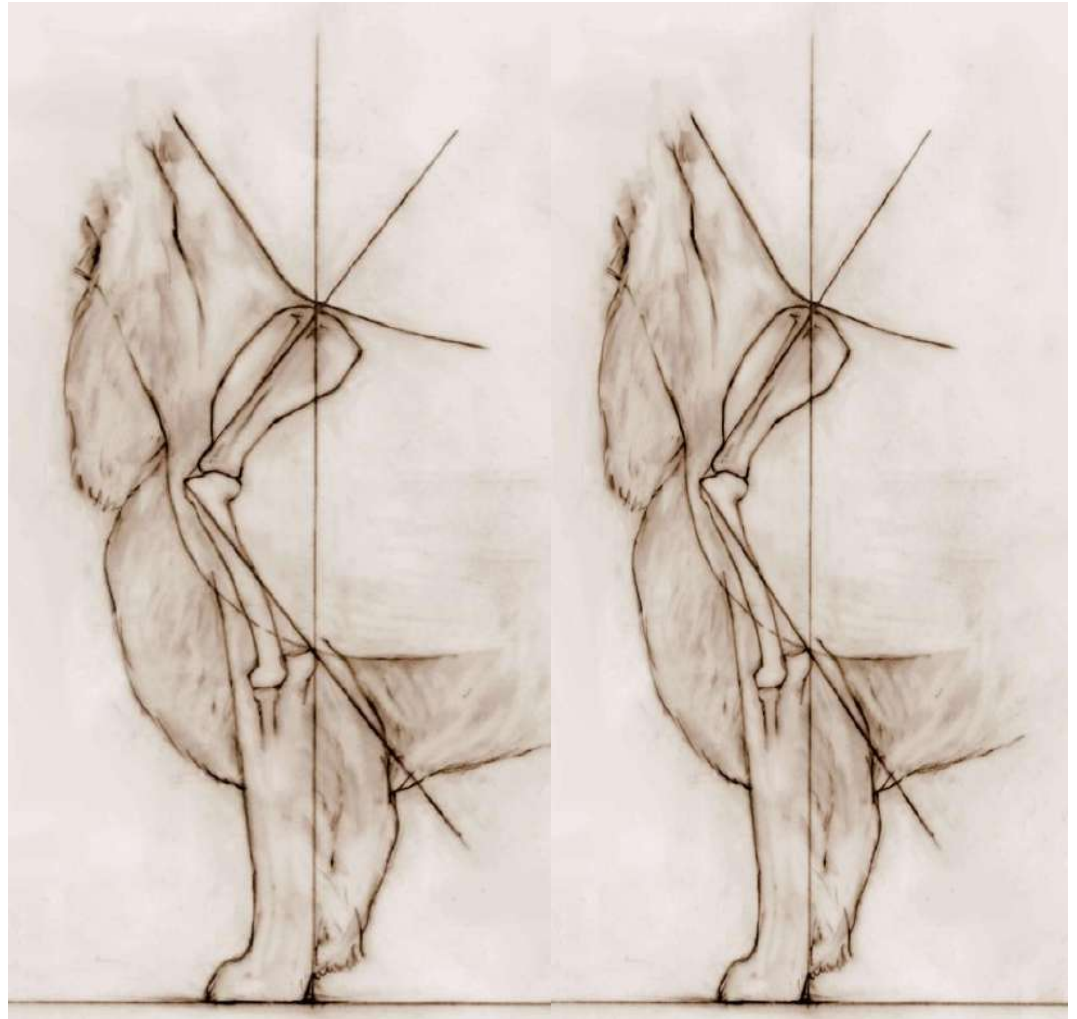


Here is a dog that is unable to extend its front to its nose, yet is kicking way too far behind with the rear. This is a compensation caused by a straight front, (upright scapula and short upper arm) combined with an over angulated rear.

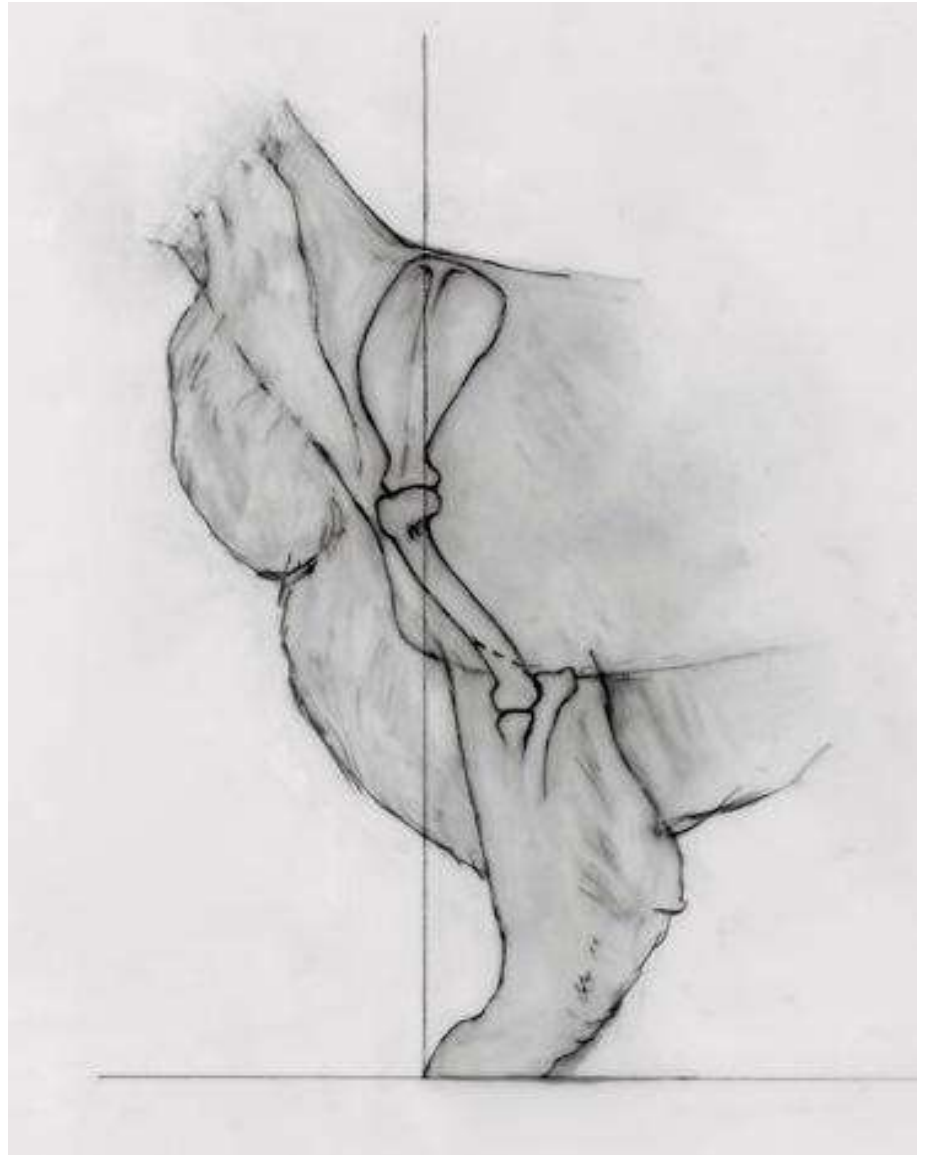
Additionally, a dog with ideal angulation has more area for muscling. As you can see on the image with a 90 degree triangle compared to the two with shallower angles, and you can see that the shallower angles it leave less area for carrying well-developed musculature.



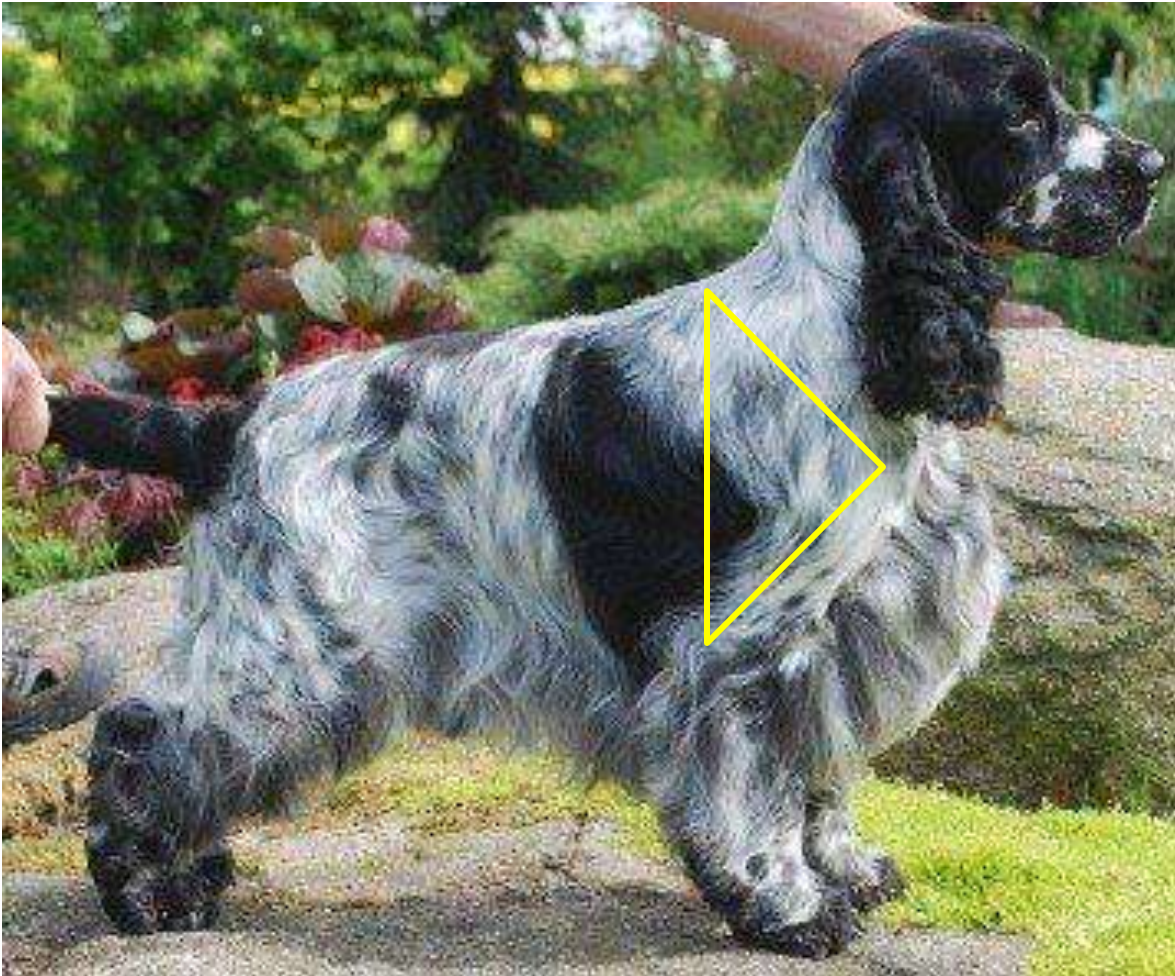
90-degree



This shoulder is tipped forward, instead of being laid back towards the rear of the dog. It places the withers well forward of the elbow. When in motion, the dog will look as if he is falling over his front, which is exactly how he is made to move. Due to the incorrect placement of the scapula, the neck juts forward and is very restricted in its range of motion, a true detriment in the field



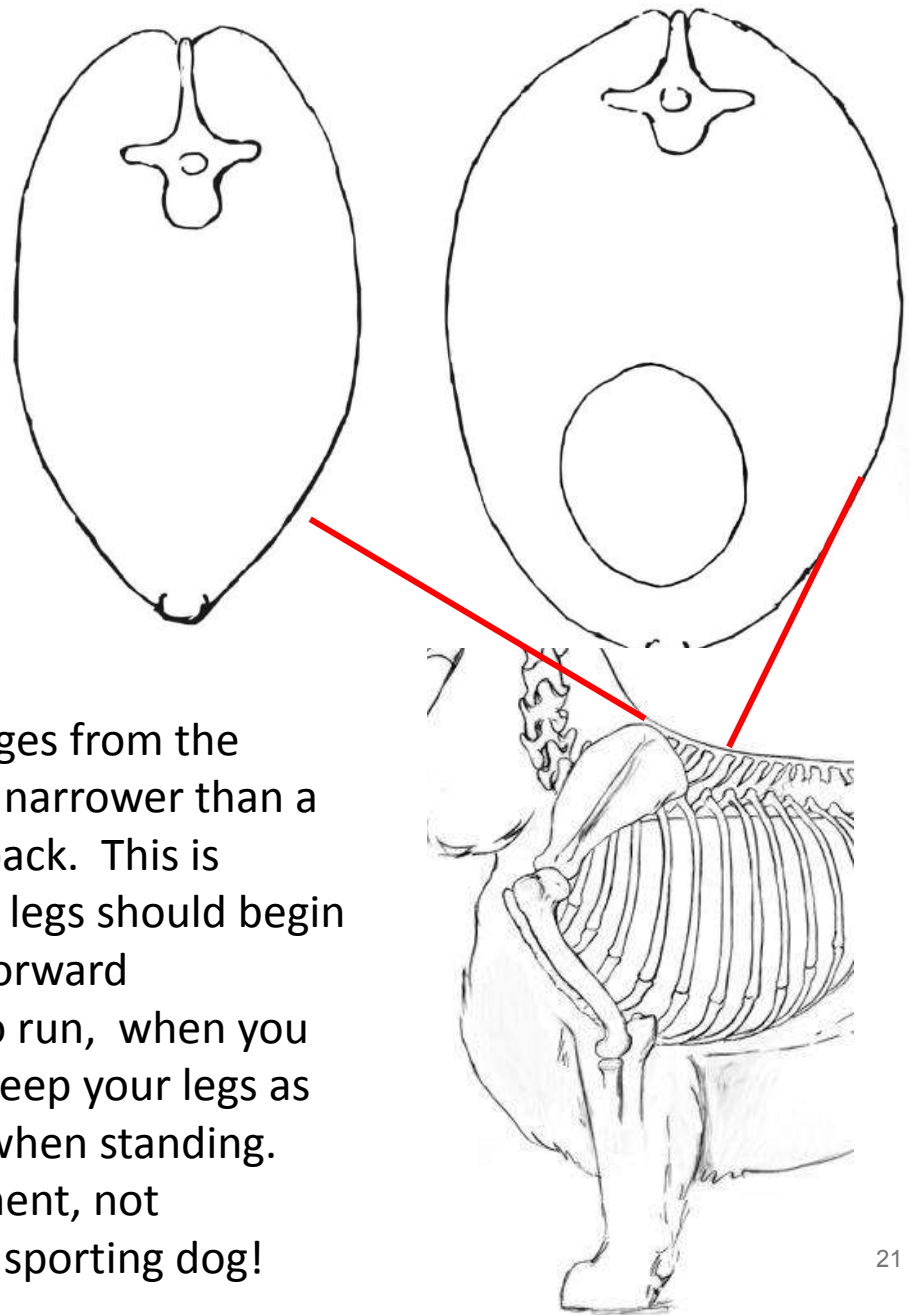
To reiterate, the ideal angulation is for the front to form as close to a 90-degree angle as possible, with the highest point of the shoulder (withers) to be directly above the elbow, which is also directly above the back of the front foot when properly stationed.



The ideal degrees for angulations has varied amongst experts and varies partially due to methods of measurement. What they all agree on is that the scapula & upper arm have got to be the same length.

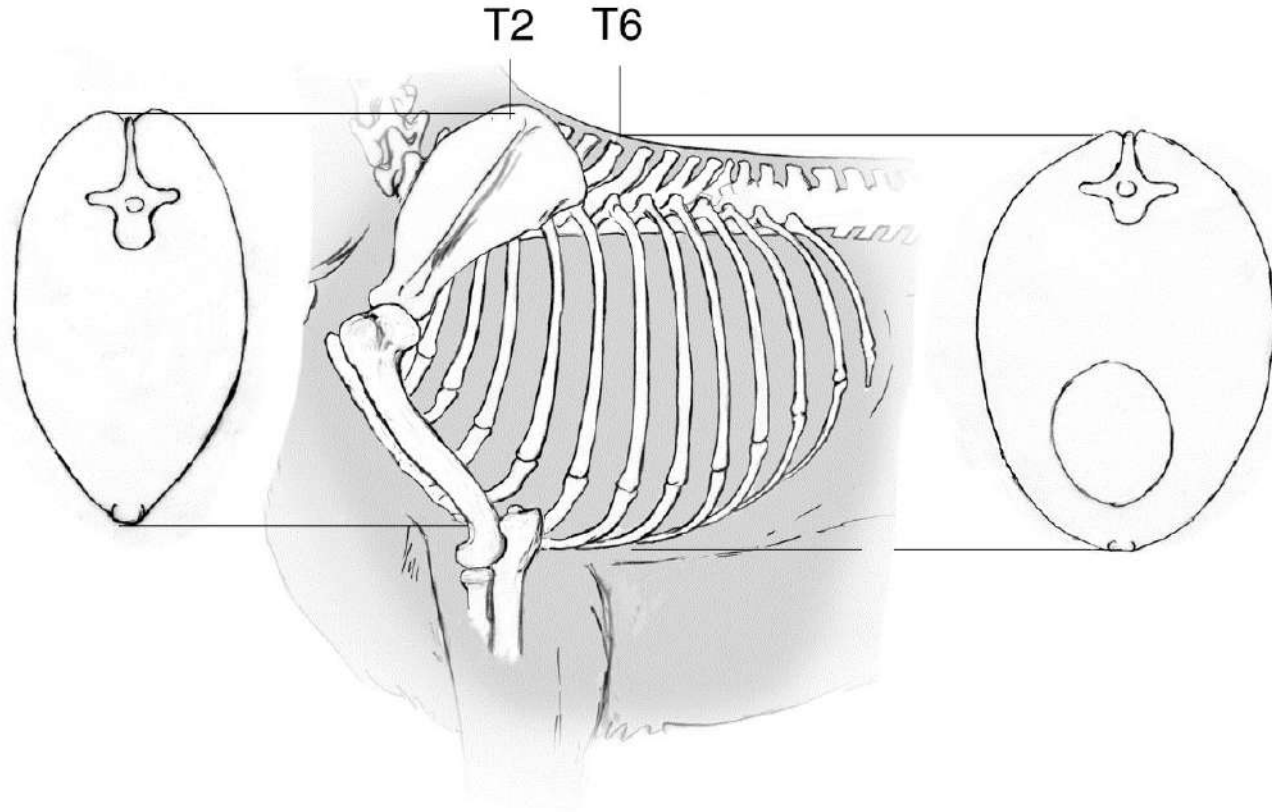
That standard states: “Chest deep; not so wide as to interfere with action of forelegs, nor so narrow as to allow the front to appear narrow or pinched.” The dog has to have good spring of rib in order to house heart and lungs of sufficient capacity. The rib needs to extend downward to at least the dog’s elbow. A shallower ribcage crimps space for heart and lung expansion. From the front, the rib needs to be heart-shaped at its widest point.

If one were to take sliced transverse images from the elbow forward, the shape is significantly narrower than a slice taken from its widest part, farther back. This is because as the dog reaches forward, the legs should begin to converge. This aids in smooth, more forward movement. Think of yourself if you try to run, when you begin to move faster, make an effort to keep your legs as they hit the ground as wide as they are when standing. That causes a stilted, side to side movement, not conducive to good running. Same with a sporting dog!



Consider that a cocker is a smaller, wider breed than other sporting dogs. If its width is sufficient, its front legs will never converge on the same line (single tracking) or even come close to it because it is a wider breed with wider muscle for its size than other, taller dogs.

SHAPE OF RIBS
at about T2 and T6



The dog will move with width between the legs appropriate to his build.



correct



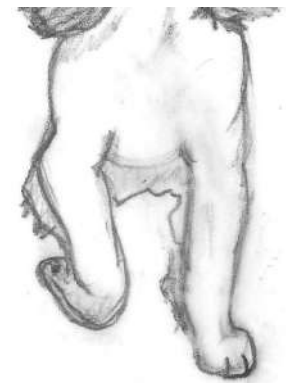
elbowing out



narrow



tied in at the elbows



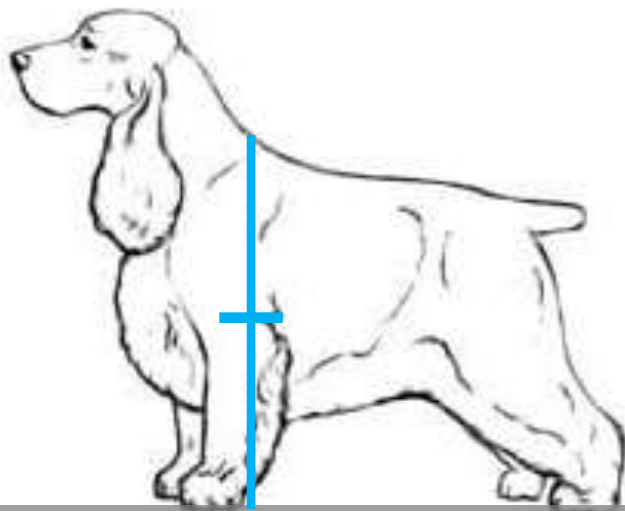
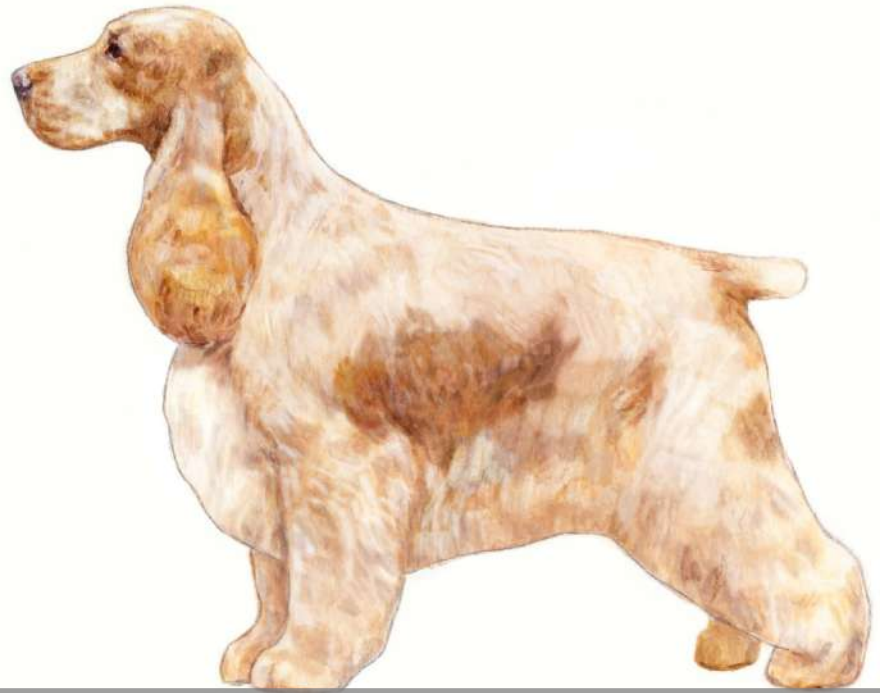
paddling

Because of his roundness and considerable width, a correctly made English Cocker cannot single track.

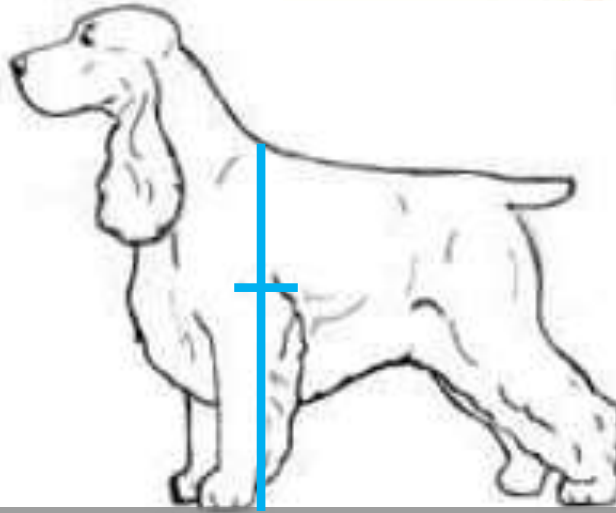
Correct Leg Length

Leg length is in balance with the body, the elbow is midpoint between the withers and the ground.

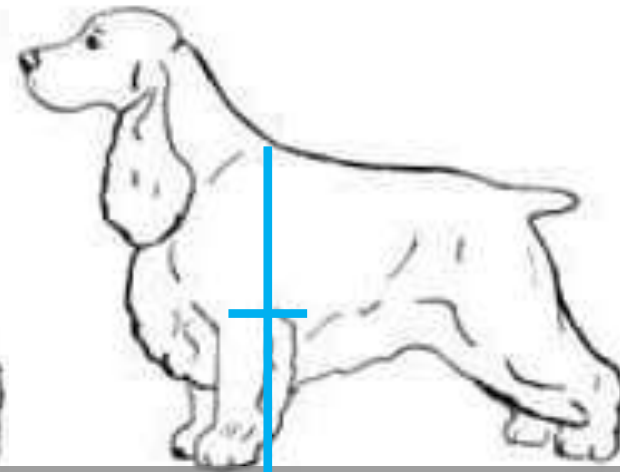
Neither leggy nor low on leg, a well-made front will allow for the correct amount of leg length, rib, forechest and depth of body.



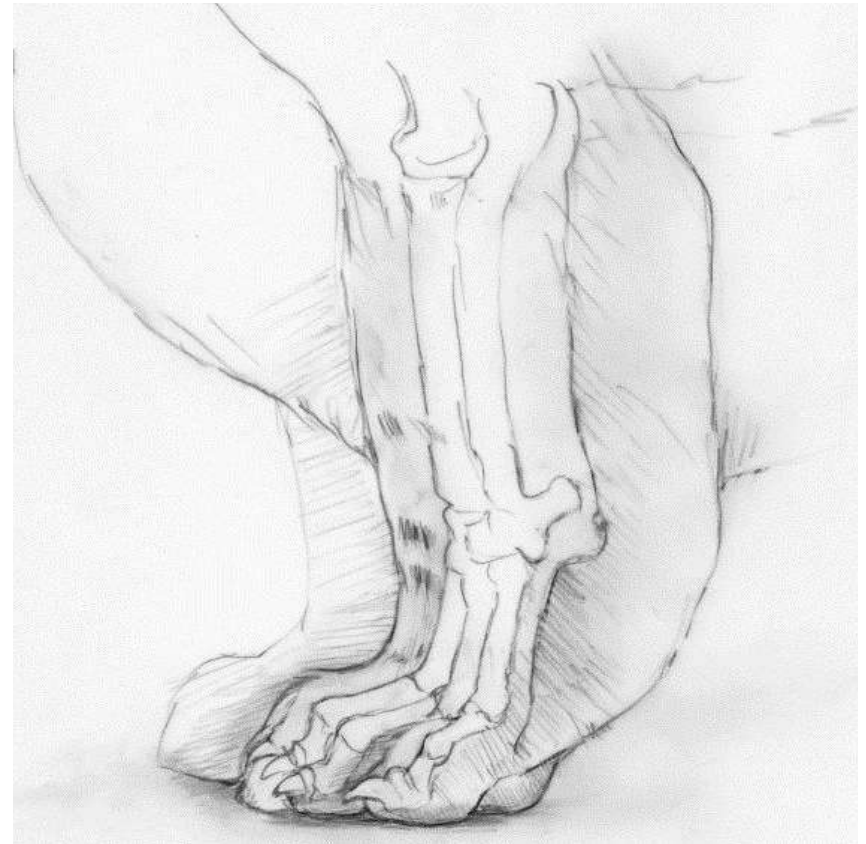
Elbow midway between withers and ground.



Legs too long.



Legs too short²⁴



Pasterns: the standard states “pasterns are nearly straight with some flexibility”.

The pastern needs to have enough angulation to “give” upon landing. An absolutely upright pastern will act more like a post, with no natural give. A pastern with too much bend will not have enough strength and will cause more strain to ligaments and tendons. Compare the greater slope of the front pastern with that of the rear. This is because the front has to deal with more concussive forces and needs to be more shock absorbing.

Feet are catlike. They are firm & round with arched toes & thick pads. Splayed, flat feet are a definite detriment in the field.

Following are images of fronts, good and not so good. The first of each set of images, the second shows the same front with superimposed dots showing suggested points of withers, point of shoulder and elbow.

When looking at the first image, ask yourself: “what will these look like with the overlay?”

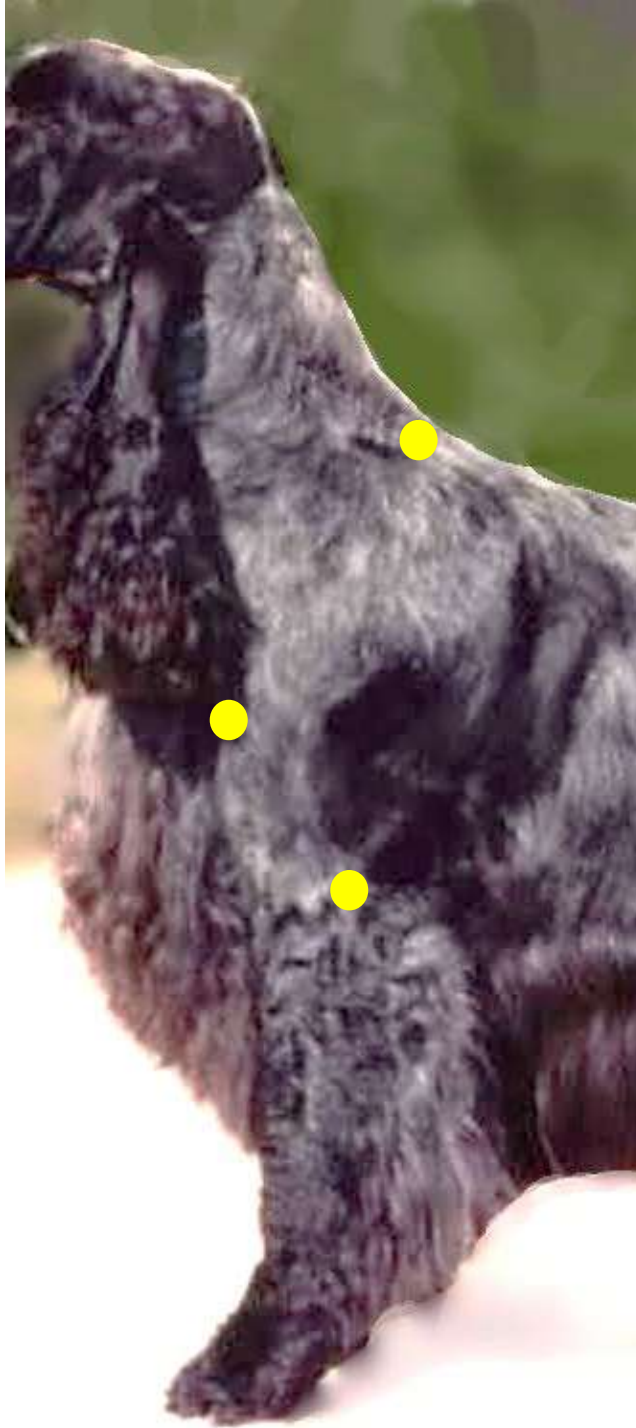
As you look at these photos, imagine a triangle that shows the ideal 90 degrees. Which examples hold up? If you draw an arc from the point of shoulder showing the projected forward reach, will it have sufficient forward movement? Are the lengths and angulations of the shoulder and upper arm long enough to allow the foot to reach a vertical line dropped from the nose?

Test yourself!









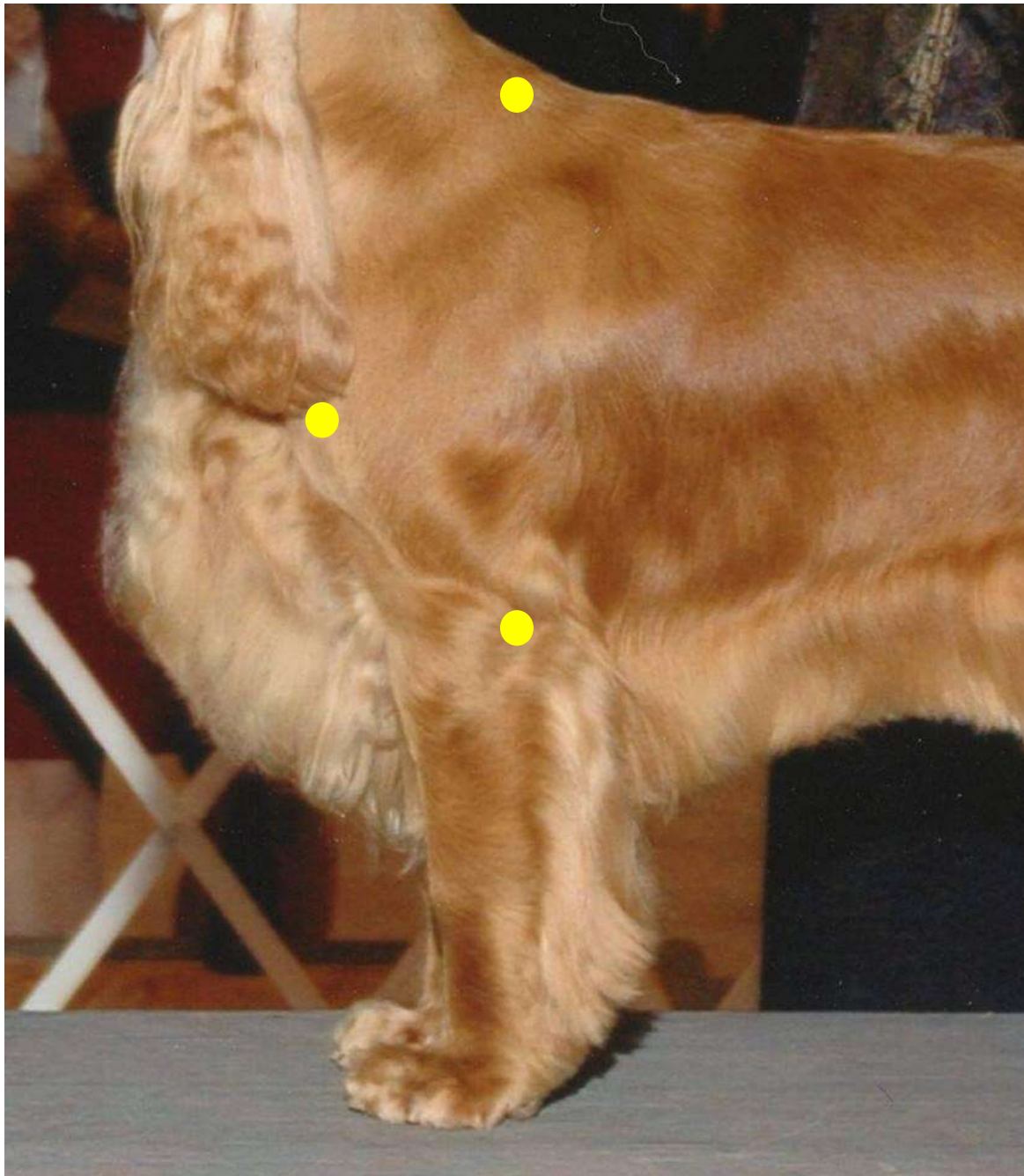


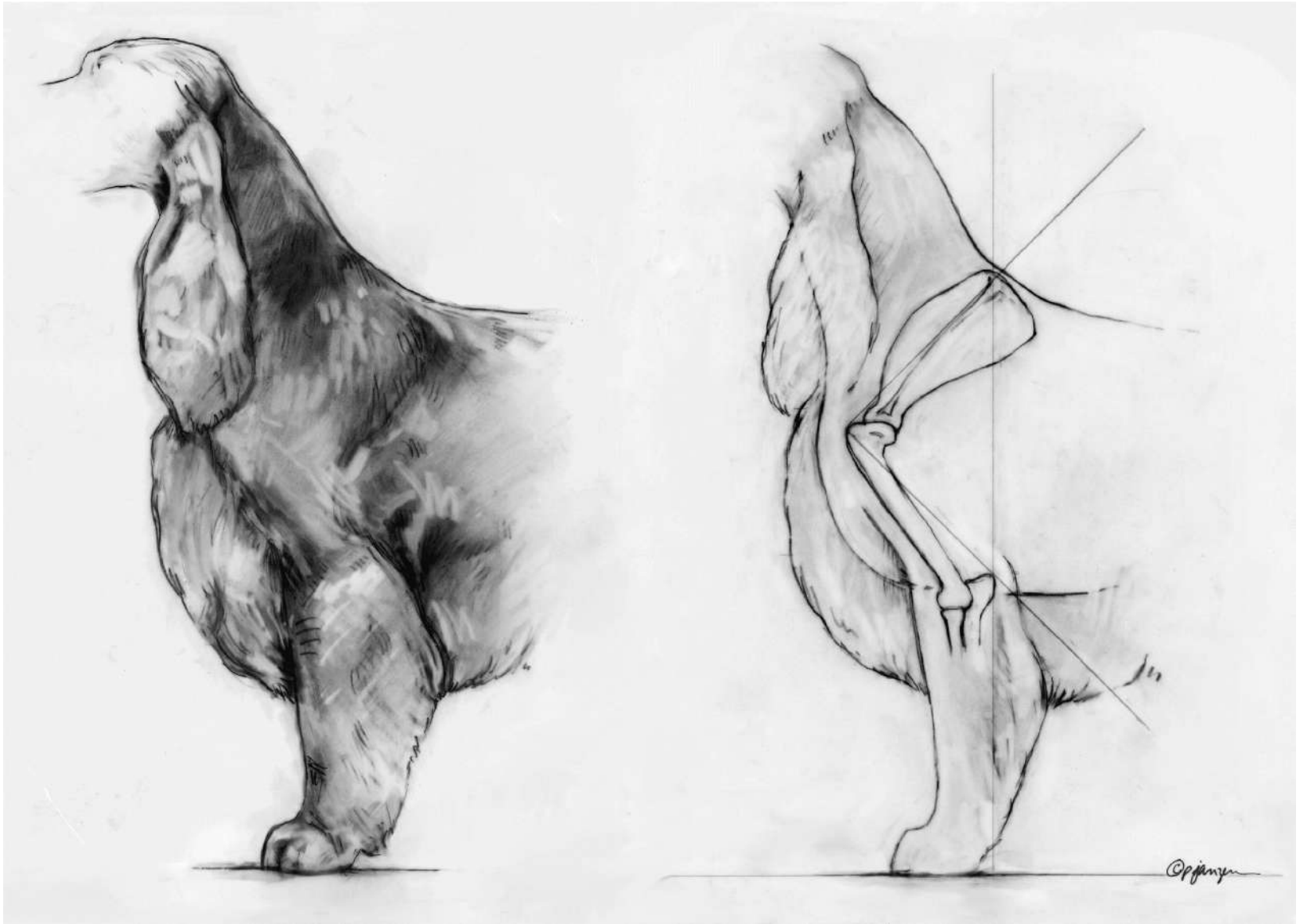












Where do we go from here?



Examine as many dogs as you can until you are comfortable identifying correct front assemblies and knowing why one front is better than another. Make sure you watch dogs on the move, checking for soundness and balance.

Honestly evaluate your breeding stock's front assembly and how that will play into your breeding decisions. Ask breeders questions as you continue your understanding of the components of a good front while not losing sight of the whole dog.

**Master Breeders will tell
you that a correct
shoulder is the most
difficult virtue to breed
into a family of dogs and
it is the easiest to lose.**

"In any breed, the whole dog is hung on its front end. How the neck is set, how its topline is, all go to the front."

"Must have forechest out in front. We're getting a lot of English Cockers whose fronts drop straight down, a so-called Terrier front where they're laid back in shoulder, are short in forearm and their fronts are way out in front of them with no forechest - it's totally incorrect for a Cocker. Got to have some forechest!"

Anne Rogers Clark - second generation English Cocker breeder, E.C.S.C.A. Past President

Thank you!

Illustrations by Patricia Janzen.

Written by Patricia Janzen, Genelle Joseph and Bonnie Threlfall

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